

The Slough

TANDING water stagnates. Flowing water remains clear. To each his own eyes and vision, and may the river of mercy endow gods and men, friends and enemies, with equal wisdom.

Once upon a time in a certain village, there lived a prosperous Gujar household. Their cows and buffaloes were of the best stock; milk and curds flowed like water. Their pitchers were full of clarified butter. Whey was freely available to all the villagers. The Gujar was a fine young man, fair and well built like Isar. He wore a huge turban, a red-bordered waistcoat and shirt and a neck band. Earrings of pure gold, bracelets of silver and embroidered shoes. His lathi (cudgel) was as tall as he was. It was decorated with copper stars and silver bands.

When the time came, his bride arrived from her village. And on her arrival, word spread with the winds throughout the village that such a beautiful Gujar had never before been seen or heard of. The couple looked like Isar and Gangaur



This story by Vijay Dan Detha, based on a Rajasthani folktale, is from a collection of his stories that is shortly to be published by Manushi Prakashan

incarnate, as if god had expended his skill to make them fit for one another. Her sturdy body was as though moulded of milk and curd and butter. Youth foamed in her. Intoxication dripped from every pore. Whoever set eyes on her wondered how such beauty could be contained in such a small space. It was as though all the unparalleled beauty of nature had found shelter in Lachi Gujar's body. Her name was unique like her beauty - Lachi. A mouth-watering name. Echoing in the heart. Soaked in nectar.

Talk of Lachi Gujar's beauty spread from house to house, from field to fallow, and finally reached the ears of the Thakur. He immediately called Bhoja Kanwariya, his favourite agent, who was as close to him as the hair on his moustache.

The Thakur asked: "Bhoja, have you heard anything new?"

Bhoja Kanwariya was a clever fellow, smart enough to pluck the stars from the sky. He could understand a thing before it was expressed. He was dark, with sparkling white teeth. A man like any other. Neither very beautiful nor very ugly. But a fellow with all his wits about him. Without enquiring further, he said: "O master, one can never know the truth by hearing about it. I have seen it with my own eyes." The Thakur was reassured. Bhoja's eyes could not err. Eagerly, the Thakur asked: "Then what I've heard is absolutely true?"

"No master, absolutely false."

"False?"

"Yes, master, false. One may gabble as long as one likes, but this poor tongue is powerless to describe such beauty. Master, Lachi is Lachi, that's all there is to it. By some miracle, her body is able to sustain such loveliness. Holding such beauty in a body is like holding burning coals in a cloth."

The Thakur listened, astounded. Bhoja went on. "Lachi was coming from the lake with a group of friends, her waterpot on her head. She was like the

moon shining among the stars. At first, I could not believe my eyes. But master, one has to believe reality. When I looked on her enchanting face, I realised that all these years you have been wasting your time following various women and my service too has been in vain."

"Then, now..." said the Thakur softly.

Bhoja eagerly interrupted: "That goes without saying. I realised at once that this lioness will not be easily tamed. But who can resist the god of death? I will consider myself a successful agent the day Lachi Gujar comes to your honour's bed." Bhoja spoke with confidence, but for the first time, the words stuck in his throat, though he attached no significance to this unconscious hesitation. "Enough, enough," said the Thakur. "You've fanned the fire to such good effect that I can think of nothing else. I will now rely on your wits."

Indeed, the Thakur had cause to rely on Bhoja, for he was skilled in such doughty deeds. In any case, how could a mere Gujari refuse to obey the Thakur! The Gujar was master of his house, the Thakur was master of the whole village. However beautiful, she was, after all, of the Gujar caste and a ryot in status. She should be proud to be called to his honour's bed!

Bhoja Kanwariya was a bachelor and secure in the Thakur's favour. While providing the Thakur with women, he satisfied himself with the leavings. All the villagers tried their best to be in his good books. Self-interest will always prevail over self-respect.

After the bride's arrival, Bhoja began to visit the Gujar's house very often. He was already acquainted with the family. In the beginning, he never so much as raised his eyes to look at Lachi. Such beauty can be perceived without looking.

Bhoja had several girlfriends among the watercarriers. He wanted them to find out which way the wind was blowing with Lachi. But her mind remained

unfathomable. One girl said that she was a perfect innocent. Another said that she was a deep one. A third said that she didn't have the brains to match her beauty. She couldn't fathom a word or a gesture, nor had she eyes for any man other than her husband. She wouldn't even wash her mouth with water from

a buffalo's milk is not black, how can laughter and the human mind be black?

Bhoja could not progress beyond inciting the Thakur. The girlfriends had to acknowledge defeat, for Lachi turned a deaf ear to them. The curds and whey remained separate and could not be mixed.

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any pitcher but her own. Why waste one's energy on such a troublesome woman?



Bhoja said that they would have to waste their energy on this one. A quick-witted girl retorted: "If one were to get something out of it one might have a go." Bhoja was not to be outdone. Smiling, he replied: "Can one get one's share of the feast before it is offered to the gods?" At this, the faces of both were wreathed in smiles. No question like a smile! No answer like a smile! After this Bhoja's girlfriends tried their best to entrap Lachi but she seemed not to understand their meaning. She had been born and bred amidst the foaming milk pails; so she saw nothing but the whiteness of milk all around. When even

The Thakur visited the Gujar's house many times, on the pretext of looking at the cows and buffalo. Lachi now understood his meaning but she kept quiet. The smell of burnt milk persists even after it is made into clarified butter. How could she then fail to smell the odour of the Thakur's filthy mind?

One day, the Thakur, while praising the cows, came close to Lachi and asked: "How many times has this cow been mated?" Lachi was holding a bundle of fodder in one hand and the cow's rope in the other. She answered quietly: "I don't quite know." Bhoja was standing nearby. Seeing his opportunity, he at once spoke up: "It seems to me that you don't know what's good for you or for anyone else either." Lachi raised her lashes and looked at Bhoja. Then she sat down and began to milk the cow.

Embarrassed, the two of them moved off, pretending to be engaged in conversation. Was this a woman or a monstrosity? She had no respect for the master of the village. She understood everything very well but pretended not to understand.

