



## **Short Story**

Birubar Gamcha<sup>1</sup>  
Rose Kerketta

### **Introduction**

Dr. Rose Kerketta is a writer and tribal rights activist. She was born in a Kheria family on 5 Dec, 1940 in Kaisara, Ranchi which is in Simdega district of Jharkhand now. She has led various activist movements which fought for the rights of women and marginalised communities. With her creative and critical works, she has made significant contribution to Kheria and Hindi literature. Her literature reflects her activist concerns. Her stories raise issues concerning adivasi life and identity. The adivasi worldview, their right to land and forest, the onslaught on their land, culture and tradition by outside forces and the adivasis' attempts to preserve their tradition and identity- these are some of the issues which form the subject-matter of her literature.

### **Translated from Hindi by Vandana**

Five days after Diwali, Subhagi got a chance to go to her parents' home with her husband, Ganesh. They were welcomed warmly by her parents, brother and sister. Her father didn't go for farm work for two days. Instead, he began a fresh work of digging up of sweet potatoes with the purpose that the entire family could stay together. Subhagi's brother quickly dug out the beds of sweet potato. Mother began plucking tender leaves from vines. She'll cook curry with dried leaves. Subhagi and her sister, Kalawati clipped off sweet potatoes from the vines and heaped them up. Father-in-law, Pancham and his son-in-law, Ganesh had met after one whole year, so they chatted more, harvested little.

Subhagi has come visiting her parents only for two days. Pancham is overjoyed seeing his daughter and son-in-law. He found

an educated son-in-law in his own community. He lived in city, but his daughter didn't stay with him. Who knows what he must be getting to eat? The day she arrived, Pancham told Subhagi, "Son-in-law lives in city, might not be gettin' much to eat there. While he's here, you cook for him. Everythin's home-grown, all fresh. Groundnut and coconut oil's been extracted at home. Cook whate'er you wish t'."

Ganesh and Subhagi come from families having different financial status. But Ganesh is educated, doing a job, so moves with the times.

Chicken was cooked for dinner. Pancham made his son-in-law do the honours of culling the chicken as letting the son-in-law do it, is a way to honour him in Adivasi rural community. Kalawati was helping her brother-in-law in preparing chicken. With gentle affection she said. "We'll roast parts in patpuria<sup>2</sup>, Bhatu<sup>3</sup>. In the city, you must ha' forgotten tha' taste."

Ganesh, "You ha' reminded me of tha' weird taste. Jus' the broiler chicken there in city. T' way it keeps sittin' all along, you too keep sittin' after eatin' it. So, I don' eat this sorta thin' there. Though I do get some milk and curd."

Kalawati asked excitedly, "So, you get milk-curd? Then, you mus' be eatin' Rasogola<sup>4</sup> a lot?"

Ganesh, "No. Do'ya think I keep eatin' all the time? I've gone there for work, not jus' to have fun."

Ganesh Baraik works in a cloth mill in Surat. Earlier, his grandfather, Ghuran Baraik used to weave cloth, but times changed fast. He saw Barki, Pechauri, Motiya, Gamcha<sup>5</sup> slowly going out of trend during his own lifetime. His family profession began to suffer. Would get to weave only Betra<sup>6</sup>, Gamcha and Bidauti<sup>7</sup> just twice or thrice a year. They faced tough times. Loom and shuttle lay silent in a corner of the house. The couple began to spend days doing irregular labour, still they sent their son to school. But hunger loomed large. Paikara<sup>8</sup> stopped too. Now, even the irregular work in fields, they

would get only during rainy season. Ghuran's angst began to burn him and one day, it swallowed him entirely.

Before the final parting, holding the hand of his son, Manku, Ghuran said, "E'en if there's no fire to cook and you're dyin' of hunger, don' sell off loom and shuttle. Don' let it burn or get infested with white ant. This's been our ancestral occupation, our identity." He was very proud of being a chik baraik<sup>9</sup>.

Ghuran's wife wailed, "Leave a word for me too, Manku's Pa. How'd this widow raise t' child."

"This son'll take care of you," saying this, he croaked.

Manku was in fifth standard then. His mother kept father's words in mind. Selling two goats, she somehow managed to do his last rites, kept crying, remembering her late husband for a few days. Past would come alive whenever she looked at the loom. At the time of their wedding, Ghuran was the only weaver among surrounding five villages. People grew cotton, every household had a spinning wheel. Villagers brought cotton yarn to Ghuran who wove cloth with different patterns. Villagers would come to collect cloth. He would get a good earning and, more importantly, respect from all. But he had no child. Tried many treatments, massages for getting a child. He could spend on all that as he had a sound financial position. Therefore, he named his son, Manku. How he wished to give his son good education!

