

# We Dream of Peace



Stories of strife and peace at home, at school and in communities, written by children and young people

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## Foreword

Every society goes through phases of strife, hatred and violence at different levels. The root causes of these are the injustice and poverty inherent in the socio-political and economic system around us. Children and youth see this strife and violence around them and fear for their own futures. On this background, if one looks at school education, one can see that these bitter truths about society find no place in school education. There is no attempt in the school to understand these experiences of the students, and their first-hand knowledge of their society. The approach of school education to social issues is top-down,

moralizing and superficial. These stories children have written are closely connected to the essential realities of their lives, and will prepare readers to face these realities meaningfully. You will see that these stories have been directly lifted from life. They don't attempt to present distant horizons, but draw us to the here and now. The writers are not trying to get recognition from you, but to bring recognition of their realities to you.

**Prabhat Kumar Jha**  
December 2022

Mahatma Gandhi once said that if you want to achieve true peace, you have to start with the children. He was right, because peace - especially within the family - is a fundamental need for children and young people. It is as important as food and a safe place to sleep. For children, peace is the foundation on which they can grow and develop.

If there is no peace, in other words if there is war, then children lose their stability. The ground is literally pulled out from under their feet. We are currently seeing this in Ukraine, Israel, the Gaza Strip, Yemen..... In these countries, war is still going on in the recent past, which we thought we had largely overcome as a hostage of humanity.

Reason and balance have often been replaced by the law of the jungle. Many children have lost their parents and their homes. They have to learn to be a child again, to live, play and learn in a foreign environment. Together with *terre des hommes*, we are helping them on this long journey. Children in the trouble spots show us very directly how important it still is to focus on peace. It cannot be taken for granted. We must have the courage to stand up for it every day and defend peace as the basis of our coexistence. I am therefore very proud of this book and of all the young authors who have written down their stories and are thus standing up for peace in their families and communities. On my visits to Uttar

Pradesh, I have seen the great need and eager striving for peace in the eyes of many children and young people. I was able to witness the impact of peace at home and in village communities. That children can claim their rights with self-confidence. That they attend school and find their way to a self-determined future, that they respect and protect their environment.

In the book "We dream of peace", all of this comes together in the most wonderful way. Enjoy reading it and make your own contribution to peace.

**Bernhard Simon**

Chairman of the Supervisory Board  
DACHSER

**Vorwort Bernhard Simon**

Mahatma Gandhi hat einst gesagt, dass wer wahren Frieden erreichen wolle, bei den Kindern anfangen müsse. Damit hatte er Recht, denn Friede – insbesondere innerhalb der Familie - ist für Kinder und Jugendliche ein grundlegendes Bedürfnis. Er ist so wichtig wie Nahrung und ein sicherer Platz zum Schlafen. Friede ist für Kinder die Grundlage, auf der sie wachsen und sich entwickeln können.

Wenn Friede fehlt, also Krieg herrscht, dann verlieren Kinder ihren Halt. Es wird ihnen im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes der Boden unter den Füßen weggezogen. Wir sehen das gerade in der Ukraine, in Israel, dem Gazastreifen, Jemen..... In diesen Ländern herrscht auch in jüngster Vergangenheit Krieg, den wir bereits als Geisel der Menschheit weitgehend überwunden glaubten. An die Stelle von Vernunft und Ausgleich ist so häufig das Recht des Stärkeren getreten. Viele Kinder haben ihre Eltern und ihr Zuhause verloren, sie müssen in einer fremden Umgebung wieder lernen, ein Kind zu sein, zu leben, zu spielen und zu lernen. Gemeinsam mit der Erde des Menschen helfen wir ihnen auf diesem langen Weg.

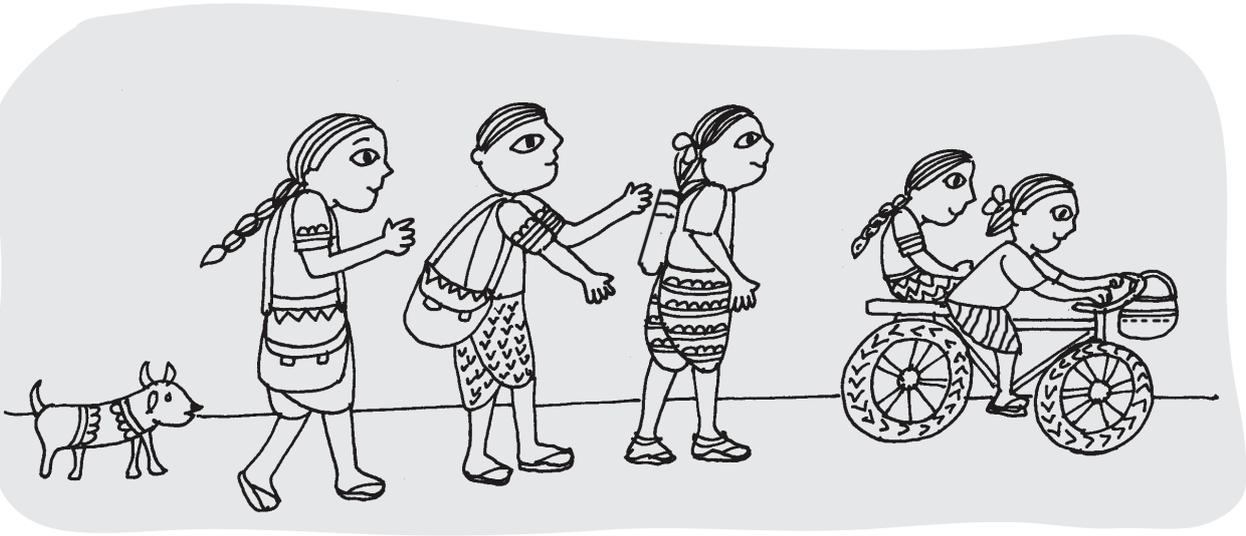
Die Kinder in den Krisenherden zeigen uns ganz unmittelbar, wie wichtig es nach wie vor ist, sich mit Frieden zu beschäftigen. Er ist nicht selbstverständlich. Wir müssen jeden Tag den Mut haben, neu dafür einzustehen und den Frieden als Grundlage unseres Miteinanders zu verteidigen.

