

## Translations



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#### Intruders<sup>i</sup>

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Tr. from Hindi by Manoj Kumar Yadav\*\*

The death of Subhash Sonkar, a Medical College student, had had no effect on the city's daily routine. It was reported in the newspapers as a case of suicide. Within a year, this was the second death to occur in the Medical College. Final-year-student Sujata's death was also ruled a suicide and the matter was hushed up soon after. No one felt it was required to investigate into the reasons for the suicide. It appeared as if the city was devoid of human sensitivities and empathies. People in the city remained quiet even after the two deaths which could be termed as "murders".

As soon as Rakesh reached the office, the phone-bell rang. It was a phone call from Ramesh Chaudhari. "Rakesh *sahab*, Subhash Sonkar's life has been sacrificed...", he said in his trembling voice.

"What?" Rakesh exclaimed, almost yelling.

"Rakesh *Sahab*, how many more murders now?" Ramesh continued speaking "What was Sonkar's crime?...Just that his parents wanted him to be a doctor". Ramesh Chaudhari was uttering each word with deep anguish and pain.

Rakesh was like a lath embedded in the earth. Ramesh Chaudhari's hoarse voice appeared to come from a distant place, which he couldn't hear properly. Rakesh wasn't able to believe about Sonkar's death. He felt as if Ramesh Chaudhari was standing in a deep abyss. And the echoing voice emerging from such a place turned softer by the time it reached him. Rakesh was finding it difficult to hear anything.

Subhash Sonkar's gloomy face kept popping up in front of Rakesh's eyes. He felt the phone slipping from his grasp.

The day rushed through his memory when he met Sonkar for the first time. It was Ramesh Chaudhari who had brought Sonkar and some of his friends to his house.

That day, Rakesh sat down with the newspaper when he got home from the office. The clattering sound of utensils indicated that Indu was busy in the kitchen. In another room, the kids were doing their homework. It was a quiet ambience at home. But the fact that Rakesh clung to the newspaper as soon as he arrived from the office, was enough to irritate Indu. "Have you got to go somewhere?" she sarcastically inquired.

"No... why?" Rakesh was taken aback.

“You didn’t change your clothes...?” Indu expressed her doubt.

Rakesh did not reply. In fact, he was somewhat restless. He had received Ramesh Chaudhari’s call in the office. Ramesh wanted to talk about something important. He told Rakesh that he would visit him in the evening. Rakesh tried hard to avoid it, but Ramesh Chaudhari was adamant. Rakesh even said, “Come over to the office”. But Ramesh Chaudhari said, “No, the matter is such that it cannot be discussed in the office”.

Ramesh Chaudhari is a social worker. One way or the other he visits Rakesh frequently. Whenever he comes, Rakesh gets uneasy. The more he tries to escape, the more Ramesh insists on meeting. The way Ramesh Chaudhari spoke, the person speaking to him would not remain comfortable.

“... What do you guys think of yourself? You simply need big promotions, and that too relying on reservation. Your kids must also get admitted to schools or colleges based on quota. But when it comes to doing something to save reservation, then either you people get urgent work or you are not relieved from office. In those moments only Ramesh Chaudhari becomes a scapegoat. He is the only one to be abused. Look *sahab* ... if you see danger in being part of the crowd, then donate to institutions that work for your interests...If you people remain indifferent like this, then the day is not far when these people will devour the reservation meant for the underprivileged...Baba Sahab is not alive, and those who are pretending to be Baba Sahab’s representatives, as soon as they reach Parliament, they will become yes men to those who are against reservation, and specialize in all sorts of shrewd gimmicks. They will make judges give verdicts against reservation, so that admission in medical and engineering colleges will not be granted based on reservation. It destroys talent and versatility. As if geniuses are slave to them and talented and bright minds are bound to take birth in their homes only.... if the upper-castes were so talented and intelligent, then how come this great nation of ours remained a backward country till date. . .”

Rakesh would find it extremely difficult to engage in such discussions. And if this conversation would be held inside the house, Indu would feel as if neighbours were listening to every word of it with their ears pinned to the walls. Indu is so disturbed by such conversations that the infight would continue in the house for several days to come. In such a situation, Rakesh would go for a truce and would surrender on his end.

Indu would finally come to this point:

“No matter how big of an officer you are, you will continue to be in the company of these people, those who do not even have the etiquettes to sit on a couch. . . .If you want to continue your friendship with such people, keep it out of the house. . . The little respect that we have in the neighbourhood, why are you set on ruining that. . . you don’t have to announce your affinity with such people from the rooftop. . . the surname that you have... is this not enough... How many times have I asked you to replace it with a better surname. . . Children are growing up. . . they have to tolerate so much. Yesterday, Pinky’s friend was saying...Raidas<sup>ii</sup> used to make shoes... You people also make shoes... Pinky came home crying... I wish to go somewhere with my children...” These jibes and taunts by Indu would intimidate Rakesh. He would be filled with guilt and remorse.