"We still get chalani<sup>10</sup> cotton yarn but don' get Serhuva<sup>11</sup> anymore. There's no forest. The enemies of chik baraiks've entered t' forest. Within a year, forest had been cleared and factories got built. Enemies've made the workers settle here. These people don' e'en touch t' handloom cloth. Wear laurapants<sup>12</sup> tha' look like double-barrelled gun. No rain. How'd cotton grow? All villagers turn into coolies, t' coolies. My son'll also do this for earnin'. Whate'er he does, he shouldn' leave t' village. Days for kargha-lundari<sup>13</sup> are gone. If one's to serve t' others, then why think of colour or design!"

Handloom cloth has not vanished altogether. Motiya, gamcha

and bidauti are given to one's daughter at her wedding. But this has also remained just as a fashion.

Mother had father's dreams before her, but very soon the truth of those dreams was clear to her. The helplessness of landless dwellers of the village became obvious. Chik baraiks, potters, ironsmiths got swallowed by the mills and factories. When farming did not survive, how could co-operation, brotherhood have! Big farms came up on fields. There were farms for even hens and dogs. So, people were ready to take refuge in anybody's service.

Mother told Manku, "Fix t' kargha-lundari to t' wall, son. We'll show incense to it on days of festivals and worship. It'll be safe in t' corner, as your father wished," she grew sad saying this.

Manku acted on her command.

Manku had studied till 5th standard and knew basic addition, subtraction. He got work in the flour mill of Mahavir Saav<sup>14</sup> in city. Manku was honest, would work efficiently. He received two rupees and one kilogram flour in wages. Mother continued with rearing hen and goat. Sometime later, mother fulfilled her responsibility of marrying her son off. While handing over the keys of home to her son and daughter-in-law, she also handed over her husband's last wish to them. Time lapsed.

Manku saw and understood business minutely. "Saavji keeps sittin' t' whole day," he saw. "I work on flour mill, t' other boy takes care of sellin' items in t' shop, but it's Saavji who earns money. He earns flour more than money. He sells tha' to those who look for fresh flour. T' rates for grindin' Madua<sup>15</sup>, millet, corn're higher."

Manku realised that this flour mill is not just a mill, it's the golden goose. He saw Mahavir Saav, soon, began being called Mahavir Seth<sup>16</sup>. He, now, had got a pot-belly. He would no longer try to hide his pot-belly on seeing people.

Manku regretted not having been able to finish his studies. Incidentally, his first child was a son. After much thought, he named

him Ganesh. The day he named his son, he announced that he would ensure his son gets highly educated. His son will get educated, work in a factory. He will set up a flour mill for his father. They'll see better times. He will get married to an educated girl; wedding will take place with great fanfare. Manku will get to have grandsons and granddaughters.

Manku got Ganesh pass Matriculation. He sent him to city to do 'Inter'<sup>17</sup>. He got good results. Ganesh was an ideal student – no tobacco, no wine. No blot of any kind on his character. The day he would be at home, he helped his mother in her work, mother got time to relax. Sometimes, he would help his father. It was then that he realised how heavy a sack his father had to lift for work. He also noticed how weak his father's spine had become and his gait did not look normal any longer. It was now the time to leave studies and search for a job. But when he went out looking for a job, all his certificates proved useless. His spotless character failed to impress anyone. Search for job brought him from top to bottom. Army, clerk, peon, office boy – all kinds of jobs require recommendation. Each required some palm to be greased. In the absence of both these, Ganesh was proved to be ineligible.

Ganesh was passing through the 16th and 17th spring of his life. Subhagi was finishing her middle exams<sup>18</sup> then. They studied in separate schools, lived in different villages. But the path which led to their schools and back to home was the same. Intoxicating mornings and evenings of Spring thrilled the youth. Subhagi and Ganesh were eager to get entranced. There was just one condition- "I should become independent." Both were from the same community, both were educated, both had a good conduct- so their families agreed too.

After wandering for two years in search of job, Ganesh decided to leave village. Ramesh of Tudkadih and Lakhu of Kudahatu had left their villages after 3rd standard. They got jobs in cities. Ganesh contacted their families, they told him that both of them would come back home for Diwali holidays. As Diwali falls in the beginning of November, Ganesh would have to wait for five months to meet them. He took their address and told them about his plans. If a young man having studied only till 3rd standard can get a job, then he would

definitely get a good job there, he thought.