Ich bin deshalb sehr stolz auf dieses Buch und auf alle jungen Autorinnen und Autoren, die ihre Geschichten aufgeschrieben haben und damit für den Frieden in ihren Familien und Gemeinden einstehen. Auf meinen Besuchen in Uttar Pradesh habe ich das große Bedürfnis und eifrige Streben nach Frieden in den Augen vieler Kinder und Jugendlicher gesehen. Ich durfte mit erleben, was Friede, zuhause und in den dörflichen Gemeinschaften, bewirkt. Dass Kinder mit Selbstbewusstsein ihre Rechte einfordern können. Dass sie die Schule besuchen und den Weg in eine selbstbestimmte Zukunft finden, dass sie ihre Umwelt respektieren und schützen.

Im Buch „We dream of peace“ kommt das alles in wunderbarer Weise zusammen. Genießen Sie die Lektüre und leisten auch Sie Ihren Beitrag für den Frieden.

**Bernhard Simon**

Chairman of the Supervisory Board  
DACHSER



## Let's have conversations

### **Harish**

It was around two in the afternoon. I was on my home from school, lugging my heavy schoolbag. My water bottle was empty and I was very thirsty. I looked around for a tap, but only saw some kids playing marbles in the dust. Then I noticed that four or five women were standing with buckets and some clothes in their hands. I guessed there was probably a hand pump there, and I made my way towards them. I could hear them talking, but at that time all I could think of was water.

As I filled my bottle and gulped down the water, I heard the women talking about some girl. They were criticizing her for freely going about everywhere. One woman wondered, "Where was the need for this girl to get out of her house at all, it is something only boys do. If she keeps going around like this, who know what she will get up to!" Their conversation set me thinking, but I could not say anything right then. When I reached home, I found my big sister, my Didi, sitting on a chair, looking glum. I asked her what was up, and she gestured towards my grandmother who was lying on a string cot in the yard, and saying something to my sister. My sister was only half listening, but I listened to my grandmother with great attention.

I guess my sister did not want to pay too much attention because my grandmother's thoughts

are very old fashioned and Didi may not have wanted to get into any arguments with her. My grandmother was saying, "Girls should not go out of the house, who knows whom they may meet, where they may go, what they may eat!" So she had banned Didi from going out at all. She was not allowed to use the mobile, and even if she stood near the window, grandmother would wonder aloud whom she was looking at.

Well, none of this was new for me, it was an everyday matter, and I had a lot of homework to complete, so I went inside to start on it. The next morning, there was the usual arguing going on when I woke up, because Didi had woken up late, and grandmother was wondering why she had slept so late last night, and what she had been up to so late.

Things reached a peak that day, and Didi went into the inner room and locked herself in. I went and knocked on the door and called out to her, but she did not respond. I ran out into the yard and called out to my grandmother for help. But grandmother was still grumbling about Didi's behaviour.

"She should not go out like this, girls from good families don't go about everywhere like her, what happens if she does something wrong, our family will be shamed."

Then I decided it was time to speak my mind.

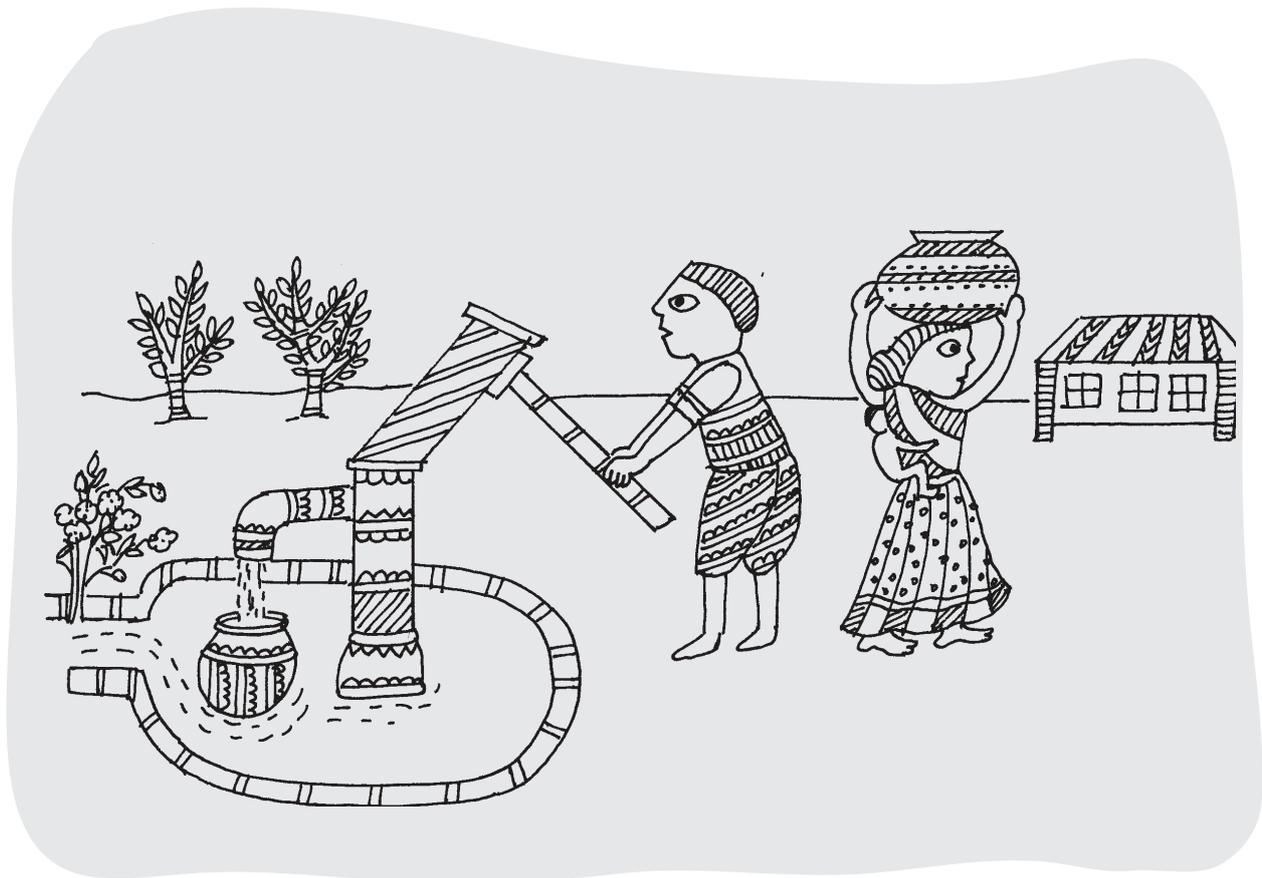
“Grandma,” I said, “If Didi has not seen the world, how will she be able to take care of herself? You want to get her married soon. Suppose that does not work out, or her husband dies, who will take care of her? Can you? All of us will be busy trying to make our own lives. Shouldn’t she become independent and able to take care of herself? Grandma, times have changed, you should change too!”

