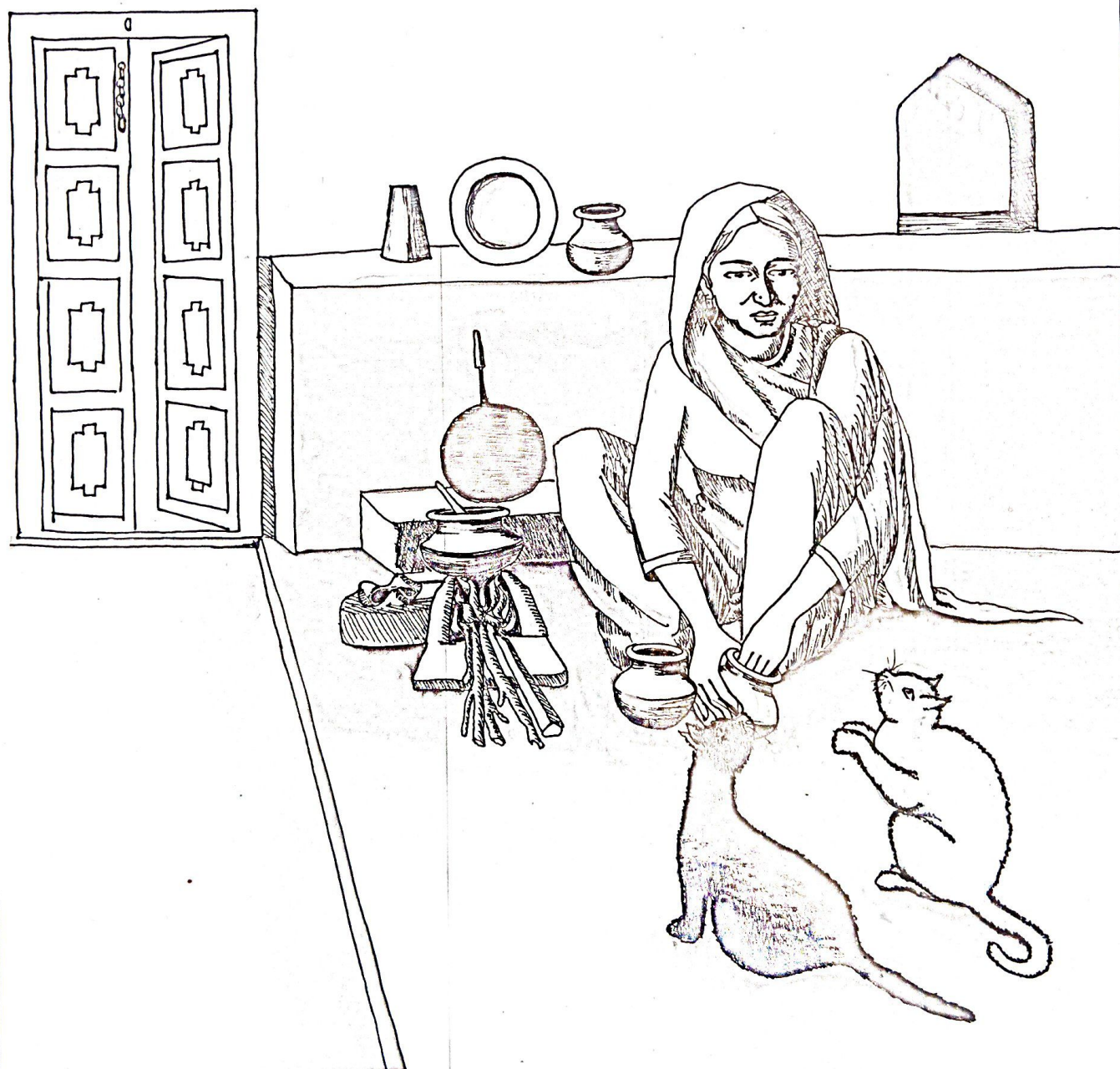


S. R. HARNOT'S

Cats Talk



Edited by
Khem Raj Sharma and Meenakshi F. Paul

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THE TWENTY-FOOT BAPU JI

BEE'S FOOT KE BAPU JI

Chachu reached the outhouse and tethered his horse. He pulled out his cap stuffed into the pocket of his sleeveless woollen sadri jacket and flung it into the chulha. The embers of the clay stove were cold and the wrinkles on the cap writhed open languidly as if they were in the last throes of death. He picked up the lantern, opened it, and poured the kerosene over the cap. Then he struck a match and set it afire. The horse whinnied softly as though the burst of flames had scorched him.