Yet Lachi did not get unduly perturbed. To each his own ways and his own nature. The five fingers of the hand are not equal, after all. She almost told her husband what had happened, but refrained. Eating coals will only blacken the mouth. But her pursuers

were not to be shaken off so easily. One day Lachi was standing in the paddock. A cow was in heat, so she began to call out to the bull. Alerted, the bull puffed up his neck, and then galloped towards the cow. The Thakur and his agent had probably been waiting for this opportunity. Lachi, busy calling to the bull, happened to look around. They were standing there, smiling shamelessly. For a moment Lachi was startled, but the next instant she turned her back on them and continued to incite the bull. What need for shame or modesty before this pure mystery of nature? Why should she be embarrassed by these shameless men?

Such a coincidence does not occur every day. The Thakur's agent did not control his tongue: "Lachi, you are so concerned about this bull, but you do not care at all for the Thakur Sahib. How long he has been writhing in agony!"

Lachi heard every word clearly. The earlier incidents flared up like fire before her eyes. Burning with anger, she looked around and saw a disgusting shameless smile plastered upon the Thakur's lips. This smile seemed to her even worse than Bhoja's words. Such a filthy smile on the lips of a human being! Every pore of her body burnt like coal. Forgetting the relation of ryot to landlord, she pounced on the Thakur and dealt him such a blow with her elbow that he fell down senseless. The unexpected attack took even the agent by surprise and in a panic he began to massage his honour's chest. Suppressing her laughter, Lachi walked towards the bull.

At last, after much rubbing and pressing, the Thakur opened his eyes and asked: "Bhoja, what happened?" Stroking his muscles, Bhoja said: "Oh master, this is what happens when you go after low caste women. Please consider this just a bad dream and be patient a few days more. She will come to her senses. I understand women very well."

"But you made a mistake in this

case," said the Thakur in a feeble voice.

"No master, I didn't make a mistake. Lachi made a mistake. She is not familiar with the manners and customs of this place."

Breathing with difficulty, the Thakur said: "Do you think I should get the whore's nose and ears cut off and her teeth broken?" With folded hands, Bhoja replied: "As your honour wishes. But master, she'll be completely spoiled if she is botched up like that."

"She has trampled my honour in the

full of excitement, her bangles clinking, her skirt rustling and a happy smile on her lips. Taking her husband's lathi in one hand and stroking it with the other, she said: "If you will reward me with sweetmeats, I'll give you some joyful news."

She had been a month in her husband's house. She had already told him that she was expecting. What joyful news could this be? But she had not been so happy then as she was now. A new bride does feel shy. Perhaps she wanted

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dust today. Is that nothing?" "Who saw it, master?" said Bhoja, pressing the Thakur's heart. "Only you, Lachi and I know of it. These dumb beasts know nothing of human honour and respect. If you so command, I will forbid Lachi to speak of this to anyone, on pain of dire consequences."

"Yes, but will she agree?"

"She doesn't have any choice, your honour."

The Thakur stood up, brushing the dust off his clothes. He was too upset to even order Bhoja to brush him down. Bhoja quietly approached Lachi and said: "You have committed a grave error today. But such is the greatness of his honour that he has forgiven you. We will not speak of this to anyone, neither should you speak of it."

This time, Lachi could not suppress her laughter. She burst out laughing so violently that she could not stop for quite a while. Bhoja was once more at his wits' end. He withdrew, shamefacedly. The Thakur too asked no more questions. Long after it was heard no more, Lachi's laughter continued to echo in their ears.

When the cow had been pacified, the Gujar came along. Lachi ran towards him,

to announce the same thing again, now that she had overcome her shyness. What greater joy than pregnancy can there be for a woman? Stroking her cheeks, he said: "You are so excited that you forget you've already told me that good news."

Shaking her long neck, she replied: "No no, this is something else. First promise me the sweetmeats."

The Gujar was surprised, yet he said, smiling: "Eat sweetmeats every day if you like them, my dear."

"It's not that I like them, but that I am to be congratulated."

Then she narrated in detail the entire story from the beginning up to the very end when the Thakur fell down, unconscious. Her husband listened, stunned. But he could not swallow the part about her laughing aloud after being forgiven for the blow. Turning pale, he muttered: "This is dreadful! You should have shown some respect for the master's honour and dignity."

At these unexpected words from her husband's lips her happy smile vanished, as though a kite had snatched it away in one swoop. Unable to believe her ears, she stammered: "Honour and dignity!

What has this to do with honour and dignity? I was so angry I could have wrung the bastard's neck."

These words made her husband as angry as she had been. Laying his hand across her lips, he said: "Hold your noise, don't you feel ashamed to talk like that? That is the nature of the All Bountiful. He enjoys a little bit of teasing."

Lachi jerked herself away and said: "You consider this a bit of teasing?" And her eyes filled, so that she was unable to utter another word.

Then her husband began to explain to her that such madness would not work here. The All Bountiful would remain what he was. The ryots had no control over him. For ryots to pick a quarrel with the Thakur was like the fishes of the river being at enmity with the crocodile. One had to be sensible to survive. His honour looked kindly on their house. The Gujar

weapon is of use in conflict with those who are equal or superior in strength. Animals and birds are simple and straightforward. There is no gap between their appearance and their behaviour. But the behaviour of humans is highly complicated. They think in one way,

**"I can bring scores of women like you", he said
"But where can I go if I lose the favour of the Giver of Bread?"**

speak in another, and act in a third.

They are quite the opposite of what they appear to be. Home and family, caste and community, the bonds of conditioning control them completely.

Lachi made no reply. Her husband thought that her tears were a sign of



got along well with Bhoja. Of what value is mere beauty? Good sense and intelligence are more important.

The husband continued his sermon and Lachi sobbed loudly. What hopes she had cherished of this young husband and what had he turned out to be! Of what use was his lathi? All very well to vent one's aggression with a lathi on dumb animals who cannot express their pain. A lathi is not needed to control those who are weaker than oneself. A

remorse. She was still a child. A few knocks would put sense into her head. Running a house is a very difficult and complicated business. Petting Lachi, he said: "My lecturing has taught you some sense, I hope?"

Bewildered, Lachi looked up at her husband. She could not have dreamt that he would look at her like that. Wiping her eyes, she tried to force a smile. He asked again: "Have you come to your senses or not?"

Lachi's fate was now bound up with that of his family. Where else could she go?