I felt somehow that she was a bit affected by what I was saying. She sat thinking for a while. Suddenly I saw a transformation in her. She marched up to the locked door and shouted at Didi. “Open the door, you have to go to the market right away. Go buy the Diwali crackers, I want to see how well you can manage that!”

At once the door was opened and Didi came out looking very happy. She burst into tears, and grandmother too looked a bit tearful. She affectionately pinched my ear and said, “You have suddenly become very mature, huh? I never imagined my grandson would become mature, but you have explained things to me so well!”

I just said, “Ouch Grandmother, my ear hurts!”

The rest of the day was just great, I was so happy that I forgot to go to school! From then on, Didi’s life became much easier, she got more freedom. And I understood that when we face any difficulty, it helps to be unafraid and speak one’s mind. A lot of issues can be sorted out by a frank conversation!



## Late one evening...

### ***Komal Kumari***

I woke up with a start at the loud whistle of the pressure cooker. My eyes fell on the wall clock. 6.15 already! I jumped out of bed, because by 7.30 I had to be at the pick-up point for the vehicle that took me to my work.

Three different vehicles on three routes picked us up to take us to our place of work, and we could get on to whichever one suited us best. At my pick-up point usually only two of us got on to the vehicle.

It felt like any ordinary day. I had no idea how this day was going to turn out. I rushed through my bath and got ready. Ma had put out some food for me, and told me to eat everything properly. Then she got busy with her work. Just as I started eating, Durga Didi, my co-worker called me to tell me to hurry up.

The place where we worked was across a very long bridge. As it was the only bridge in that area,

it was always packed with vehicles, and we used to get late for work. So we all decided to start really early, to avoid the heavy traffic. This way we could be sure to reach work on time. There was no way of knowing how long the return journey would take. If we were lucky and the road was clear, we would reach home on time, otherwise it could be eight or even nine o'clock. This job was only for three months, and we got paid by the day, so that if we missed even one day, we lost some money. So I tried to not miss a single day, because we needed the money.

As it is I was late, and on top of that, Ma had told me to be sure to finish my meal. But I was in such a hurry and Ma was busy, so I thought I would leave some of the food and cover it and rush off. But my little brother was watching me like a detective, and he said he would tell Ma if I did not finish my food. So then I just stuffed the food in, almost in tears, and then rushed out of the house

like a motor car.

As you leave my house, the road slopes uphill, and then it curves to the left. After that, it is like a zoo!. You can see cows, buffaloes, goats, dogs...a whole pack of dogs in fact! The road is tarred, but the cow dung covers most of it. You can see women collecting the dung to make dung cakes for fuel. Here someone is milking a cow, there someone is feeding a goat. After this there is a small hillock, and panting up that I reached the crossroad. I jumped into an auto rickshaw, but the driver would not move, he was waiting for more passengers, and I was in a big hurry. Just then I spotted another auto, which had one empty seat. I leapt into that and sped off.

During all this, I kept getting calls: where are you? Hurry up! Are you walking all the way? You are so late!. At last I reached the pickup point, and jumped into the waiting Scorpio. Vijay, Jaju, Neetu, were all there, and all began to talk at the top of their voices. Before we knew it, we had reached the field area.

There was not much traffic at that hour, and we reached the field area quite fast. Everyone got down to work, and we worked all day. At 4 o'clock it was time to go home. Everyone was eager to get home quickly. We all gathered near the vehicle. Everyone looked sweaty and exhausted. We piled into the vehicle, and Chachu put on some old film songs. Then we all began to sing along, and soon we were singing at the top of our voices. I forgot all about the day, my home, and the road, and lost myself in the joy of the music and the company.

Then suddenly we arrived at the bridge, and there was a huge jam. It was nearing 6.30, and we could see that the traffic was barely moving. This is the only bridge for miles around, and it always gets jammed in the evenings. This was going to take a long time. Just then my phone rang.

It was my uncle. "Are you out somewhere?" he asked. Well, he knows I don't reach home before 7 every day! Anyway, he said my grandmother wanted to speak to me. I told him I could not talk then, I'd call back when I reached home. He cut the phone quite abruptly.

Now the traffic had come to a standstill. People were getting out of their vehicles and looking around as if there was something to see, as if

there was a busy road with plenty of moving vehicles, while actually there was not movement at all! I was getting a bit restless now, wondering when I would reach home. My uncle called again, and seemed annoyed to hear that I was still not home. My grandmother came on the line, and said, "You are still not home? If it gets so late, leave this job, look how angry your uncle is!" I just listened quietly, and said I would call back when I reached home. Even though he knew I was not home, he kept calling, just to find out where I was.

At last the traffic jam cleared up, and I reached home. I could see my parents looking troubled, and my two brothers too looking quite upset. Usually my mother looks so happy to see me, but today she looked pained. I put my bag down and asked gently, "What happened, why are you so silent Ma?" I was desperate to hear her say something, even if it was to scold me.

"Nothing much," she said, "You were so late, your grandmother had called, she said why do you let her go out so late? Your uncle also was very angry." Ma's eyes filled with tears, so I knew there was something more. "They said, if you can't look after the girl, why are you sending her all over the place, what will you do with the money, what about what other people will say."