He picks the newspaper and sits down. In such topsy-turvy situations, the headlines of the newspaper seem to mix-up and words seem to be turning into black spots. Rakesh starts feeling like he is safe.

Ring of the doorbell interrupted his pensive mood. He opened the door. It was Ramesh Chaudhari. There were four more youngsters with him. They all came in and stretched out. Rakesh was looking at them carefully. They all looked petrified. Shadows of fear were visible on their sulking faces.

They were all silent. All cuddled up in their shells. Their eyes had more tension to come out of the shell than their faces. Seeing their condition, Rakesh had many doubts in his mind.

Ramesh Chaudhari broke his silence and said, “Rakesh *sahab*, this is Amardeep, this is Vikas Chaudhari, this is Nitin Meharam and this is Subhash Sonkar. These are all medical students. Amardeep and Nitin Meshram are in the final year and the other two are in the first year. They wanted to meet you.

“Yes... Sure...” Rakesh said in a spontaneous tone.

Amardeep said hesitating, “Sir! We are in great trouble... and we don't understand what to do?” Amardeep stopped for a moment. Organizing himself said, “In the present conditions of the Medical College, it is getting harder day-by-day for us to continue our studies. Only we know the tortures we have tolerated all these years. Many times, I have felt like leaving the studies and returning home...but the expectations of parents force me not to do so. Continuing studies with all those tortures...it is indeed very painful...one day I decided to even commit suicide.” Amardeep’s words filled with despair and disappointment had deepened the evening dimness even more. The screams echoing within Amardeep’s conscience were clearly heard.

The atmosphere had become sad. It was as if Rakesh’s heart was pounding faster. Amardeep, floating on the waves of his own inner self, said, “Yesterday Vikas Chaudhari and Subhash Sonkar were beaten the entire day in a closed-hostel-room.

“Why?...was there any ragging going on?” Rakesh asked surprisingly.

“Had it been ragging, this would have happened with all the first-year students. But only these two people were beaten up there,” Amardeep emphasized.

“Insulting *dalit* students by making them stand separately is part of everyday routine. They are also slapped or punched by asking about their entrance exam percentage-marks. They are further beaten up if anyone dares to object. And it is not a matter of two to four days, it has been going on for years. Also, this fight is not limited to the college or the hostels. This also happens in buses that are going from villages to colleges. Any senior stands and shouts in the bus that those students who are *chamar* should stand up, thereafter they are pushed towards the back seats and are thrashed by the seniors who are already there”. Amardeep explained the situation.

“This is sheer oppression” Rakesh said excitedly. Amardeep looked at Rakesh... “Just a few days back, final-year-student Pranav Mishra shouted on the bus. There was Saurabh Sonkar on the bus, who remained silent on Pranav’s call. The student sitting beside Sonkar hinted that Sonkar was there. Pranav Mishra was stung at his disregard. He grabbed Sonkar’s hair and pulled towards him, “Why didn’t you hear us you *chamar*?” Don’t you hear us? Sonkar tries to release his hair and says, “I am not *chamar*”. The grip on the hair was strong. Sonkar groaned. Pranav Mishra slapped him hard...” *Chamar* or *Sonkar*...you are not a brahmin...you are one of those who belong to the reserved category...that’s enough. Pranav Mishra’s kicks and punches left

Sonkar half-dead. The entire bus was buzzing with laughter. Abuses were being hurled in the name of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Pranav Mishra was receiving compliments for his courageous work.

Rakesh looked at Sonkar. He was sitting there with his head bowed down like a culprit. Sonkar felt his bruises to be deeper.

Ramesh Chaudhari was also silent. But the muscles on his face looked tighter and the colour of his face kept changing. Indu's scattering in the kitchen was further intensified. Indu's clearing of the throat was a signal for Rakesh.... "You shouldn't get into these problems". Even while doing the household chores, her ears continued to lean on the conversations between these people.

Indu's attitude was a by-product of social oppression. She wanted to live a simple life. She used to feel that Rakesh should avoid these conflicts. She would try not to disclose their caste identity in the neighbourhood. She found this to be the safest way. But Rakesh was perturbed by their disturbing stories. He felt as if they were all trapped in a dense wilderness and were surrounded by darkness and thorny shrubs.

Indu got out of the kitchen and went into the bedroom where children were busy with their homework. A few moments later, Rakesh's eight-year-old son came and said in an imperative tone, "Papa get my homework done".

"Yes son, I will make you do it now, in about 10 minutes...let me speak to Ramesh uncle for a while....till then you can finish your drawing". Rakesh persuaded and sent him back. Rakesh understood what Indu wanted to say. "Get rid of these people as soon as possible....keep yourself away from this mess".