Having worked at Mahvir Saav's place, Manku was familiar with life outside village. On an auspicious day, he married his son off to Subhagi, but the wedding was a mere formality. He felt reassured that his son was safe now.

Lakhu and Ramesh live in a small room in Surat. They had a few pots and pans, cooked on stove, had bedding on the floor. Both of them worked in Bhagyashree Cotton Mill. Ganesh had brought all his certificates. He began searching for a clerical job, but he needed someone to stand surety for him for such a job. How will a man from Jharkhand get a surer in Gujarat?

Tired of searching for one, finally he joined duty as the guard of the godown of a mill. He chose night duty. His master was happy as other guards ran away from night duty. Ganesh opted for night duty because the mill was close to the sea. When his friends would be away for work during the day, he slept comfortably in the chawl<sup>19</sup>. The best thing was the clean toilet and clean water for bathing in the mill. He would come out the mill at six in the morning after taking bath. Would go straight to the sea beach; fishermen used to sell fishes there, which they caught at night, to contractors. No one bought small fishes, so the fishermen emptied them out on sand. People like Ganesh would pick these up. Ganesh used to collect fishes sufficient for the meal. With this new arrangement, the problem of vegetable curry was taken care of. Lakhu and Ramesh too became wiser. They began fetching some vegetables from the mill compound. They could do so as people knew him. Living here in Surat, they realised the value of vegetables, small fish and every single paisa<sup>20</sup>.

When he received a warm welcome on visiting his in-laws after one whole year, Ganesh kept the miserable condition of his life in Surat, a secret. But when he returned for holidays after the 2nd year, Subhagi had a three-month-old daughter in her lap. There was no reason for Subhagi now to stay away from her husband. The description of availability of milk and curd made Surat seem to be a lovely place. It seemed to be a land of fairies where there's sea. Where large and small boats sail in the sea, where people travel by

buses and trains. Foodstuff is available wherever you go. People earn money and lead a happy life. Why should Subhagi be deprived of such a bliss?

Now, what could Ganesh do? He himself had extolled the beauty of Surat. Subhagi dismissed the problem of the lack of accommodation saying, "We live with parents in two rooms here, so we can adjust in one room there."

Ganesh didn't want to feel small. He informed his friends that he was bringing his family along. The friends thought him to be a fool, but they had to help him out. There must be some compulsion, they thought. They enclosed the three feet wide, six feet long porch with a thick tarpaulin sheet and put a plank for themselves to sleep on.

Subhagi reached there. For the first time, she realised the value of aangan<sup>21</sup>, alleys, plants and trees. Perhaps, this is why it is said, 'to gain something, one has to lose something else.' They were able to find a room in the same chawl after five months. Lakhu and Ramesh contributed in paying for that room. Then, it was time to buy pots-pans and bedding.

Ganesh went out with Subhagi on weekend. Subhagi tied her daughter to her back with a gamcha. Seeing this, Ganesh went wild, "You've been livin' here for such a long time now, still've stayed a village woman. Untie this betara."

Subhagi, "I'm comfortable wit' it, I'll go this way."

Ganesh, "What d' you think, you'll attract attention of everyone. Where've these boorish people come from! You wish t' hear this?"

Subhagi, "Whate'er people say, I'm comfortable this way." "So, you'll carry t' betara?"

"Yes."

Furious, Ganesh went out. It took Subhagi time to tie her daughter to her back and lock the room. Having done this, she ran

after Ganesh. Realising Subhagi was running after him, Ganesh accelerated his pace. Subhagi began following him ten steps behind.

A woman called out Subhagi on the way, “Don’t tie the baby like this, it will get suffocated.”

Subhagi adjusted the baby at the front, lunged forward without saying anything. The woman kept muttering. Subhagi feared that she might get lost. She kept moving, getting pushed, making her way in the crowded road. Ganesh then shouted, “Stop!”

Subhagi stopped, she was sweating profusely in winter. She was breathing hard as she stopped. Ganesh was in a bind. He wanted to scold her when he stopped her, but he felt pity seeing her condition. He took her to a tea stall. After having tea, they bought some small items and returned home. Kept walking silently, ten steps apart on the way back.

Both kept to themselves for two days. Pots and pans for kitchen had to be bought. Finally Ganesh broke the silence, “We’ll buy utensils on Saturday, will leave early,” he said.