Without another word I called my uncle. When he picked up the phone I asked to speak to my grandmother. He told me she was asleep. But I insisted on speaking to her. I demanded to know what she had said to upset Ma. Her tone became a bit softer. "All I am saying is, your uncle is upset because you come home so late." Then I decided to speak my mind.

"You know that my father's work is unpredictable, sometimes there is work and sometimes there is not. Money is always short, so should I not try to earn some? My brothers have to be educated, my own higher education has to be taken care of. If there is no food in our house is uncle going to feed us? And for how long?" Grandmother quietly disconnected.

But after this, there was no such talk at all.



## When Laughing Became a Crime

### **Manish**

Muskaan left the class, laughing and talking with her friends. She looked for her best friend Anjali, and along with the other girls, she began the walk home as they did every day. On the other side of the road, the boys walked in their own group. Naturally, both were very much aware of each other, but they were all the same age, and did not give their friendship any deep significance.

Muskaan loved this walk from school to her home. It was one time when she was free of the regimented life at home, when she could laugh and chat as she pleased. It was now time for all of them to part, as they would graduate from school and go their different ways. Muskaan was not too upset by this, because she and Anjali would both go to the same college of commerce. About the boys, Muskaan did not care much yet, she only smiled and said hi when she met one of them.

Anjali was the first to comment. "Can you see that chap Sanjay, over there with the other boys? Notice how he stares at Tanisha, and Tanisha blushes and acts coy like the actress Katrina!"

Muskaan too joined in, looking at Sanjay and laughing. This was how they always fooled around on their way home.

Muskaan had barely reached home, changed her clothes and had a wash, when her mother began pelleting her with questions: "Why are you so late? Did you come straight home? Don't talk too much on the road, okay?"

It felt as if Ma was ranting at her but was actually angry about something else. Muskaan just went inside and finished her homework. Then as she usually did, she took her cup of tea and sat on the verandah outside, reading jokes on Ma's mobile.

She was giggling away to herself, enjoying the jokes, when she caught the eye of Tushar next door, who was also her classmate. Muskaan felt as if everyone on the street was staring at her, and quickly went inside.

Ma started off again: "Why were you sitting outside? Why were you laughing so much? Don't laugh so much, look around you before you laugh!"

Muskan thought to herself, now I have to ask permission even to laugh? Annoyed, she went to the inside room.

The next day, when she set off for school, she noticed that Tushar was following her. He even caught up with her and tried to talk to her, but she hurried on and reached school. On the way back, he followed her again, and Muskan felt a little uneasy. The same thing happened the next day too. Muskaan hesitated to tell her mother, because she used to scold her all the time anyway. But her mother noticed something amiss, and asked her what was wrong, and All Muskan's fears came tumbling out.

"You don't worry, I will see to him," said Ma. The next day just as Muskaan set off for home after school, Tushar came and stood in the way and

tried to say something. When she tried to avoid him, he tried to hold her hand. Just then Ma appeared and began to scold him at the top of her voice.

"Aunty, SHE is the one who has been coming on to me, looking at me and giggling all the time. She started it!"

Muskaan was shocked. "I was not doing anything! I was not even looking at you," she protested. "You seem to be that type of girl," said Tushar angrily, "Who leads a boy on and then turns around and insults him!"

"You leave her alone!" said Ma and marched off with Muskaan behind her. When they reached home, Ma went on and on about how she should think before she does anything, how she should not be so free in her laughing and chatting, how it encourages boys etc etc. Muskaan was very sad. This is how society expects girls to behave, she thought. We cannot laugh or talk freely without someone misunderstanding us. Any innocent laughter is looked on as a flirtation.

This happened four years ago. Muskan has learned her lesson. Now she goes to and from college quietly, with her head down. No more laughing and chatting on the street with her friends.



## Speaking Up

### ***Chandani Kumari***

It was the day of her board exam result, and Chandani was in high spirits. She went to each member of the household and proudly showed them her mark sheet. But no one seemed particularly impressed or even interested. The general attitude was, well, nothing great about what you have done, what are you so happy about. But Chandani was excited to plan her further education, and this result was the first step towards that. She wanted to take these decisions herself, she felt she was mature enough now. She had not realized that her family had begun to look on her as “grown up,” a responsibility, almost a burden.

Chandani was not unaware of the meaning of this word, grown up. She was aware that the people in her family had begun to treat her somewhat differently, there was more control and restrictions being put on her. But she did not let it concern her too much. She was only concerned about her future education, what subjects she should take for the 11th grade, what interested her, what lay ahead.

But she had begun to notice a difference in the way the other family members looked at her. There were some strange glances, and some whispered discussions. She was beginning to feel like an outsider. Sometimes she wondered if this was what she feared it was. One day, she told her mother, “The 10th of this month is the day I have to go to school for my admission to the 11th grade.” Her mother appeared to have hardly heard what she said.

A few days passed in this way, with the family members treating her strangely, constantly watching her, and Chandani busy with her thoughts of school and subjects and books. One day she noticed that the house was being cleaned up as for a special occasion, and the front room decorated. As she looked around her curiously, she heard her father say to her mother, “Have you told her about the decision we have all made about her?”

Chandani reacted in some anger. “Decision, about me? Without even consulting me? What decision!”

At once her mother was besides her, pressing her arm to signal her to keep quite. "I have told you many times, speak softly, this is no way to talk!" Turning to her husband, she said, "Leave it to me, I will explain it to her." And she shot a warning look at Chandani.

Her father left the room and Chandani and her mother were alone. At last her mother said, "Tomorrow some people are coming to view you with a proposal."

"What? You mean marriage?"

"Yes, Chandani, and there is absolutely no scope for saying no here. It is not an option." Her mother's tone was serious. Chandani left her food unfinished and went off to bed. All night she thought of how she had planned her own future and what was to become of it, and at last fell into a disturbed sleep.

She woke up the next day to the sound of the cock crowing. When she went to the kitchen, she saw that no one had cooked anything. Her mother told her to hurry up and bathe and get ready, and then begin cooking. Chandani understood that she was supposed to cook all the food, to show the visitors her skills.