Chachu sat near the chulha still wearing his shoes. His eyes were transfixed on the burning cap. The gloomy room lit up for a while and things became visible through the ruddy light and grey smoke. A lantern hung on the wall to the left of the chulha. To its right, a long wooden board was placed on two thick logs. On it lay some bare utensils for his simple tea-roti meals. Chachu's bedding lay rolled up at the back on a spread-out goat-hair kharcha. Five or six nails were fixed right above the mat and from them hung an old umbrella, a cloth bag, one or two shabby kameezes, a churidar with a baggy seat and another sadri.

His horse was tied to the other side of the door and his things were kept in a couple of sacks a little distance away. Next to the sacks was a big wooden chest with a large iron lock on it. Chachu kept all his earnings in this chest.

An awful silence engulfed the room. The fire had died down and the black shreds of the burnt cap stood out on the white ash. They cut Chachu to the quick. He picked up the tongs and drove them deep into the ash. The stench of kerosene still permeated the light darkness. Chachu shuffled back on his haunches till his back touched the rolled-up bedding. He lay down without unrolling it. He raised his arms and wove his fingers together to rest his naked head. He crossed his right leg over the raised left knee and closed his eyes with his face to the ceiling. The horse bent his neck towards Chachu, baffled at being brought home so early from the Ridge. Never before had they returned so soon. They left home in the morning and hardly ever came back before nine or ten at night.

horse's bridle. He held on to it tightly. Before turning to leave, he placed the hundred rupee note in the child's hand, who even now was fascinated with the old man.

“Lovely boy! Please take it. Have ice-cream. Eat”

The woman was bemused. She understood nothing. But Chachu's tear-soaked voice seeped deep into the young man. He wanted to stop Chachu but he couldn't. Chachu pierced through the crowd with his horse to the farthest corner of the Ridge. The young man's eyes came to settle on Bapu's statue.

Translated by Meenakshi F. Paul and Khem Raj Sharma

DAAROSH

DAAROSH

Kaanam had probably not slept well in a long-long time. Today too, she began to read the newspaper with sleepy eyes. An unexpected news on the first page startled her. She read it all in one go and ran to her papa's room. He was lying on the bed awaiting his morning tea. Kaanam's sudden arrival there with a newspaper in her hand filled him with misgivings. Before he could ask her, Kaanam placed the newspaper before him and said, "Chhote Papa. Chhote Papa. Here, look at the news!"

But he looked more carefully and curiously at her than at the news. For the very first time he had felt a kind of completeness and confidence in her voice. There was an intensity and freshness in her eyes, perhaps it was the eagerness of making him read the news quickly. Before Chhote Papa could pick up his spectacles lying close by, Kaanam started reading out the news herself. She didn't even hear Chhoti Amma come in and read on breathlessly.

"... Two young men of the tehsil, with the help of some accomplices, forcibly kidnapped a girl of the village who was going to see the tournament with her friend to a nearby school. They took her to a cave close by. Then the friend and other youngsters left. Only the one who wanted to marry her stayed on and had sex with her against her will"

Kaanam read so far and stopped suddenly. There was utter silence in the room. The morning sun rose gradually and the sunrays entered through the window. The light filled the room with a kind of freshness. Kaanam felt it deep inside her. Her Chhote Papa and Amma, however, were quiet. Kaanam saw fear lodged in their eyes. This fear had occupied their house for years, somewhere in Chhote Papa's mind or in the sleepy eyes of Kaanam. The fear had never allowed her to sleep in peace and this news deepened it even more. Chhoti Amma stood stunned at the threshold with a tray of tea in her hands. Kaanam reached across the fear and silence and asked Amma to draw near. She took the tray from her, placed it on the table and made her sit on the bed. She started to read the news again: "The parents of the girl had taken the matter to the courts. This was the first occasion when any family had challenged the tradition."

