

## LOAD

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### Bojhha

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The body refuses to move. The exhaustion is so great that it is difficult to even stir from the sliver of shade under the tree to walk up and collect the weekly wages. The body seems broken to pieces. Carrying eight bricks at a time on the head keeping the neck firm and climbing three floors up the bamboo ladder – leaves no chance for the neck to move, which stiffens by itself. Regardless of the rebellious will, or the protesting shoulders and back, the neck continues to perform its task automatically – it keeps itself straight. It knows that if it does not hold strong and firm, then eight times one and a half –twelve kilos of weight would not be easy to carry. The slightest misbalance could bring the whole lot down. The slipping load would not just pound the feet, there was the chance of falling in a heap and breaking the spinal chord. But the greater risk was being immediately dismissed from work by the *sardar* or the contractor.

It was just a few days ago that Sabo sat on the first floor roof catching the bricks thrown up from below. Her pregnant belly had become so big that she could bend with difficulty to pick up the platters of cement mix. So Nilmoni exchanged duties with her, surreptitiously, without letting the supervisor know. It was the easiest of jobs for women in Sabo's condition. Bricks would be thrown up from below that she had to quickly catch standing at the edge of the roof and pass on to the next handler. But Sabo was afraid of even such an easy job as that. Her fear made her movements slow, her hands did not move fast enough. Suddenly something went wrong in the relay. Before she could

pass the brick and turn in readiness, the next one was thrown up. Sabo's hands were not in place to catch the brick; but her belly was where her hands should have been. Nothing could be done after that. Blood had already started to flow before hands could lift Sabo from where she had fallen and bring her down the ladder. As she lay on the ground, the blood seeped into the earth around her and made a puddle. The men moved away quickly. But barely had the old timers Budhni and Lokhimoni managed to pull the baby out, that the supervisor arrived.

He stood slightly away but started yelling at the men.

'Why have you rascals left your work and crowded around here? Who brought that heavy-bellied female to work here? Didn't I see her carry cement mix the last few days? Who's the leader that changed her 'depty' without my order?'

He sacked Sabo and Nilmoni on the spot. Even before Budhni and Lokhimoni had fetched two platters of water from the brick-soaking tank to clean her up, Sabo was jobless.

So the neck knows its duty; it stays straight. But at the end of the day, after countless twelve kilo loads, when the body sinks -- that is when it can move as it likes -- but the body refuses to move altogether. Not even to pick up the weekly wages. But move one must. The yellow smoke from the Wariar Factory burns into the lungs as one breathes. The smoke is a part of the atmosphere, and one must get used to it. After all, how can one not become used to the air one inhales? Living here, people have also become used to their persistent cough. All who live here, the young and the old alike -- have the same kind of chest-wracking cough that threatens to drag the entrails out with its force. The ribs rattle, threatening to fall off and let the soot-filled barely pulsating heart splatter on the coal dust.

That is the way Akuli's father-in law had coughed. Was there only the Wariar Factory? That man used to work in the Colliery. Wearing the light-fixed hard hat, he rode the trolley into

the mines. When he came up, he was like an owl, couldn't see a thing in the light. He frowned and blinked and tried to focus. Akuli's father worked in the colliery too. She was so small when he died. She barely reached his shoulders. The colliery became famous when he died. It was in the papers, in the radio – every body came to know about it. Many people came to see the colliery. Even the annual *Pous mela* didn't draw such crowds. Akuli's father did not die alone; many died with him. He became famous after he died; many people came to see and hear about what had happened. But why they hadn't come before, Akuli wondered.

After duty her father used to come home and comment,

'Things don't feel right – what'll happen one day in the mines, only Mother Kali knows!'

He said,

'There used to be a ban on cutting coal near the river. Now the *sahibs* don't go down into the mines, don't check; they are happy with more 'pouduction'. With so much water seeping in, who knows when the whole river will enter the mines!'

And that was exactly what happened. Every body knew the disaster they suffered at Chasnala – Akuli's family and so many others. Yet no one had paid any attention before; neither the supervisors nor the *sahibs* – no one.

That was when Akuli stopped her studies too. Her brother got a job in another colliery and her mother got Akuli married in a hurry with the money they got from the government on her father's death.

Now the contractor asks,

'Tell your name.'

'Akuli Patorain.'

Without raising his eyes from the paper, the contractor comments, 'What a voice. Your mother left it choked at your birth. Here, put your thumbprint.'

'I can write my name.'

'Is that so? I see you've become Indira Gandhi!'

When she had insisted on studying up to the fifth class, her father had said the same thing.