Rakesh got perplexed. Ramesh Chaudhari also understood what Indu wanted to imply. He wanted to maintain a clear and spontaneous stance. He told Rakesh, "Sir, I do not intend to waste any more of your time. But these boys are determined to become doctors. Please suggest something and show them the right path". Rakesh was immersed in deep thoughts. He was unable to figure out what these students should do in such circumstances.

Nitin Meshram was still silent. Seeing Rakesh immersed in deep thought, he said, "Even after the room is allotted in Hostel No. 1, no *dalit* student is allowed to enter it. At the end of the day, *dalit* students are kept in hostel number 2 only. The same situation prevails in girl's hostels too. All the *dalit* girls live there in the same hostel. The college management does not find these problems to be very serious. They feel that for *dalits* to go for medical studies is itself an encroachment. When they receive complaints regarding these discriminatory practices, they do not pay attention."

Nitin Meshram grew a little more articulate, "Not only that, even in practical examinations, there is discrimination. Pranav Mishra is in my own batch. Neither does he attend the class, nor does he participate in practicals. Still Trivedi sir gives him the highest marks. Even attendance is not a problem for him." Meshram said bitterly.

Meshram's narration made Rakesh take a trip down the memory lane. As a student, when he went to the hostel for the first time. There was already a student in the room allotted to him who had not allowed him to enter the room. He had categorically refused to share his room with a *bhangī-chamar*. When Rakesh complained about the incident to the hostel warden, he also had

inquired about his caste and later placed him with a *dalit* student. The warden had also warned him: “Stay in your limits... otherwise, I’ll kick you out of the hostel.”

The hostel days were very painful for Rakesh. Every day would bring a new faceoff with another casteist torture. He had to sit separately in the mess as well.

Ramesh Chaudhari interrupted Rakesh’s deep thinking, “Sir, now tell us what should be done?”

“Did you people meet the Dean?” asked Rakesh.

“Yes, we met...” He was of the view that—since we got admission through reservation, we will have to endure a little bit. He does not consider the atrocities of the *savarna* students to be unfair. Because it was their reaction against an injustice...anger arising out of opposition to reservation.” Nitin said with a sigh of frustration.

“Not only the Dean, but professors also make similar comments, and incite students like Pranav Mishra.” Amardeep supported Nitin Meshram’s views.

Subhash Sonkar, suppressing the anger rising within, said, “I got my medical report made, with which I went to the police station to file an FIR (first information report). But the police inspector refused to register a report. He was of the view that it was our internal matter and that we should not drag police in such issues. Now you tell me sir... where should we go? After all this, it becomes really difficult to focus properly on studies.”

Ramesh Chaudhari had also sent a report to newspapers in which the harassment of *dalit* students was the main issue. But the newspapers published it as ragging, there was no mention of excesses carried out on *dalit* students.

After deliberations, Rakesh and Ramesh Chaudhari decided to meet the Dean to find some solution to the problem. If needed, they decided to meet some influential person too.

They were disappointed when they met Dr Bhagwati Upadhyay, the Dean of the Medical College. The Dean was of the view that the level of medical studies was deteriorating due to the reservation. Rakesh interrupted him, “Doctor *sahab*, we have not come here to speak either in favour or against the reservation, we have come here to discuss the problems of the *dalit* students.”

The Dean turned deaf ear to their words and continued speaking only on the damage caused by reservation. His belief was that when people with lesser qualifications infiltrate institutions like the Medical College with government intervention, then the situation will worsen day by day. What is the fault of those students who have passed with good marks?

Rakesh wanted to avoid the debate, “Doctor *sahab*, we will discuss the reservation sometime later, but for now please find a solution to the problem that we have discussed. Please stop the harassment of the *dalit* students.”

“Look, don’t give so much weight to small incidents. There is no harassment of *dalit* students in my college. And I do not believe in these ridiculous things. In our house, even a *bhangin* was called ‘Amma’”. The Dean seemed unwilling even to acknowledge the issue.

Rakesh and Ramesh Chaudhari got enraged and came back. The admission of *dalit* students in the Medical College was an intrusion in the views of the Dean. Ramesh Chaudhari had controlled himself with great difficulty. Probably because of Rakesh.

For several days, they both met many influential people. But everywhere they ended up in disappointment. They also went to many *dalit* officers. Their attitude was also disappointing. They did not want to take any risks. They were of the view that the idea of taking up issue would further harm the interests of *dalit* students only.

Despite relentless efforts of ten to fifteen days, they failed to produce any furore.

Frustrated, Ramesh Chaudhari had said, “Rakesh *sahab*, now you have seen yourself ...why do I talk bitterly to these people ...”.