hands. Kaanam was unaffected but the girl was astonished. After returning from the temple Kaanam entered the court aangan of the school, much to the surprise of the people standing around there. She went up to the election officer, took the nomination form, filled it and turned to leave. Everyone followed her with her eyes. They were all astounded.

This news reached her home before she did. It also spread all over the village. As she reached the aangan, a group of ten to twelve girls and women surrounded her. Kaanam, however, felt all alone even within the garland of their arms. A girl hummed a nati. An unprecedented joy was reflected on all their faces. Beyond the circle of their arms, Kaanam's eyes fell on Ma's face as she sat near the stove. Ma's face appeared serious in the light of the burning wood. For Kaanam it was not difficult to fathom her expression. Bade Pita sat dejected near her. Kaanam looked at both of them with enigmatic eyes. Bade Pita stirred the embers of burning wood with a tong. Kaanam saw him sitting beside Ma for the first time. Despondent and hapless.

The words of the nati began to sound all around and the girls in the circle began to dance.

Daarosh: Daarosh is a word widely spoken in a tribal area of Himachal Pradesh. It means to use force or power. The tradition of 'coerced marriage' that prevails in that particular area is called "Daarosh dublub", which means to "marry forcibly."

Translated by Khem Raj Sharma

SLUR

KAALIKH

Shyama called to her son Manu from the edge of the aangan. Who knows where he is busy playing. He is nowhere to be found. There is no response to her call from anywhere. Shyama's calling out in this way is not new to the villagers. But today it fell on their ears like blasts of dynamite. They all made faces. A cow came jiggling down the footpath in front. It belonged to Phula panditani. Every day, instead of going straight to its cowshed after grazing, the wicked cow made her way to Shyama's house. Phula usually asked Shyama to stop the cow, but today she appeared annoyed. She was irritated more at the sight of Shyama than at the cow. She ran after the cow with a stick. Shyama didn't bother either. She took a few quick puffs of a bidi, but when the heat touched her fingers, she quickly threw it down and ground it into the soil. She called out to Manu again,

"O re Manua! Manu oye!"

When he didn't respond, she began to swear in anger,

"God knows to whose house the leper has gone. The low caste bastard is born to suck my blood. Just let him come back home and see if I don't break his legs today, change my name if I don't."

She grumbled as she turned to go inside. As she reached the door, Phula returned, having secured her cow. Instead of going straight, the cow turned towards Shyama. It hoped that as usual it would get a wheat ball or a piece of roti from her. Phula was already irritated and now her anger broke on the cow's back. She hit it several times till the stick broke. By the time Shyama came out with a roti, the cow had bolted. There were long welts wherever the stick had landed on its back. Shyama quietly watched all this from the threshold of her house. What else could she have done. She gnashed her teeth in anger as if she herself was in pain.

"The brahmani has gone mad. She doesn't even spare gau mata. I spit on you!"

She spat vehemently and crushed the piece of roti with such force that it crumbled into pieces. She flung them over her shoulder onto the roof. The crumbs spread all over the mud tiles. A few crows descended and

started pecking
for a long time
the house. She
few bamboo
through them
black and dis
cobwebs were
places and th
much clay an
plastered it o
bamboos cou
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So long as the headmaster remained at the school, the mother's name continued to be written in place of the child's father. After his transfer, another headmaster joined the school. When he saw the register, he had a hearty laugh at finding the father's name entered as "Smt. Shyama Devi". He swore freely at the incompetence of the former headmaster. Then very neatly, he rectified the entry in the register: Father's name – "Sh. Sham Dev."

Translated by Khem Raj Sharma and Meenakshi F. Paul