She said: "I had to come to my senses sooner or later."

The Gujar felt proud of his good sense. Lifting his wife's chin, he gazed at her face for a while. Then he said with pride: "Even a stone could not help feeling attracted to such beauty. So how could his honour control himself? Had you not been so beautiful, no problem would have arisen."

"One cannot help being beautiful or otherwise."

"But one can try to be compassionate and patient."

Lachi felt as though someone was stabbing her in the heart. To provoke her husband, she said: "If you don't have the courage, I can burn my face."

She was about to go on but her husband was enraged.

"Such pride in one's beauty is not good", he said. "I can bring scores of women like you to light the fire and make cowdung cakes in this yard, but where can I go if I lose the favour of the All Bountiful?"

Lachi realised that the argument had gone too far. It was no use taking it further. Wheedling, she said: "Yes, what you say is absolutely true. But you won't find another beauty like me either."

Annoyed, he answered: "So what? A house cannot be run on the strength of mere beauty. Now we'll need to have all our wits about us to get out of this difficulty."

Lachi could not stop herself. Tauntingly, she asked: "Would you like me to sleep with the Thakur in broad daylight?"

This was like adding fat to the fire. Grinding his teeth, he said: "You witch, when did I talk of sleeping? In any case when the urge takes you, you won't be stopped by anyone. Your tongue seems to be running away with you. If your skull is itching for a few knocks, tell me and I'll set it right."

"It needs no manliness to set it right", retorted Lachi. "But I had hoped for something else. It's good that my illusion has been destroyed. I'll never again complain of anyone to you. In this short while, I've learnt the wisdom of a thousand years."

Suddenly recalling something, the husband asked, "I sent you to do a job and you got into such a mess that I clean forgot to ask whether the cow was mated or not."

This is the highest duty of the household. This is also the essence of the paddock! Picking up a broom and beginning to sweep, she answered: "Yes, she was."

She had left the familiar customs of her home, her fond family and the company of her girlfriends to come to this alien place. What joy she had held in her heart! But this one jolt had so shocked her that all the blossoms withered in her breast. The new buds were shrivelled within her.

Yet her beautiful body remained as healthy as ever. It was not paralysed. The routine of the household went on. Milking and fetching water, lighting the fire, sweeping, the fodder and the fuel. The same lanes and by-lanes. But her heart was not in it. The pleasures of intimacy had faded. She felt as if a bamboo scarecrow was digging at her body. Surely all this could have been done without erecting the facade of marriage, of altars and of handtaking.

If her husband could not protect her at such moments, why had she taken his hand and followed him here? For what occasion was he preserving his anger, vengeance and his fine stout lathi? The Thakur may be a Thakur but how could people endure this defiling of beds? She had not accepted such slavery in exchange for mere food and clothing. There were thousands of other ways to procure such a despicable subsistence. Why then had they made such a fuss with music and song? As she churned

the curds, an invisible churning went on in her own mind - chur, whirr, chur, whirr. Heaven knew what kind of buttery child would be produced! Lachi's heart was soured through and through. She took no pleasure in anything. For her neither did the sun nor the moon nor the stars give light. The sun might rise or set as it

Please be patient for a while; I will not leave a stone unturned."

Sighing, the Thakur answered: "I know. I'm quite confident of that."

But Bhoja was no longer the reliable agent he used to be. His heart had begun to stray. How was it that one blow of the elbow was enough to fell the lord of the village and that even after he had



pleased. To Lachi it was all one. Within a month of her arrival at her husband's home, all of nature had been transformed in Lachi's eyes.

She had to smile, even laugh to keep up appearances, but the earlier milky radiance no longer sparkled on her lips. She felt ashamed to refuse to sleep with her husband, but her mind was never again in union with his.

After suffering the blow, the Thakur too had become restless. He would often say irritably to the agent: "Bhoja, have your wits rusted or what? Haven't you thought of a plan yet?"

Folding his hands, Bhoja replied: "All Bountiful, I said from the beginning that this was a difficult fish to catch. She is not simple like other women. If the stars in the sky could be gathered as easily as berries or limes, would they be spared? Such rare things are obtained with difficulty, O All Bountiful! But once they come to hand what boundless, limitless pleasure! Might one well give up the rule of heaven in exchange for that pleasure.

awakened from his swoon not one hair of anyone's head had been harmed? Thakurs and gods frighten those who are easily frightened. But they fear the fearless. This new knowledge lit up Bhoja's mind and gradually he began to detest this job of supplying women. It wasn't as if he had to feed a hundred

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elephants. It did not behove an unmarried person to do such a repulsive job. And the job seemed even more distasteful when an angelic beauty like Lachi was in question.

If that delightful body could be his, he would exchange a hundred agencies to look once on her face. Kingship itself would pale before the joy of having her arms entwined around his neck. If he betrayed such beauty he would surely suffer for it in the afterlife.

It so happened that an unique opportunity fell to Bhoja's lot. Bhoja was skilled in branding animals seized with convulsions. One of the Gujar's buffaloes began to writhe in convulsions and the worried Gujar immediately sent for Bhoja. The Gujar was in a hurry to attend a community council meeting. So he explained to Lachi what had to be done and then set out on his journey.

Bhoja was standing in the paddock, stroking the writhing buffalo, when Lachi came in, with a basket of burning coals. A red hot scythe lay smouldering among the coals. Bhoja immediately caught hold of the handle and applied it to the buffalo's boil. A faint smoke rose from the skin. The buffalo kicked, but soon stood up as if magically cured. Scratching the soil with her toe, Lachi said: "The buffalo's life was saved because the brand was applied in time, otherwise she'd have died in agony."

How could Bhoja refrain now? Immediately, he replied: "I am like this buffalo, my life is in your hands. You can save me or kill me as you please."

At first Lachi could hardly believe that he would speak this way, after the incident he had witnessed. When she had not spared the lord of the village, what chance did a mere agent stand? The Thakur had fainted, but half a blow would knock the stuffing out of this fellow. Yet this knowledge had not diminished his boldness. Lachi stared at him in surprise. Suppressing a smile, she said: "Have you forgotten what happened that day?"

"No, I haven't, that's why I've been so daring. To die at your hands is to attain paradise. The most unfortunate wretches have their share of sunshine, then may I not hope for so small a share of your beauty?"