It was Saturday. There was no change in their attitude. Both walked ten steps apart. The baby was tied with the same traditional gamcha. The same woman called out on the way. She said in a sharp tone, “Good god...look how she’s disfiguring the baby’s face. Her nose is getting rubbed and pressed.”

Subhagi took the baby off her back, “How her nose is getting pressed, tell me? Had it been so, the baby would’ve cried. But she’s quiet,” retorting thus, she tied the baby to her back again.

Ganesh was standing at the entrance of a shop. As Subhagi approached, he went inside the shop. it was a big shop. There were many benches, people were sitting on them. The shopkeeper and his workers were busy. A couple was sitting on a bench. The woman was smiling at Subhagi. She gave the impression as if she wanted to get familiar with Subhagi. She gestured Subhagi to come and sit by her side. When Subhagi was about to sit, she asked, “Are you from

Jharkhand? Do you belong to Ranchi?"

Taking the baby in her lap, Subhagi looked at her with surprise. But she didn't say a word. The woman kept smiling. After a few moments, Ganesh spoke, "Yes, but how did you find out? We have never met you before." The woman, "We recognised just by looking at you. We are also from there." Ganesh felt reassured. Subhagi smiled too. The woman continued, "Let's move out and talk."

As they came out of the shop, she began, "This is my husband, Subodh Manjhi. People call him Subodh da<sup>22</sup> or Manjhi da. We are also from Ranchi, from Siramtoli. My name is Sushila, I have also studied from Ranchi. We are here for the last 25 years. We have our quarter<sup>23</sup> close by. My husband is a driver in the Ordinance factory, it is a Military campus."

Then Subodh da called them inside. "How did you recognize me? It's only six months since I've been here. Don' e'en have a decent stove at home," Subhagi asked.

The woman chuckled and said, "Is it difficult to recognize your own people? Our residence is nearby, at Crescent Road. Do come with us and see, children are also at home, you can meet them too."

Ganesh did not want this kind of intimacy with such a recent acquaintance, but Subhagi was sick of her loneliness, she readily agreed to go along.

Manjhi had four children. His elder daughter was a teacher. They spoke Hindi at home. Outside home, fluent Gujarati. Elder daughter Bula said, "Aunty, I was 11 years old when I last went to my grandparents' house. Today I am 20 years old, you can guess how much I miss that place. We live in the same country, still aren't able to meet our family members."

Subhagi, "I can understand your feelings. You must visit us. There're two others who also belong to that region."

Bula, "Where do you live?"

Ganesh, “In LavanyaBai KunjanBai street, near MaganBhai Biskutwala factory.”

Ganesh returned home with his family in the evening. Subhagi was overjoyed. She began going out for shopping every now and then. One day, a guard standing before a hotel saw her. He called out, “Are you from Ranchi?”

“How did you find out?”

“On seeing this Biruvar gamcha, only people from there have this gamcha.”

Jharkhandis have got their identity due to this gamcha. Most of them live in chawls or out-houses. Only Manjhi had a ‘quarter’ with three rooms. People began gathering at his house on festivals. He became everyone’s guardian. Earlier it was a compulsion to live in Surat, but now an invisible streamlet of joy began to flow through it. But this little joy proved to be short-lived.

Godhra Railway Station went up in flames. Entire Gujarat got engulfed in this fire. Surat, where people from every corner of the country had gathered for a living, all of them got scattered. MaganBhai Biskutwala factory was on fire too. The chawls in the area also faced disaster. Where would one go, nobody knew. Army lorries came out, but there was police patrolling on the roads. Police personnel with batons were spectators to the arson. In LavanyaBai KunjanBai street, there were mostly biskut<sup>24</sup> factory workers who were scurrying around. A stampede all around, suddenly an ordinance factory lorry came that way.

The factory lorry halted before Subhagi’s chawl, Subodh da came out. Subhagi clung to him and began crying. Subodh da told, “Quick, get into the lorry.” Five other women with their children from the chawl had boarded by then. After them Subhagi boarded with her daughter. Policemen patrolling the area were baffled to see the army vehicle. How this lorry dared to get here? Before they could reach it, the lorry drove straight and entered the military camp.

There was uproar in the camp too. Manjhi's neighbours were angry at these people being brought there. They got into a scuffle with Manjhi. The senior officer of the camp was informed. He came and sent others to the relief camp. Ganesh and his family stayed back.