Everyone welcomed the guests with smiling faces, but Chandani could not muster up a smile. She realized that the whole burden of pleasing this

people was only on her. She quietly served the food, and answered the questions they asked. As soon as they had asked about her education, someone in the large group said, "Well the girl cooks well, now how about putting on a sari and showing us how you walk in it."

All this time Chandani had been doing everything that was expected of her, like a puppet on a string. But this was too much. "What do you mean? Can't you see me as I am? Why should I wear a sari for you?" she said loudly and angrily. At once her mother began to apologise on her behalf. From the group came a sarcastic voice. "A girl who cannot even speak with humility, we don't want such a girl in our family."

"And I don't need any marriage or anything," Chandani shouted back. All that she had been suppressing for the past few hours came spouting out, and she spoke her mind, as the guests began hurriedly to leave. When the last of them had left, Chandani banged the gate shut, saying, "Good riddance!"

Never before had Chandani spoken in this tone. Even in front of her mother she had always kept quiet. And here she was, shouting out all her anger and frustration at the guests! She felt strangely light and free. Slowly she took off her heavy earrings, and went off to her room.



## Character or Surname - Which is bigger?

### Prince

It was November, and the whistle of the cooker woke me up. I was hoping for a hot cup of tea, but no such luck. Even the parakeet in his cage had got a fresh bowl of seeds, but no tea for me. Instead, my mother shoved a bag and some money into my hands. "It's the season for new potatoes, go and get some from the market, I am thinking of making some potato parathas today." She stood looking at me until I had to get on to my bike and go. In a short while I was in the market, looking for good potatoes, when I saw a familiar face in the crowd. He looked away quickly and walked off in the other direction. I thought sadly to myself, childhood was so good, when my surname did not matter to me or to anyone else.

This is the story of those two boys, the one who went to the market, Rahul, and the one who avoided him and went away, Aman. They used to be friends until a caste surname came in the way. Just six months earlier, the two had met again at a friend's sister's wedding. The whole gang from school had been there, and soon they were all chatting and laughing, remembering how they went to school together, how they played, and all the mischief they got up to.

Aman began to speak a bit unpleasantly about Rahul's home background, his poverty, and

his school work. When none of this got much reaction, he began to tease him about the language he spoke at home, which was the regional Bhojpuri, not the standard Hindi. Rahul just ignored these taunts, and kept up a cheerful front. The boys had a good meal, and each went home.

A few months later, Rahul put some interesting facts about Emperor Ashoka on his social media, how Ashoka had expanded his empire, the Kalinga war, and other such details. Many friends responded with likes or some comments and questions, but Aman messaged Rahul with an odd query: "Why do you put 'Singh' after your name, that is only allowed for Rajputs and Sikhs, not for your caste." Rahul was amazed, and responded that there is no such rule, that it was his real surname.

But Aman would not let it go. He and his friends kept sending insulting messages to Rahul, full of abusive words and slurs about him and the women in this family, until finally he blocked them all. He knew he was powerless against this powerful upper caste gang.

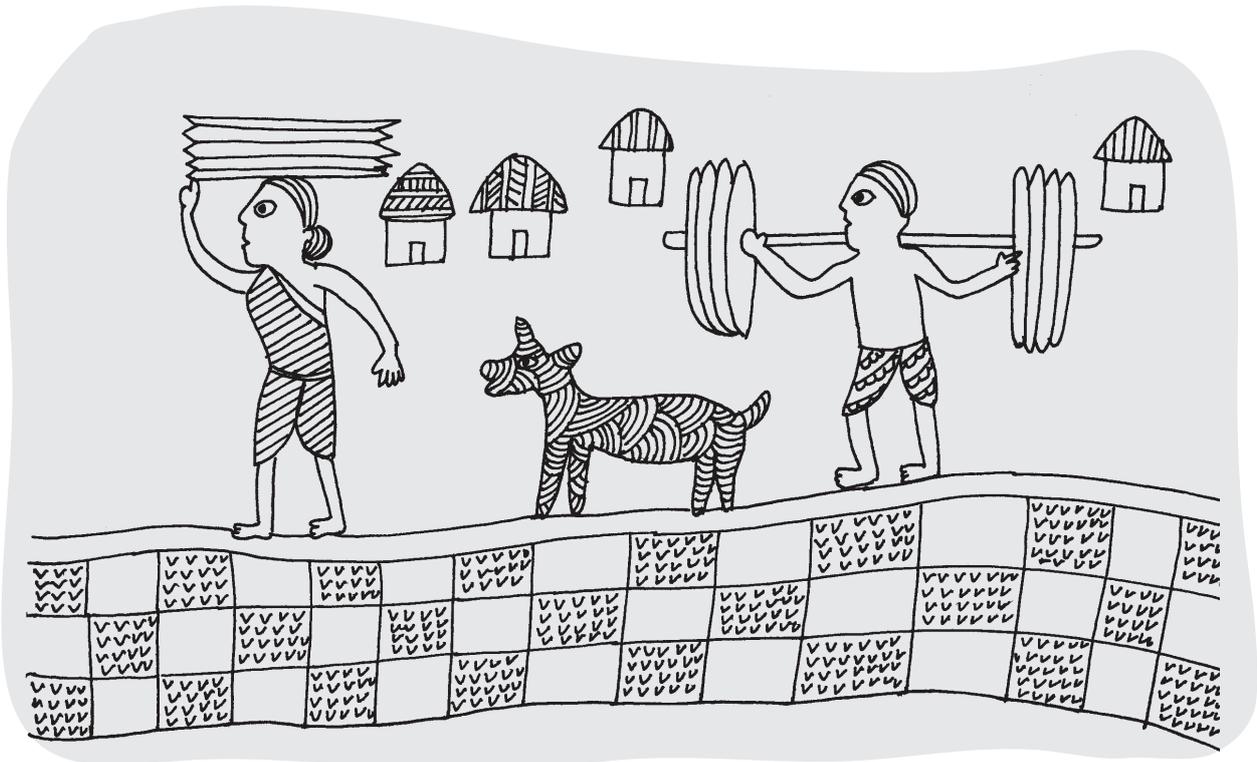
After a few days, Rahul got a call from Aman. Aman sounded furious. He kept threatening Rahul. Rahul did not really bother about this.