With downcast eyes, Lachi scratched at the soil. If the reality of her husband's strength had not been exposed to her, she would have torn Bhoja to pieces today. But after hearing her husband's sermon she had changed a great deal.

Many chameleons lie hidden inside a human being. He scarcely knows when his colour begins to change. Many storms began to arise in her mind. Though her husband had not been enraged by the Thakur's behaviour, might he react if he saw something similar with his own eyes. She might as well put him to this test to assess him completely. He was to return in two days. Moving

milk and curds."

Lachi replied politely: "I don't need to bother so long as you are here. Elders can manage these things better."

"It is profitable to learn the secrets of housekeeping as soon as possible."

When Lachi sat down to do the evening milking, she felt as if the milky ocean of her happiness had altogether dried up. She tried to liven up her mind

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off, Lachi said: "After three days come to the paddock at dusk."

How could Bhoja be so patient? Today the moon had risen in his palm. Eagerly, he said: "Can one who is bitten by a snake wait to be cured on Sunday? Why not today? Today is the most auspicious day of the calendar."

"But the auspicious day occurs in my calendar only three days hence." So saying, Lachi walked off. Bhoja leapt after her, saying: "Lachi, the brand to cure my sickness is in your hands. If it is not applied in time today, I will certainly die." Lachi answered: "Not today. Three days hence in the evening, in the paddock."

Bhoja was going to reply when Lachi's mother-in-law was seen approaching. He was forced to control himself. Instead, he said: "Mother, the buffalo was completely cured as soon as the brand was applied."

Smiling the mother-in-law said: "I had full faith in your skill. Please come in and have some sweets."

Walking off swiftly Bhoja said: "I'll have sweets only when brother comes back."

Smiling, the mother-in-law remarked to Lachi: "What a good, simple man this agent is. He has always looked kindly on our house. These agents are the eyes and ears of Thakurs. Entertain him well when he comes to the house, offer him

but the burnt roots would not turn green. The direction of her thinking had changed. When she started milking the bridled cow, she felt embittered. This cow was bridled because she was in the habit of turning around and drinking her own milk. Such is the profitability of the secrets of housekeeping. Calves are not allowed to drink their fill of milk. Yet these poor animals eat grass and give milk plentifully like nectar. Heaven knows what possessed Lachi to pour some milk into the manger for the cow. At first the cow could not believe it. She looked up at Lachi. Then she began to lap the milk.

Was this the kind of pity she had shown Bhoja? No, no, that was utterly impossible. The family honour must be preserved at all costs. Then how was it that the Lachi who had knocked the Thakur senseless had with her own lips invited Bhoja to the paddock? Did she want to test her husband or was it merely a facade for her desire to sleep with Bhoja? Had this pity lain buried deep beneath her anger? She could not believe it, even though face to face with it. Can one's mind thus play hide and seek before one's very eyes? The Gujar, born and bred amidst milk, had never realised how playful and mysterious the mind is. The memory of her conversation with Bhoja caused her limbs to shrink in shame. Then she began to tell herself

again and again that had she not been eager to uncover the real face of her husband, she would never have spoken thus to a strange man. Skilled indeed are humans in the art of self deception.

The two days were equally long for Lachi and Bhoja but their thoughts ran in entirely different directions. Far better that the illusions of those divergent emotions not be revealed.

At last the awaited evening came. When Lachi asked her husband to go with her, he said, surprised: "What's come over you today? You never asked me to go with you before."

Lachi answered crossly: "I didn't know the ways of your village before. Now I feel afraid to go alone."

Consoling her, the Gujar said: "The fear will gradually disappear in a few days. If one's mind is in control, one need fear nothing. But if you want me to come, I'm ready."

With each passing minute, Bhoja's impatience increased. Peeping over the wall, he saw the Gujar coming along with Lachi. This was awful. But Bhoja was very sharp witted. At once he began to move the fodder around.

"Who's there?" growled the Gujar loudly.

Bhoja turned and answered just as loud: "It's I, Bhoja."

With raised eyebrows the Gujar asked: "Why are you in the paddock at this hour? Bhoja, even a witch spares one house!"

Smiling, Bhoja replied: "I don't know about witches, but for me, service to my master comes before brotherhood. Somebody complained to the Thakur Sahib that you feed grain to your animals along with the maize fodder. On searching the manger I find it to be true. You should have had more sense. Now I too will have to suffer with you."

The Gujar's heart sank. But he had full faith that Bhoja would get him out of the fix. Going up to him he said: "Bhoja, I swear by you, it was only yesterday

that I couldn't resist adding the grains. Now my honour is in your hands."

For Lachi's benefit, Bhoja remarked ironically: "Your honour is mine, but what shall I say to the master? These days he's keeping a sharp watch on you, heaven knows why."

Looking at Bhoja, Lachi said: "Whether heaven knows or not, you certainly know why."

This annoyed the Gujar. "Don't babble unnecessarily," he rebuked her. "It's good I came with you, else you'd have started another quarrel. We'll settle our own affairs. You do the milking. Women should not interfere in men's affairs."

Lachi kept quiet because there could be no end to such meaningless arguments. But Bhoja had certainly made good use of his wits! He hadn't given any room for suspicion. Only she knew now the turmoil of her heart.

While she did the milking the two men

"Is that definite?"

"Yes, definite."

Bhoja took another route and Lachi walked on with her waterpot. This was fine sport! Bhoja would be outwitted sooner or later. Her husband's suspicions would, ultimately, be aroused. Now that she had so unknowingly waded into such deep waters, she would not pause till she reached the opposite shore.

In the evening a buffalo refused to even smell its fodder. Perhaps it was thirsty. She poured out some water, but the buffalo did not look at it. Patting its back, Lachi untied the rope and the buffalo ran off, snorting. It was in heat. Lachi called at the top of her voice to the male buffalo, who galloped after the she buffalo like a bullet from a gun. Pure nature knows no hesitation, no shyness. Nor is it controlled by the facade of custom. But human beings are imprisoned by many walls, curtains,

Why must a woman stay sheltered in one man's control, control which fulfils thousands of selfish interests of men?

conversed. Bhoja assured the Gujar that the matter would not go further. Before dawn, the next day, Lachi went down to the lake. On the way she met Bhoja. Casting his eyes around, he said: "Lachi, for the sin of which birth did you take revenge on me? Why did you bring the Gujar along?"