It took time for peace to return to Surat. But Ganesh was restless after this incident. Subhagi insisted on returning to village. Ganesh knew that going back would be stupidity. Here, at least they were able to manage a living. Staying here, they could help father too, but how to make Subhagi understand all this?

They held discussion with Subodh da and Sushila di<sup>25</sup> daily. Subodh da understood the situation back at the village very well. He also knew the world around. He tried to persuade them, "You can't live in peace in any corner of the country. We, all the Ranchiyars<sup>26</sup>, together can think of and share each other's happiness and well-being. You will face problem of riots, price rise, cheating, suffering everywhere. Shortage of water, shelter, food and injustice are the challenges for all of us. These challenges will always be there. To fight these, we left our homes in village. Now it is better to take these challenges head on." Ganesh reminded Subhagi of his two-year long loneliness.

Now people started returning to work. One day, Sushila di said, "Ganesh, we have this Biruvar gamcha as our identity. You brought it here. This gamcha helped so many of us in coming together."

Subodh da, "It is true, we have been staying here for the last 25 years, still we felt the pain of separation from home. Now, we have got united with our kin again."

Sushila, "We, all of us, are living together like a big family, isn't that so?" This helped Subhagi's mind to settle.

After a month, Manku received an envelope. Ganesh had sent a letter to his father. He had talked a little about the riots and informed about being safe. Further, he had written something very special -

Johar<sup>27</sup> to my great grandfather. Today I've understood how far-

sighted he was! He'd said – kargha-lundari is our identity. This Biruvar gamcha has saved our lives, given us our identity in this city where we're strangers. We all, who belong there, could get together under this gamcha. Now we're sharing each other's happiness and grief.

Pitaji<sup>28</sup>, I request you to take time out to weave such gamchas, it's in demand here. I consider myself fortunate to be a chik baraik. Our gamcha is priceless. I am proud of being your son and dadaji's<sup>29</sup> grandson. We all send johar to you and ma<sup>30</sup>.

Your son, Ganesh.

Two tears had dropped from Ganesh's eyes while ending his letter. Father kissed those on the letter.

#### Notes

- 1 Biru or Birugarh was a part of kingdom of Kaisalpur-Birugarh Parganas which was ruled by the king Ganga Vamsi of the Gajapati royal family of the Gajapat kingdom for centuries, even during the British colonial era. Currently, it is a village in Simdega district of Jharkhand situated at a distance of about 11km from Simdega city in South Jharkhand. This region is inhabited by the tribal and Odia communities. Kheria community is one of the five primary tribal communities of the region. Biruvar Gamcha is the traditional hand woven cloth made by this community. Three stripes in the cloth represent 3 sub-tribes of Kherias-Dudh, Dhelki and Hill or Pahari Sabar Kherias. A pattern of 9 stripes in the Biruvar Gamcha represents 9 sub-clans of Dudh Kherias. (<https://simdega.nic.in/en/history/>).
- 2 To cook food wrapped in leaves.
- 3 Brother-in-law.
- 4 An Indian sweetmeat made with curdled milk.
- 5 Various types of cloths made with coarse cotton yarn on handloom.
- 6 Cloth to tie a baby to one's back.
- 7 Cloths, utensils and other items given to one's daughter as a gift at the time of her wedding.
- 8 Foodgrain received annually from the village as a reward for the services rendered throughout the year.
- 9 The tribes of Jharkhand were culturally classified by the

anthropologist Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi. According to his classification, chik baraik belonged to simple artisans' community.

- 10 Fine cotton yarn made with machines.
- 11 Dye made from a tree's bark.
- 12 Bellbottoms, as these were called in local slang.
- 13 Handloom and shuttle.
- 14 Trader, moneylender.
- 15 A coarse food grain also known as 'finger millet' or ragi is widely used as staple diet by adivasi community.
- 16 A rich trader, landlord.
- 17 A short form of Intermediate which is an examination equivalent to higher secondary.
- 18 Examination equivalent to 8th standard.
- 19 A large building divided into many separate tenements offering cheap, basic accommodation to labourers.
- 20 A monetary unit of very small denomination in Indian currency. It is equal of one hundredth of a rupee.
- 21 Open space in the middle of the house which is the activity centre in Indian homes.
- 22 Elder brother
- 23 A small apartment
- 24 Biscuit
- 25 Elder sister
- 26 Natives of Ranchi
- 27 Salute, form of greeting in tribal communities.
- 28 Father
- 29 Grandfather
- 30 Mother