He was never a person who cared about caste, but Aman seemed to be steeped in casteism and hatred. Rahul felt sad that they could not be friends. The way he looked at it was, live your life so that people will admire you, they will tell their children to be like you. That is what made you great, not your surname or caste.

The innocent friendship of their childhood days had disappeared. His school buddy Aman had

disappeared. Instead there was this angry young man and his gang, for whom friendship counted for nothing, character and behaviour counted for nothing, only caste mattered.

Rahul was sad that an unimportant thing like a surname had spoiled a good friendship. That day when Aman avoided him in the market, he knew he had lost his friend for ever.



## Are we that different?

### **Dipendra Kumar**

This is something that happened when I was in Class 4, and did not even know that there was something as caste, that some castes were high and some were low. School is where I first became aware of caste. At the time of admission to school, we were asked our caste and it was noted down. Our school was a typical village school, just one room with no furniture. We sat on floor mats, and one teacher taught all of us all day.

That day, only Ma was at home when I got back from school. My father who is a school teacher has been posted in another town for many years now. He rarely came to the village. My mother was the one with whom I spoke about everything. But that day I was not sure how to broach the subject. Many times before, things had happened in school that had upset me. But I did not tell my mother because I could not pluck up the courage. What if she scolds me, what if she tells my father? I was held back by these thoughts, and the fear that they may stop my schooling because of this sort of treatment from the other boys.

But on that day I had decided that I would tell her everything. When I went home, she was preparing our dinner. She took one look at my face and asked, "Why are you looking so sad? What happened?"

Still I hesitated. She came towards me and asked me again, "Come on, tell me. What's up?"

"Ma, today I experienced what we have always known, we have heard about it: being untouchable. Today some boys treated me like an untouchable."

"What happened, son? Tell me everything." Ma sounded upset.

Then I told her the whole story. That morning, when I reached school, instead of sitting in my usual place, I went and sat a little further ahead. I had not been able to hear my teacher clearly from my earlier spot, so I decided to move up closer to the front. Some other boys, who belong to a high caste, usually sit there, and as they arrived they began to look at me and speak angrily. "You are

a Dalit, how dare you sit with us? Get up and go back to your place!”

They forced me to go to the back corner, and threw my school bag after me. I was very sad. I really wanted to sit in front. I went looking for my class teacher, hoping he would help me. He was in the staff room. When I went in and began to tell him what happened, the other teachers pretended to be very busy with their work, though I knew they could hear me. I told him the whole story. But imagine my surprise when he began to scold me! “Why did you go and sit there? You know what you are, you know your place. How can you sit with them? It’s a good thing they threw you out.”

None of the other teachers even looked in my direction, leave alone support me. I have never felt anything if people refer to my caste, or ask me what my caste is. But this high caste low caste thing really upset me.

I went back to my class and sat in the corner assigned to me. That day the teacher did not even look in my direction. He was only teaching the boys in front, only asking them questions. When it was time to correct our notebooks, he refused to touch mine. He said, “If I touch your notebook, I will become impure.” This was his usual

practice, he used to make me turn the pages of my notebook myself as he glanced at what I had written, but he never touched it.

My mother looked very sad as she heard me out. I did not want to upset her, but I needed to speak my mind, or I would not have been able to study or concentrate on anything because I was so hurt and upset. Ma patted me lovingly and said, “First of all, let us talk to your Papa, then we can see what to do. In the mean time, don’t sit in those boys’ place, sit in your own place.”

Ma spoke to Papa, and he too was upset by what had happened. He said we should tell the village head, the Sarpanch. When my father came to the village, he marched off to the Panchayat office and told the head the whole story. But the Sarpanch said, “What can I do, this falls under the education department, you should see the Education Officer.” After all, he too belonged to the same caste as my teacher, both upper caste, and so he did not want to do anything for us.

I continued to go to school, always sitting in my own corner, like so many other children from our backward castes, getting an education while sitting in a corner and being ignored.



## The School Never Says Sorry

### **Nayan**

It was just two months after we had gone into Class 10. I reached school at 10 o'clock as usual. But me and my friends, Anurag, Ayush and Suraj, were stopped at the gate and not allowed to enter. We had no idea why, but we had a lurking suspicion that it was something to do with us making a complaint about our class teacher to the school principal. We saw our class teacher Ravindra Sir and the school peon coming towards us. They handed each of us a sheet of paper. It was a letter of dismissal from the school. We were all stunned!

"Why is this being done?" we asked in surprise.

"Because of the obscene things you have written about girls," was his surprising reply.

Someone had written some awful things on the wall about girls, and we knew very well it was not us. "Don't do this sir," we begged, "We did not do this. It is our final year, don't do this to us!"

Our group was well known in the school for being a little mischievous, laughing loudly and fooling around. But we did not do bad things. We were interested in our studies. But Ravindra Sir had it in for us because we had complained about him. He used to come late to class, and hardly teach us at all. He would just make us write answers from the guide books, and go outside. That was what we had complained about, and we were right to do so. But he was now making it tough for us in the most important school year, and we were shocked, and desperate.

Miserable, and with fear in my heart, I took the letter home. All four of us were terrified. Our fathers were farmers, and would never believe that a teacher could be wrong. My mother was at home, and my father had just come back from the fields. I told them what had happened. I assured them that I had not done the terrible thing I was accused of. My father was furious.

The next morning, my father came with me to school to discuss the matter. All the four fathers were there. They begged the principal to take us back, assured him that we had not done anything wrong. "The children's whole future is at stake here, don't do this to them, they have done no wrong, they are being punished because they made a complaint about the teacher," they said. But Ravindra Sir would not be shaken, and refused to accept that he was only punishing us for complaining about him.

All four fathers went home, and decided that they would take the matter to the village head, who at that time was Neetu Devi. Then next day they told the village head the whole situation, and she took us all along and went to meet the principal and teacher. She told the principal that there was absolutely no proof that we were the culprits. But

Sir began to rant about us and our behaviour, and would not listen to her. Neetu Devi kept insisting that we were innocent and Sir kept saying we were bad boys who were sure to have done the nasty deed.