'*Bap re!* My daughter will now become Indira Gandhi. She'll talk *gat mat --*'

Akuli harboured a certain degree of vanity too, especially when she used to work in the colliery. While her husband and brother-in-law put their thumbprints, she signed her name 'Akuli Patorain', notwithstanding the crooked letters, and collected her wages. There too she did the same work of carrying load. Women were not permitted to go down into the mines any more -- such was the new government rule. So they worked outside. Only in the open mines where the earth was dug out in big ponds, was the coal carried up in baskets by the women, the *kamins*. The pond-like mines became deep with digging. Though they were not like the tunnel mines, they were deep enough to make the miners working at the pit appear tiny from the upper rim. When the office horn sounded, take the basket and the trowel and go to the mines; when the horn sounded again, the shift was over. Akuli went with her husband and brother-in-law, Surin Pator and Boron Pator, for duty in the colliery. They carried their food in three shining tiffin boxes. They spent the holidays roaming the Sitarampur bazaar or went to the cinema. Then, one day, her mother-in-law fixed a match for Boron and sent word to them.

The two old people lived in the village near Bankura and cared for their land after her father-in-law's severe asthma forced them to leave the colliery area. There wasn't much land; just a bit that didn't even yield six months' rice. Yet it was land, mother

earth. The mother-in-law also planted some millet and pulses. There was another reason. The adjoining land belonged to the uncle. If there was no one to supervise, they could easily encroach and plough the fields. After all, if the land was not cultivated, there was reason for it to be taken over. For the last few years, one of the two brothers Surin or Boron, insisted on being present during the sowing season. There was simmering acrimony between the uncle's family and theirs. Often the two families were not on talking terms. However, when the sons were around, no open quarrels ensued. The uncle had a large family – three sons, their wives and children – a full house.

Coming home to see Boron's bride provided the occasion for more things to happen. Through the years Akuli's father-in-law had saved the sons' money carefully. Now he expressed a wish to buy more land. Actually it was the mother-in-law's wish that some new land be bought before Boron's marriage. Since Akuli did not conceive even after several years of marriage, it was hoped that after Boron's marriage the family would grow; that there would come some children and more mouths to feed. The logic was, when there was some money in hand and there was good land available, why not seize the chance. The comment carried a censure for Akuli too. Five years had passed yet her womb had not become fruitful. For that fault of hers, the mother-in-law often curled her lip at what Akuli said. But there wasn't anything new in that. What was new was the matter that came out of the talk about buying more land.

The land in view was adjacent theirs; close for both the families. That land belonged to Hariram Sau of their village. Though he was a Sau, Hariram wasn't rich. He had land but not much cash. His family was also a large one. Now his daughter's marriage was fixed, so he needed to raise some money. That's why he wanted to sell the land. He wasn't greedy nor had he quoted a high price, but he wanted the entire sum at once. Now, Surin's uncle also had his eye on that land. But whereas he needed some time, at least a couple of months to raise the amount, Surin's

father had ready cash in hand. Sau finalized the sale with Surin's father and the registry was to be done in a few days. But Surin's cousins were furious. They had always lived in the village and knew all the party boys from the panchayat. 'Which father's son will dare to step on that land...', they growled threateningly from their courtyard.

On the day they were to go to see Boron's bride, Surin was the first to notice that on their almost-registered land was hoisted a small red flag. He ran to inform the others and immediately the father and the two brothers rushed to the field with spades and trowels. No sooner had they thrown the flag aside that the young men from the uncle's house charged in. All of them carried *lathis*. The other villagers had just begun to reach their own fields. The shouting and yelling soon drew a big crowd at the spot. Some tried to pull the two groups apart, some merely stood and watched. Before one could take three breaths, three bodies had fallen on the field: the father-in-law, one of the uncle's sons and another boy staying the night at the uncle's house. He was the brother of a panchayat member. Everything seemed to happen in a blink of an eye. Akuli had not even grasped what happened. But what she understood hardly mattered. The police arrived within the hour. All the male members of the two families present on the field were dragged to the police station along with Akuli's mother-in-law Kusum Patorain crying at her husband's feet, and Akuli Patorain herself. Those left free were the uncle's wife who wasn't present at home and their two daughters-in-law who were in confinement.

Their confinement served as ground for one of the boys of their family to be released on bail. Through her brother's untiring efforts and great expense, Akuli was given bail too. But she was restricted from leaving the village. Finally after a lot of pleading, the second officer of the police station permitted her to go to the colliery through the Niyamatpur bazaar accompanied by a constable. Akuli wanted to weep and sink into the earth in embarrassment. She used to walk to the colliery office with her

head held high to sign her name and collect her wages every month. Now people stared at her in amazement to see the constable walking behind her. But no one came forward to ask her anything. What was there for Akuli to say, any way, and to whom could she say it? Nor did she have any time for explanations. She had to return to Durgapur and from there to Bankura before nightfall. A few steps beyond the office were the mines. All her friends were working there. Why did such a thing have to happen to her when she hadn't been involved in anything at all? Tears of humiliation blurred her eyes.