"Your brother insisted on coming, What could I do? It wasn't as if I had dragged him there by force. These days, he's become over suspicious. You had better be cautious otherwise both of us will be disgraced."

"Don't worry about me," said Bhoja boastfully. "I always come up with some bright idea that clears me of suspicion. But make another appointment."

"I can't help it if you are unlucky," whispered Lachi. "In the last watch of night, come to the calves' paddock."

customs, veils, blouses, collyrium and cosmetics. Why does a woman take the hand of only one man? And why must she take a hand that she has not known or accepted, even in a dream? Lachi's youth could have been veiled in the house of any Gujar. Why must it stay fettered in one man's control, a control which fulfils thousands of his selfish interests? How far must a woman please the Thakur, the agent, and the other powerful men of the area?

To survive, some way or the other, has become the creed of humans. No morality is greater than the household and its survival. This is the milk of human history, the curds of knowledge and the butter of religion! The rest is but whey and water! In the beginning, Lachi had thought everything was as white as milk, but she now began to see blackness even



in milk. Understanding goes through its own cycles in this way. What a dilemma she was in! Did the modesty of a wife count for nothing before the fear of the Thakur? Countless wasps began to buzz in her head. She had a husband to watch her and a well-to-do household. For what invisible pleasure did her mind yearn?

In the last watch of the night, she sat up with a start and shook her husband awake. "You sleep like a log!" she said. "Now I will never go out alone in the dark. Come along with me."

The Gujar tried his best to get out of it but Lachi was determined so he had to go along. The dim light of the eleventh night of the dark phase of the moon lay around them. Bhoja had arrived an hour earlier. His eyes had become tired of looking out for Lachi when he finally saw two people walking up. One was Lachi and the other... the Gujar! The bastard, here he was again! Now something would have to be thought up, fast.

As she entered, Lachi saw a man gathering cowdung. "Who's there?" she asked loudly. The answer came without hesitation: "It's me, Bhoja." Annoyed, Lachi said: "What lost treasure are you looking for at this hour?" Still busy gathering cowdung, Bhoja answered: "Today is the eleventh so the Thakurani keeps a fast. I've come for calves' dung to purify the hay for her worship of the basil."

"Why did you bother?" said the Gujar. "If you'd let me know, I'd have brought it over."

"Oh come, I've no angel's wings to lose! And you know the Thakurani doesn't trust anyone but me."

Bhoja was mighty pleased with his answer. What a brain he had! After that, the two friends fell to talking. The Gujar asked whether Thakur Sahib was still angry. Bhoja boastfully replied that as long as he was there, he would look after that. How could one ever repay the kindness of so faithful a friend? Though surprised by her husband's lack of understanding, Lachi said not a word.

As she churned the milk at dawn, she felt as if her mind too was being churned. Confined within the house, she listlessly went from one task to another. In the afternoon she took the animals to the lake. Seizing his chance, Bhoja approached her. Lachi stood with face averted. Amongst the animals, she felt deeply ashamed. As if she would never be able to show her face again to these innocent creatures. Bhoja came before her once more and said: "Lachi, today's plan was again a failure." Stroking her plait, Lachi replied: "So what could I do? I have no remedy for your brother's suspicion."

"But you have the remedy for my sickness."

"God himself has no cure for your fate. Come at sunset to the barn. I'll cure you on a bed of grass."

Laughing, Bhoja said: "Today is the eclipse of the moon. You will reap the merit of seven generations all at once.

But don't forget!"

"Is this a thing to be forgotten?"

No need to stay longer. Bhoja turned back. The Thakur sang to but one tune these days. He had taken to reciting Lachi's name to the rosary, instead of God's. Every now and then he would ask crossly: "Bhoja, has nothing worked yet?"

"It's working, O All Bountiful! It's easy to hunt quails and pheasants but hard to snare a lion. In this sport one has often to risk one's life. Your life is priceless. How can I expose you till I am sure of safety? I made one mistake already for which I still repent."

The Thakur was very pleased with his loyal agent. Bhoja went into the barn an hour before sunset and began to indulge in fantasies. These narrow ways between the stacks, the shelter of these mounds, this bed of grass, Lachi's plait! The buttons of her blouse! Her breasts! Her lips! Her skirt! And...

Just then, he heard the crackle of fodder being pressed underfoot. Lachi must have come. He peered round and... oh no! That low-down Gujar had to make his appearance again! It would be surprising if he suspected nothing now. How long could one keep on making excuses? But to think of a scheme was child's play to him. Turning his back to them, he began to choose kush grasses

As she churned the milk, Lachi felt her mind too was being churned.

from a fodder stack. From a long way off he heard the Gujar's growl: "Who's there?"

Turning round he answered just as loud: "It's I, Bhoja!"

"What are you doing here?"

"It's the eclipse of the moon. I'm collecting kush grass. You know that a whole bundle is required on the night of the eclipse."

"I've plenty of it. If you'd let me

know, I'd have brought it over."

"You know my ways. I prefer to do the job myself and get it over with."

Lachi laughed to herself. Bhoja's mind spun like a top. Another would not have been able to issue a pre-planned retort as swiftly. What a contrast to this idiot of a Gujar who refused to see what was plain as daylight.

At midnight the moon was swallowed up. It was black and round like a frying pan. The stars shone brighter at the eclipse. The world was aware of this



eclipse, but none knew of the eclipse that Lachi underwent. As the moon was freed, she was imprisoned in the Gujar's arms. Nor was Bhoja's bed empty that night. He did long for Lachi, but to him the woman who was at hand was the most beautiful. What use was it to thirst for Lachi's name? Can the body be silenced by the heart's desire? Each time he was disappointed in Lachi, Bhoja would be mad for sexual intercourse. Could the Thakur's loyal agent lack for anything? Two were ready to supply the place of one. Bhoja was a man of sense. Imagining that the woman in his arms was Lachi, he would force himself to feel satisfaction. Those who insist on breathing the same air all their lives cannot have their desires fulfilled.

The next day Lachi was washing clothes at a rock by the lake when she saw Bhoja standing before her. Before he could speak, she said: "You need not reproach me. It's all your brother's fault. If you can send him out on some pretext or other, then your desire can be fulfilled."