This discussion went on for some time, and finally a compromise was reached: We were to apologise, (for something we had not done!) and the school would allow us back in. Because it was our final year, we had to agree, and our expulsion was revoked.

But going back to school was very hard. None of the other kids would speak to us, neither the girls nor the boys. The teachers too ignored us, and this affected our studies. Things reached such a head that we decided to stop attending school. We enrolled in a tuition class, and studied together and supported each other. All four of us passed the Class 10 exam, but I think I would have done better if I had been able to attend school and get the attention of teachers.

We all suffered just because we had got on the wrong side of a teacher. Even after all this, there was never any apology from the school. The school never says sorry, only the children have to say it.



## Smothered by Dust

### *Sanjay Kumar*

I was probably in Class 5 then, around 10 years old. My father used to work as a stone breaker in the hills nearby. I have seen a time when the hills were covered with trees, but slowly they have become bald, and the different colours of rocks can be seen. A lot of quarrying is going on there now. When there is blasting in the quarries, there is a huge loud sound, like a bomb. The whole earth trembles as if there is an earthquake. Some people's houses have got cracks, and we always fear that our house may tumble down.

Gradually the quarrying was turning large-scale, and my father was worried about his livelihood. Sometimes he would sit outside, deep in thought. If my mother asked him what he was worried about, he would just smile, and say it was nothing. Every morning he would leave early, by five o'clock,

taking his stone cutting tools with him. Whatever the weather, biting cold or pouring rain, he would always leave at the same time, every single day.

As soon as he reached the quarry, he would set to work, breaking up the big rocks into smaller pieces. At noon he got a two hour break, to eat and rest a bit. And then back to work until 5 or 6 in the evening. The season of Basant, when there is a bit of cold, and also a bit of rain, was the favourite season for the stone breakers, because the stone was easier to break, and the hard labour easier to bear. Every day after work, the men would come down from the hill side, and sit in one place for a chat. Someone would narrate a story, or tell a joke, and everyone would relax after the hard day.

I had been watching his increasing worry for a long time. The quarrying was getting mechanized, and

huge machines would work night and day grinding the stone to small pieces. The whole area was full of dust, which settled in our village and even in our houses. In addition to this, the trucks that carried the broken stone went past our village, spewing even more dust.

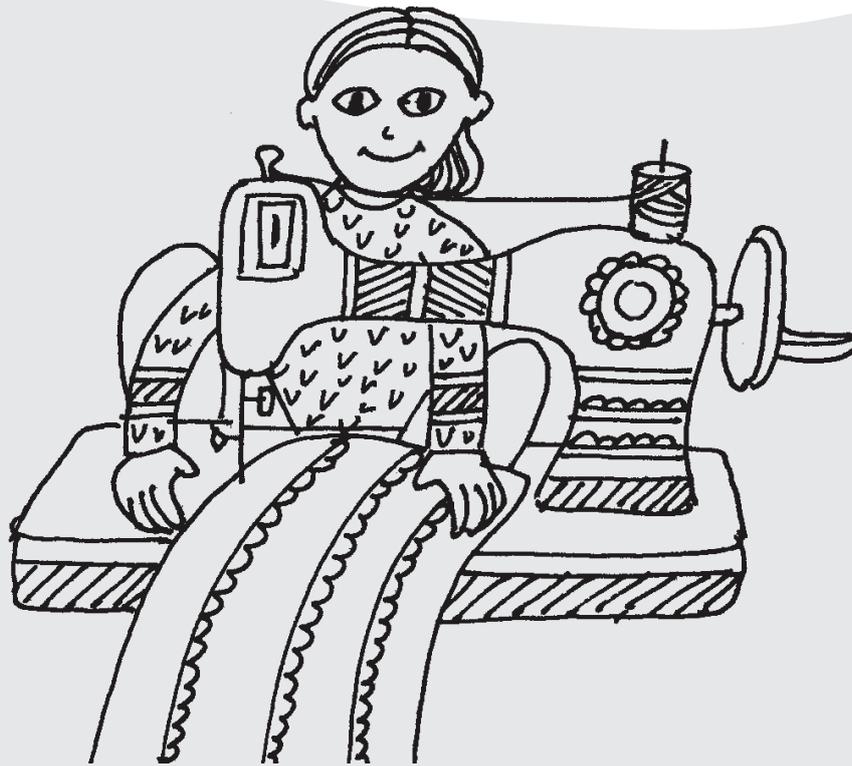
With great hesitation I decided to ask my father if I could help him in his work. My mother was appalled, but my father agreed, on condition that I would only work for an hour, and not miss school. So I began to go with him to the quarry every day before work. Slowly I began to work longer and longer hours, as my father grew tired and unable to work as much as before.

Gradually my father's health deteriorated. He began to cough and get breathless. He stopped going to work, and the entire responsibility of earning for the family was on me. We did not have enough money to take him for a proper treatment

to some big hospital. Our friends and family members told us to go and at least get a diagnosis, which we did. My father had TB!

We were all frightened and upset, but someone told us to go to the government hospital where we would get free medication. We started him on a course of treatment and he improved slightly. But he could never work again. I began to worry about my own health, and sought some work outside the quarry. I found some other work, and supported my family as I continued my education.

Many other people in the village are in the same condition. The large scale quarrying using blasting and big machines and trucks creates huge clouds of dust, which they all breathe in. All kinds of lung diseases are common. We are powerless to stop the quarrying, we can only watch as the quarries take the lives of our people.



## Death by Marriage

### ***Bhavana Pande***

This is a story from a small village in the mountains, where violence was a way of life. The men would get drunk and get into fights, walk around using filthy language, and at home beat their wives and children. Geeta was born into a farming family here, and her father was no different. Geeta's mother had been beaten so often that she was covered in bruises, and looked exhausted and ill.