She walked nervously to the supervisor's table. The latter had noticed her already. Who hadn't? Wasn't there the constable accompanying her? Who wasn't aware that the police never accompanied good people; that they never came on good occasions? Why didn't they come forward to escort poor old men or solitary young women safely home or help terribly sick persons to reach the hospital? The police never came for such things. Doing such things was not a part of their duty. Thus the arrival of the khaki uniform invariably spelt outrage, crime, and calamity. That was why every one stared at Akuli the moment she entered the office but lowered their eyes when she looked at them.

Akuli reached the supervisor's table and stood silently in front. He looked up suddenly from some important calculation he was doing and stared at her in shock.

Akuli quickly explained their terrible predicament. She made no attempts to prove anything. It was like having a bad dream; a horrible nightmare. Standing in the colliery office had seemed so real, as though she was getting ready to pick up her basket and the trowel to go the mines.

The amount in their P.F. was meager, accumulated for only four years. Yes, Surin and Boron had slightly more than Akuli. But they had to submit applications affixed with their thumbprints to borrow from that sum. The application would then be considered

at the next P.F. meeting. The money would be disbursed as per the committee's decision. At the moment they could only draw the previous month's unclaimed salaries.

Their case was decided after one and a half years. According to the Indian Penal Code numbers 307, 304 and 302, Gopal Pator and his two sons, his nephews Surin and Boron Pator and Surin's wife Akuli Patorain were sentenced to life imprisonment. Kusum Patorain was released due to lack of proof. Generally, those accused of life imprisonment received government funds to engage government lawyers. But without depending upon that provision, Kusum Patorain ran to her relatives – to her father's family and the son's in-laws – trying desperately to gather money for a defense lawyer.

In accordance to the government rules, on being proved guilty of crime in the courts of law, the three unskilled labourers of the collieries lost their jobs. As a result, instead of being given a loan, all their dues were settled and were collected by Kusum Patorain.

In the jail, the friendless Akuli didn't even get time to weep while serving the sentence of rigorous punishment. For a fifteen-minute duration once every month she got the chance to meet Surin lodged in the other section of the same jail. Surin told her to implore her brother to somehow raise money and engage clever lawyers. If the lawyers could arrange witnesses, he was sure that they would be released by the High Court.

Akuli got the chance to cry when her brother came to meet her. She also told him what Surin had said.

Two ladies used to come to the women's ward to teach the children. Akuli loved to sit with them. She wanted to so much to read again. The children used to ask her repeatedly,

'Eh, what is your name?'



*Load*

Akuli would reply in her thin reedy voice,

'Akuli Patorain.'

And the children sitting in the shade of the wall would roll on the ground in laughter.

Soon, what Surin had said was proved right.

With great difficulty, Kusum Patorain and Akuli's brother had managed to engage good lawyers. As a result, in response to their appeal in the High Court, all three of them were released from jail.

Akuli ties the few rupees in the corner of her sari, gets up slowly and walks to the shop, stiff with pain. At the end of the road is her small hut with a bamboo fence.

Soon after their release, Surin Pator started a new family with a new bride and new utensils in a new home.

The expenses of the case left Akuli's brother destitute. There was no money left to get his two younger sisters married.

Akuli continues to carry bricks and load and bricks and load and bricks. Her neck and back grow taut and stiff with pain.

People ask her from time to time,

'Here you, what's your name?'

But no one laughs at her answer any more

**Note on the Writer:**

Joya Mitra is a creative writer, columnist and environmentalist with several novels, collections of poems, short stories and essays to her credit. Her creative language is Bengali. In 1967, barely 18 years old, she started her college career with a dream of changing the world. She belonged to the politically sensitive generation of college students that became involved in the political turmoil that engulfed Bengal in the 1970s. She was

imprisoned between 1970 and 1974 for her association with the Naxal Movement. Out of those experiences emerged her critically acclaimed prison memoir *Hanyaman* [translated into English as *Killing Days*] which was awarded the Ananda Puraskar in 1991. Mitra lives in Asansol, a mofussil town close to collieries and steel factories. She is a deeply ideological person who believes in the social responsibility of a writer and has faith in the power of the writer's pen. She writes about the lives of the disprivileged working class around her with rare understanding and warmth. Her perception is acute and unwavering and since it is that of a woman, the style of writing has a special edge. Some of her other well known works are --

**Poetry collections:**

*Pratnoprashtharer Gaan* [The Song of the Ancient Stones]

*Deergha Ektara* [The Long One-Stringed Lute]

Short Story collections:

*Yuddhaparba* [The Battle Cantos]

*Kal-Porshur Dharabahik* [The Serial of Tomorrow and Day-after]

Novels:

*Swarna Kamaler Chinha* [The Mark of the White Lotus]

*Shada Kalo Bataash* [White and Black Bree]

**Note on the Translator:**

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