If he had been the sort to miss opportunities, Bhoja's agentship could not have lasted so many years. Immediately he replied: "Will only my desire be fulfilled and not yours?"

To irritate him, Lachi said jestingly: "My desire is fulfilled every night, in any case."

"Then why do you bother with me?"

"Why indeed? If you were dependent on me, there might be cause for concern. But you have no lack of girlfriends."

"But not one of them is worth your nose ring. Lachi, let's make an appointment for tonight."

Busy washing her clothes, Lachi said: "At moonshine hide your self in the acacia tree in the last field. It's a deserted place. The rest must be left to destiny."

The sun, moon and stars play at hide and seek. Why should Lachi Gujar not do the same thing? The longer the game lasts, the better. Lachi's pregnancy was now in the second month. In the ninth month, her womb would bear fruit. Here a baby would open its eyes and somewhere else, some human being would die. Through the ages, nature too plays this game of life and death. One leaf falls and another sprouts. This is the primal, the endless game. The magic of youth too is a mystery. The earth perpetually renews and sheds its youth. The characters change constantly but the play remains exactly the same!

Either the Gujar had absolute faith in Lachi or his heart was so pure that he was free from any trace of suspicion. Or else he was so blinded by the selfishness of his house that he could not see beyond it. How could one afford to displease the master's agent?

Late at night Lachi had finished the housework and washed her mouth. The Gujar was falling off to sleep when Lachi caught his hand and aroused him, saying: "The carpenter's daughter tells me that the shepherds are busy stripping our acacia tree. You are far too careless. Come on, let's go and have a look."

That was the Gujar's favourite tree. He had watered it with his own hands. After his bride's arrival, he hadn't had the time to tend it properly. He sat up at once. The last field lay at a short distance from the house. A saffron coloured moon had just appeared in the sky and begun to shed a soft golden light.

Husband and wife opened the gate and entered the last field. Bhoja was assured that Lachi had finally come,

She felt as if she was caught in the coils of a boa constrictor.

according to her word. Bubbling with excitement, he was about to jump down when he heard the Gujar's growl: "Who's there?"

This wretch of a Gujar just would not allow the dice to fall to the ground. Everywhere Lachi went, he stuck to her like a shadow. But there was no time to waste. He began to pluck leaves and throw them down as fast as he could. The Gujar repeated harshly: "Who is breaking the leaves? Why don't you speak?"

Continuing to pluck leaves, Bhoja said: "It's I, Bhoja."

To announce her presence, Lachi asked: "But why are you gnawing the acacia so late at night?"

"The Thakurani's eyes were sore," replied Bhoja, without hesitation. "So I had to come for the leaves. But why did you two come out here at such an hour?"

Bhoja descended. Going up to him, the Gujar said: "The carpenter's girl told us that a shepherd was despoiling the tree. How could I tolerate that?"

Sighing deeply, Bhoja said: "You had a lot of trouble for nothing."

"O well, it gave us a chance to meet," said the Gujar.

Looking at the Gujar but meaning Lachi to hear, Bhoja said: "What's the good of such meetings?"

But the good was not in Lachi's hands alone. How many obstacles there were - house and community, caste, religion, conditioning, honour and custom. Can a lone woman on her own strength confront this huge maze? Where has fled the dream of animal-like freedom? Some such flame burnt in Lachi's heart.

At night during intercourse, she felt as if she were caught in the coils of a boa constrictor. In her existence as a woman, would she ever get free of this imprisonment? Her head ached with the burden of marital life. The blow she had administered had only led her wedded husband to rebuke and scold her. What other searched for one could she seek now? Even if she sought it out, could she settle in any other shade?

Entangled in a web of dreams Lachi rose somewhat late. As she got up, she felt as if the sun had not risen in its accustomed place. Well, that was left to the sun. She had not a moment's respite from household work. She hastened to begin the care of the animals, the milking, the fodder distribution and the cleaning. Only by setting one's shoulder to the wheel can one complete work.

It was noon by the time she set out for the pasture. It had become quite late. Her husband would be waiting. She began to walk fast. Her tinkling bangles, swirling skirts, rustling veil and clashing armlets seemed to disperse enchantment in the air. The sun's rays seemed to derive new life from Lachi's youthful beauty.

At the village border she met Bhoja. Lachi did not slow down. Walking along with her, Bhoja said: "Lachi, it looks as if our meeting will take place only in the

cremation ground."

"Even the cremation ground cannot be attained unless one dies," murmured Lachi.

"One can decide when to die."

"I cannot decide even that."

"What then?"

"I don't know. I've done my best but nothing worked. If you pursue me too much, we'll be disgraced in the village. Meet me in the kitchen towards midnight. Let the honour of the house be kept inside the house." Relieved, Bhoja said: "Yes, that is fine. The rest is as my fate

"It got so late that I decided not to eat at home. Eat first and I'll eat later."

"Why later? We'll eat together today."

What can a Gujar's house lack? Thick curds, whey, butter, vegetables, beans and maize bread. Husband and wife sat down together and ate their fill. Then the Gujar said: "I'll lie down for a bit. Keep an eye on the animals. Don't let them enter anyone's field."

Having issued this warning he went off to sleep and Lachi walked towards the animals. Stroking the cows and



will have it."

Leaving the matter to fate, Bhoja turned towards the village and Lachi went on. Her husband would be waiting for his food.

The Gujar was sitting under a tree, playing his pipe. Scattered around, the animals stood grazing. When Lachi came near the Gujar said: "You're very late today."

Putting down the basket of food, she said: "You don't let me sleep on time. How can I get up on time?"

As she took out the food, the Gujar asked, surprised: "Why have you brought such a lot of food today?"

buffaloes that were pregnant for the first time, she walked ahead when her eyes fell on a shining black thing in a bramble bush. When she went closer and looked more carefully she saw that it was a black snake shedding its slough. Even when she hissed at it, the krait did not spread its hood. The slough was stuck over its eyes. It moved a little and then lay still again. The slough would not allow it to move far.