Rakesh was also an officer. But he wanted to help the students as he considered it his social responsibility. Government officials used to try to avoid such works. They were afraid that they might get affected owing to these accidents. They were afraid of their *dalit* roots all the time.

Ramesh had planned to take out a procession for the cause. He had already chosen a date. But the sudden news of suicide by Subhash Sonkar changed everything. The person who was most hurt was Ramesh Chaudhari. After hearing the news, he burst out with anger. While giving the news of Sonkar’s suicide to Rakesh, he was out of his minds.

Sonkar had deliberately been failed in the first exam itself because he dared to report Pranav Mishra to the police, had dared to lodge a complaint with the Dean and other professors, forgetting that he was caught in this labyrinth alone, and that to come out he would have to clash with the *Kauravas*<sup>vi</sup> and other warriors. Coming out of the labyrinth was never going to be easy, and he just couldn’t....Several warriors together killed the unarmed soldier Sonkar. Ironically this murder was further advertised and propagated as a suicide.

The news of the death from Ramesh Chaudhari on the phone filled Rakesh with immense sorrow and pain. He could not believe that a bright student like Sonkar could commit suicide. Rakesh’s embranglement and perplexity was further aggravated after listening to Ramesh’s angry voice on the phone. He held the phone in his shivering hand for a moment. Rakesh could barely keep the phone on the cradle....Rakesh tried to control his emotions, still he felt like he was sinking. He collapsed on the chair. He uttered vague words, “Sonkar, why did you do this...!”

Rakesh was badly upset. He was not even able to focus on office-work. As soon as he was about to leave the office, suddenly the phone rang. It was Ramesh Chaudhari’s call. He was speaking in a serious tone, “Rakesh *Sahab*, Sonkar’s dead body will be cremated at the main entrance of the Medical College after the post-mortem tomorrow...Reach out there if you have the courage...”

He felt the hidden fire in Ramesh Chaudhari’s words. He had not yet recovered from the shock of Sonkar's death and this decision by Ramesh Chaudhari had further put him in the loop. Sonkar’s face was flashing in front of his eyes constantly. The more he tried to suppress his restlessness, the more it got out of his control. He fell on the chair once again. Sonkar’s innocent face continued to agitate him. Suddenly it was as if Sonkar’s struggle had become his own pain. He took a deep breath and got up with determination. He had decided that he would not only participate in the funeral procession of Sonkar but also would carry the dead body on his shoulder.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Om Prakash Valmiki has used the Hindi title *Ghuspaithiye* as a metaphor to designate a group of students who, by the virtue of reservation, have intruded an academic space which was traditionally dominated by the upper-caste students and teachers. To my knowledge, the word ‘Intruders’ seems to be the closest equivalent to the Hindi word, hence the title.

<sup>ii</sup> Reference is made here to the *dalit* Saint Raidas (also known as Ravidas by Punjabi speakers) who lived in the fifteenth-century north India.

<sup>iii</sup> “Chamar”, literally meaning a tanner, is a lower caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Due to the derogatory nature of the term, in many regions, people from this caste use more respectable terms such as Harijan, Bhartiya, Gautam, Rohit etc. as their surname.

<sup>iv</sup> *Bhangis* are the lowest caste group and are traditionally perceived as “untouchables” in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Other terms used for this caste include *mehtar*, *chura* and *valmiki*. Traditionally they were restricted to manual scavenging and the cleaning of the dead bodies. They were forced to live in isolated *moballas* (colonies) and were refused access to temples, schools, shops etc.

<sup>v</sup> In the social stratification of castes, based on Hindu texts like *Manusmriti*, the society is hierarchically classified into four major castes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The first three are called *savarnas* or upper castes or superior castes. The Shudras (also known as *avarnas* or *dalits*) are considered polluted and are often excluded from the mainstream society. They have lived, and in many places, continue to live a life afflicted with discrimination, untouchability, subjugation and social contempt.

<sup>vi</sup> As described in the epic poem *Mahabharata*, *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* are two rival groups of cousins who fought the Kurukshetra war for a dynastic succession. While the war and the characters in the poem have interpreted in myriad of ways, a popular perception has been that *Kauravas* symbolize the lower nature of being and that their rationale for the war stemmed from ethically incorrect position. *Pandavas*, on the other hand, have been interpreted to represent a higher and more refined nature of the soul.

**\*About the Author**

**Omprakash Valmiki** (1950-2013) was a prominent figure in the contemporary Hindi literature who contributed immensely to the archives of *dalit* history. His writings document various aspects of the exclusionary existence of India's *dalits*; untouchability, economic deprivation, reservation, poverty, bureaucratic subjugation, state-endorsed persecution, honour killings etc. The short story *Ghuspaitbiye* was first published in the year 2000 in the renowned Hindi magazine *Hans*. Later in the year 2003, it was compiled and published in a short story collection of the same title.

**\*\*About the translator**

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