One day her father came home drunk, with his friend Ramesh in tow, who was also drunk. Geeta's father handed over his wife and daughter to Ramesh, as if they were property. Geeta's mother was too frightened and powerless to protest, and Geeta was too young. They went to live with Ramesh in a neighbouring village.

Life was not better there, as Ramesh was as bad as Geeta's father. Though he owned plenty of farm land and animals, he was rough and cruel, and the villagers feared him. Many were in his debt. The responsibility of the hard work of farming, looking

after cattle and goats, and the house work, all fell on Geeta as she grew up. Her step-father stopped her education, and she was not allowed to go out anywhere. He regularly beat his wife and step-daughter when he was drunk, and soon Geeta began to look bruised and ill like her mother.

One day a young man named Jagdeesh came to the village to do some plumbing work. The work was to take a few days, and he stayed in the village. In the course of his work he happened to meet Geeta, and was curious about her. They began to speak to each other, and slowly grew closer. Jagdeesh appreciated Geeta's soft nature, and felt great pity for her terrible condition. Though Jagdeesh was from a Dalit caste, and Geeta's father of a high caste, Geeta could not help being drawn to him. At last Jagdeesh decided that he would take her away from the village.

One night, Geeta and Jagdeesh ran away from the village under cover of dark, and went to the city.

There they found a tiny room in a hotel and began to live there. Jagdish looked for work and they made plans to marry.

Meanwhile, Geeta's stepfather and stepbrother found out about this situation. They managed to find the hotel where the couple was staying, and arrived there when Jagdeesh was out for work. They forced Geeta to go back to the village with them, and locked her up in her house. But this time Geeta's mother decided to help her, and aided her escape. She also gave her a little money. Geeta got back to the city and the two got married. Jagdeesh applied to both the Block Office and the police for protection, because he feared for his life and that of his bride. But he got no response.

After a few months, when things seemed quiet, Jagdeesh decided to return to the village where

he had left a plumbing contract unfinished, in the hope of completing it and getting some money. He left Geeta behind in the city. He had hardly been back a day or two when Geeta's step father and step brother came and beat him up so badly that he almost died. Then they went to the city hotel for Geeta, but she could not be found as some friends had found her another place to stay. So they came back to the village and tried to find out her whereabouts from Jagdeesh. When he would not tell them, they killed him. Barely a few months after her wedding, Geeta became a widow.

The police and authorities have not been cooperative, but Geeta has not given up her struggle to find justice for herself and Jagdeesh



## The Garbage War

### **Gopal**

Ours is one of those very narrow lanes, where two people cannot walk side by side. Our houses face each other as if they were two opponents staring into each other's faces. If one person parks a bike in our lane, another bike cannot pass. All day the sound of children playing or crying, and of women talking or arguing, fills the air. Mixed in with this is the sound of hawkers selling vegetables. An open drain flows down the center of the lane. The only good thing is, I have a room on the second floor, where I can shut the door and get a little peace.

I was sitting up there, fooling around with my mobile, when I heard my mother call me for dinner. I began to go down the steps, when I heard my mother tell my father, "Do you know, Golu's mother from next door was telling me, she saw your son near the canal smoking!"

I hurried down and protested. "No no! I was just standing and talking with my friends after our cricket match, it was not me who was smoking!"

Luckily my parents believed me, and my mother muttered angrily, "That Golu's mother has a bad habit of gossiping and making trouble!"

We had our dinner and I went up to sleep. Early the next morning I was woken up with sounds from all around me, which was normal. But today there was something different. In addition to the usual sounds of neighbours, there was some shouting going on, and seemed to come from just outside our house. And I realized with a shock that one of the voices was my mother's!

I rushed downstairs to find a huge crowd gathered outside our door. There was hardly any place to

even stand there. And my mother and Shyam's mother, who lives opposite us, were shouting at the top of their voices. Both of them have loud shrill voices, and when they fight, which is often, it feels as if the whole area is ringing with their voices. I pushed through the crowd and reached my mother. There I saw that a heap of garbage was lying outside Shyam's house. As I watched, his mother yelled at mine.

"What do you mean by throwing your garbage in front of my house? You are always doing this. Take that!" and she threw a bucket of water at the heap of garbage, so that it was swept into our doorway.

My mother was not to be outdone. She had a bucket of water too, and she threw it at the garbage which flowed right back to the other side. Now the whole lane was a mess, and no one could come or go through it.

At this there was an angry yell from the other side, and the fight was on! Many neighbours had gathered to see the entertainment, and some were peeping from the upstairs windows.

Somebody in the crowd called out, "She must have paid the garbage man to dump the garbage there."

Now Shyam's mother picked up a broom and with a big sweep pushed the garbage back to our side. Some of the muck fell on my mother's sari. She was furious.

"How dare you!" she yelled, "This is a special sari my husband brought for me from Benaras, and now you have ruined it. Wait, I will show you!"

"And what will you show me? Just a few drops and you are acting like a queen! Oh I have seen many like you!"

At this my mother too brought a broom and threw some of the garbage and muck at Shyam's mother.

Now the fight became very serious. They grabbed each other's hair and began to hit each other. No one could separate them. Meanwhile other little fights broke out on the side, between people who had been pushed into the filth now filling the lane. More people came to enjoy the spectacle, and some even began to film it on their phones. Someone tried to call the police, someone tried to call the sanitation office. There was chaos and yells and curses filled the air.

Then someone began to blame the garbage man. "He doesn't come for days, and he leaves the garbage lying about. No wonder the lane is so dirty!"

At last the garbage man himself arrived. Someone threw some of the garbage at him, and his clean clothes were immediately filthy.

"What are you people doing, what have you done!" He exclaimed.

"It's all your fault," someone shouted. "You leave garbage at the side of the drain, and it rots there. Cows and goats come to eat it, and it gets covered with flies. All kinds of disease are spread."

"Well, what can I do," said the garbage man. "When I gather the garbage from the drain, I have to leave it at the side to dry. How can I take it when it is wet? You people can help me by covering it and keeping the lane dry, and in 4 days I can collect it.."

Everyone sheepishly looked at each other. He was right. It was a simple solution. People began to disperse. My mother and Shyam's mother brought out buckets of water and cleaned the lane. Slowly peace returned.