Lachi threw a couple of pebbles at it. The snake slithered and bit and suddenly the slough got caught on a thorn. It exerted some pressure and the slough began to slide off. Freeing itself,

the krait disappeared into the thick undergrowth. Lachi immediately picked up the slough and examined it. It had a soft white lining with a number of small dots on it. Imprisoned by the slough, the snake could not move an inch. It had lain there blind, like a thick rope. Freed from the slough, it had run with the speed of vision. So the slough is the greatest bondage of all.

After that Lachi seemed to see more and more sloughs hanging before her eyes. When she went back to her husband she found him snoring away. She looked from the sleeping husband to the slough. The slough looked like the husband and sometimes the husband like a slough. How had the hue of her vision suddenly changed? Endless was the turmoil in Lachi's mind.

After a while the husband yawned and awoke. Seeing the slough hanging around Lachi's neck, he exclaimed: "Where did you get that slough? It's a very good omen. Your dearest wish will be fulfilled."

Lachi made no reply. She gazed steadily at the empty covering in her hand. Her husband came up, put his arms round her neck and planted several kisses on her cheeks. "No need to ask the astrologer" he said. "We'll have a moon-like son and he'll be very fortunate. I have found from experience that a slough is a good omen. I found one in the forest three days before our marriage was arranged."

Pulling a face, Lachi said: "Then it's a very bad omen."

Playing with her bracelet the Gujar said: "Bad? What do you mean? I got you for a wife. What better luck could I have had?" Then, gazing into her eyes, he added: "I'll fulfil one of your wishes, here and now."

When lips touched lips, Lachi understood her husband's meaning. Startled, she moved away and exclaimed: "Have you taken leave of your senses? The deeds of the bedroom should be

kept in the bedroom."

"Who is there to see us here?"

"These trees, these bushes, this grass and these birds." She stayed not a moment longer but ran at top speed towards the village. Her husband called after her but she didn't even look around.

Going straight to the store, she opened her trunk, carefully put the slough inside and locked it. How could she sit still for a moment? Work never

a morsel of anything but maize."

Bhoja had to relent. The Gujar begged and pleaded. Finally, with difficulty, Bhoja was persuaded. Lachi could not stay there another moment. She went straight to the bedroom and fell on the bed. Were one to search with a candle one would not find such a cowardly husband. But she had to acknowledge Bhoja's intelligence. What an excuse he had invented! His was intelligence

Today was the ultimate test for both the husband and Bhoja. Perhaps the essential man would be revealed.

ends in a Gujar household. Cowdung, hay, fodder, water. As she worked, she thought that when he sees Bhoja in the kitchen, the Gujar's suspicion must surely be aroused and his anger awakened. This time Bhoja could not escape. What flower would bloom after that?

But no flower was destined to bloom for Lachi. Towards midnight, she woke up her husband and said: "I think there's a man hiding in the kitchen."

How could the Gujar hesitate on hearing such a thing? Picking up his lathi, he went straight to the kitchen with Lachi. On lighting the lamp, he saw a man hiding near the wall. Brandishing his lathi, he growled: "Who is this courting death?"

Coming forward, Bhoja answered: "You are, who else? Somebody complained to his honour that wheat bread is cooked daily in your house. So he sent me to find out the truth. My good fellow, your wife cooks bread openly." Showing it to him, Bhoja said: "You are determined to ruin me as well as yourself. I'll have to tell his honour about this now." Folding his hands, the Gujar said: "That will be the end of me! So far I lived by God's grace, but now I will live by yours! Somehow or other cut this noose for me. The mistake will not be repeated. Anyway, you know that I never swallow

worthy of a man!"

The Gujar accompanied Bhoja as far as the lane and then returned to bed. In a Gujar's house, clarified butter is cheaper than oil. The lamp of clarified butter shed a dim glow. The Gujar's shadow filled half the room. He spent some time singing Bhoja's praises. Then, taking off his turban and stroking his wife's cheeks, he said: "You ran home from the pasture, but now where can you run from the bedroom? Today I'll teach you a lesson you will not easily forget."

A wife who has taken the seven steps cannot refuse her husband, in spite of the turbulence in her heart. Had she not been his wife, she could have at least made a fuss, but even this option was not available to Lachi. What could be worse than making a fuss in such turmoil!

As the buttons of the blouse were opened, a cold gust of wind blew into the room. Darting lightnings raced each other through the sky and clouds clambered over one another, growling loudly. Pearl drops fell.

There was no sign of rain during the day but at dusk there was such a sultriness that clouds from far and near gathered and it began to pour. Nature alone knows its mysteries and Lachi alone knew what went on in her mind.

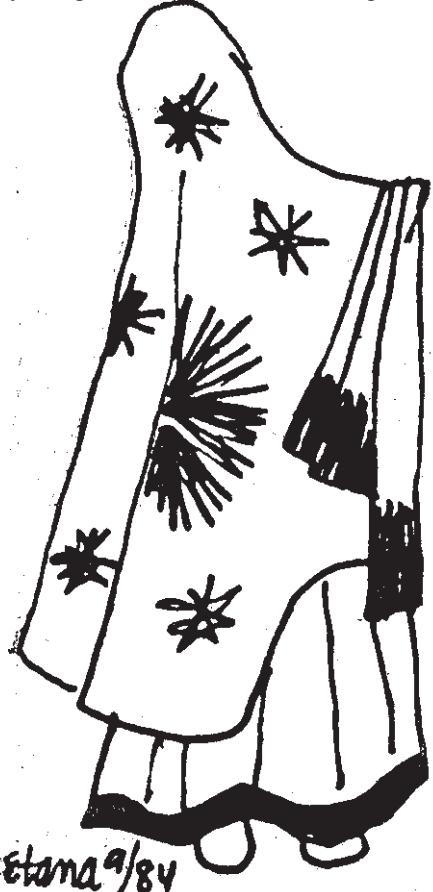
Again she was late in rising. She went straight to the store. Water lay all

around. It had rained all night. Lachi opened her trunk, took out the slough and gazed at it. Her mother-in-law's voice recalled her to her duties and she got busy as usual, with daily chores. When the rain stopped a cool breeze began to blow. At sunset Lachi was coming home with vegetables for dinner, when she met Bhoja. Showing annoyance, he said: "Lachi, I had to go hungry in the kitchen last night."

"What could I do? My sister-in-law spoilt everything."

"I don't see any end to this spoiling of things."

"Have a little patience. Sooner or later luck has to go our way. Today, you will not go on a wild goose chase. In the last hour of night, your brother cannot be awakened even by drum beats. I will be sleeping in the courtyard wrapped in an orange shawl. He'll be sleeping nearby covered with a white rug. As soon as you tug at the shawl, I'll come along with



you. Satisfied?"

"I'll be satisfied when I am satisfied. I am ready to die at your command."

Lachi repeated: "I'll have an orange shawl. Let's see how careful you can be."

"Don't worry about my carefulness," said Bhoja with arrogance. "It's only before you that I own defeat."

"You'd better go now, or people will start talking."

Bhoja turned onto another path and Lachi went home to the milking.

At night, when the Gujar washed his mouth and began ascending the steps to the bedroom, Lachi said: "Sister-in-law is sleeping there. Do have some consideration."

Retracing his steps, he said: "Where shall we sleep then?"

"Speak softly, you think of nothing but sleep day and night, while the worries are left to me. What kingdom will you lose if you sleep one night in the yard?"

"Who cares for a poor kingdom?"

Adding curd to the milk, Lachi said: "Beds are spread in the courtyard. Go along, I'm just coming."

"It'll get cold towards morning. Bring something to cover us."

After that, the same night, the same

She would be free only when she got out of the slough of family slavery.

darkness, the same Lachi and the same Gujar. The Gujar fell asleep but Lachi could not sleep a wink. Her husband did not seem to have the least suspicion of Bhoja. Can self-interest be so blind and so dumb? Even a stone would have felt some suspicion but her husband was not in the least perturbed. Was this the marital bliss for which she had cherished her youth and preserved her chastity as though it were a priceless pearl? Her husband cared not a straw for it. Why then had they staged that farce at the altar, with drum and trumpets? Why did

they bring a strange girl into this courtyard to the sound of music? To produce heirs for the family? To assuage the hunger of the bed? To work like a beast of burden? To lick the feet of the Thakur and other powerful men? If her husband's lathi had backed up the blow of her elbow, how joyful she would have been! No sorrow would have raised its head. But the man who had taken her hand had been angry only with her.

A husband will not object to anything if it furthers his self-interest. What does one gain by gathering the bitter fruits of selfishness? Is it no longer meaningful to be available only to one man?

Many such questions sizzled in Lachi's breast. Her spouse lay next to her like an uncoiled boa constrictor, snoring loudly. Today was the ultimate test for both the husband and Bhoja. Perhaps the essential man would be revealed.

Meanwhile, Bhoja was finding each moment's delay intolerable. An hour too early, he crept into the Gujar's yard. What Lachi had said turned out to be quite true. Today, surely his desire would be fulfilled. Without a moment's hesitation he caught hold of the orange shawl and tugged it off. "Who's there?" growled the Gujar, getting up with a jolt.

Immediately came the fearless reply: "It's I, Bhoja."

Surprised, the Gujar asked: "Bhoja?"

Coming closer, the agent whispered: "Yes, do you want to go to Dwarkaji?" (It is believed that one must go secretly on the pilgrimage to Dwarka.)

"No, I don't."

"I came quietly on purpose to take you along. But if you don't want to go, don't yell and scream or the auspicious occasion will be lost. Go back to sleep, quietly."

So saying, Bhoja withdrew on tiptoe. Lachi, wrapped in the white rug, was lying awake. She had heard the whole conversation. Now indeed there was no

room for doubt. A flame brighter than the sun shot up before her eyes and burnt to ashes all her conditioning, all customs, traditions and norms. Perhaps she had been waiting for this flame.

The man who had taken her hand before all the world had taken no risk for her beyond the seven steps. But there was no end to the risks Bhoja took! How could she deny such depths of longing? In any case, what glory attached to this youth of hers? Like a slave she toiled for food and clothing and nightly had her body mauled. Is this all that life was worth? Why then be enslaved to one man? She would be free only when she escaped the slough of family slavery.

The next day when she set out with the herd to the pasture, the Gujar said: "It's threatening to pour today. Come back soon."

Lachi did not answer. She did not meet Bhoja either on the way to the pasture or on the way back. The agent had lost hope. The desire for all the world's women could not be fulfilled by Lachi alone! Each woman is best in her own place and her own bed.

The lord of the village was still troubled by the same pain. He kept up his refrain: "Any luck yet, Bhoja?"

Finally, Bhoja said: "O All Bountiful, that whore is the devil's child. She'll come to her senses only when her nose and ears are chopped off."

Sighing deeply, the Thakur said: "I told you so but you would not listen."

"I hold my ears seven times, O All Bountiful. I made a very big mistake."

Towards nightfall, the sky was overcast with blackness. Lightnings sparkled and clouds growled like a thousand elephants trumpeting before battle. As she tied up the animals, such black clouds growled in Lachi's heart too. Her husband had anticipated the storm well in advance but had not suspected Bhoja even when he saw him with open eyes. What kind of intelligence was this?

After taking his fill of his wife's body, the Gujar fell into a deep sleep. When Lachi came to the door, rain and lightning greeted her youth with music and song. They bowed to her beauty. The krait's slough swung from her neck like a necklace.

Where was the time to think further? She took off her clothes and jewels and descended the steps of the bedroom. Rain fell in torrents. The lightnings(**Bolts of lightening**) outdazzled one another. The slough lay around her neck and her

hair hung down to her knees like a cloud overshadowing her. Lachi's beauty gladdened the lightening. At the touch of her unshrouded youth, the rain turned fresh and pure. Hope in her womb and the krait's slough round her neck! What greater assurance could there be?

Drenched in the rain's kindness, Lachi feared nothing. She reached Bhoja's house. Before she could raise her hand to knock, she heard a woman's voice within, saying softly: "You were mad about Lachi. How did you think of me today?"

"To hell with Lachi and her pride. Don't mention that whore's name in my presence."

The pure smile on Lachi's lips was lost in the lightning's flash. She moved forward, drenched in the pouring rain. After that she did not pause at any door nor did she ask the support of any man.

With her hope in her womb, garmentless, she still roams the universe. She has no destination, nowhere to lay her head. If her womb ever bears fruit, it might only be when this sun and this moon that light up our world are consumed!

(translated by Ruth Vanita from the Hindi version of the original Rajasthani)