

of them advanced angrily and roughly catching him by the hands, pulled him up.

'A curse on you: one said, and another, 'Aren't you ashamed of pretending to be a mahatma!'

Humiliated, Panditji went and sat down near a sweets shop and the holy men, striking tambourines, began to sing this hymn:

'Illusion is the world, beloved, the world is an illusion.

Both sin and holiness are lies-there's the philosophical solution.

The world is all illusion.

A curse on those who forbid us bhang and hashish, Krishna, lover, all the world's illusion.

The Road to Salvation

Mukti Marg

Whenever Jhingur looked at his cane fields a sort of intoxication came over him. He had three bighas of land which would earn him an easy 600 rupees. And if God saw to it that the rates went up, then who could complain, Both his bullocks were old so he'd buy a new pair at the Batesar fair. If he could hook on to another two bighas, so much the better. Why should he worry about money? He was convinced that nobody was as good as himself--and so there was scarcely anyone in the village he hadn't quarrelled with,

One evening when he was sitting with his son in his lap, shelling peas, he saw a flock of sheep coming towards him. He said to himself, 'The sheep path doesn't come that way. Can't those sheep go along the bank? What's the idea, coming over here? They'll trample and gobble up the crop. I bet it's Buddhu the shepherd-- just look at his nerve! He can see me here but he won't drive his sheep back. What good will it do me to put up with this? If I try to buy a ram from him he actually asks for five rupees, and everybody sells blankets for four rupees but he won't settle for less than five.

By now the sheep were close to the cane-field. Jhingur yelled, 'Arrey, where do you think you're taking those sheep, you?'

Buddhu said meekly, 'Chief, they're coming by way of the boundary embankment. If I take them back around it will mean a couple of miles extra.'

'And I'm supposed to let you trample my held to save you a detour! Why didn't you take them by way of some other boundary path! Do you think I'm some bull-skinning nobody or has your money turned your head' Turn 'em back!'

'Chief, just let them through today. If I ever come back this way again you can punish me any way you want.'

'I told you to get them out. If just one of them crosses the line you're going to be in a pack of trouble. 'Chief,' Buddhu said, 'if even one blade of grass gets under my sheep's feet you can call me anything you want.'

Although Buddhu was still speaking meekly he had decided that it would be a loss of face to turn back. 'If I drive the flock back for a few little threats: he thought, 'how will I graze my sheep?' And Buddhu was a tough man too. He owned 240 sheep and he was able to get eight *annas* per night to leave them in people's fields to manure them, and he sold their milk as well and made blankets from their wool. He thought, 'Why's he getting so angry! What can he do to me? I'm not his servant.'

When the sheep got a whiff of the green leaves they became restless and they broke into the field. Beating them with his stick Buddhu tried to push them back across the boundary line but they just broke in somewhere else. In a fury Jhingur said, 'You're trying to force your way through here but I'll teach you a lesson!'

He put down his son and grabbing up his cudgel he began to whack the sheep. Not even a washer man would have beaten his donkey so cruelly. He smashed legs and backs and while they bleated Buddhu stood silent watching the destruction of his army. After this carnage among the host of sheep Jhingur said with the pride of victory, 'Now move on straight! And don't ever think about coming this way again.' Looking at his wounded

sheep, Buddhu said, Jhingur, you've done a dirty job. You're going to regret it.'

When Jhingur came home and told his family about the battle, they started to give him advice.

'Jhingur, you've got yourself into real trouble! You knew what to do but you acted as though you didn't. Don't you realize what a tough customer Buddhu is! Even now it's not too late--go and make peace, otherwise the whole village will come to grief along with you.

Jhingur thought it over. He began to regret that he'd stopped Buddhu at all. If the sheep had eaten up a little of his crop it wouldn't have ruined him. Jhingur didn't enjoy the idea of going to Buddhu's house but urged on by the others he set out. It was the dead of winter, foggy, with the darkness settling in everywhere. He had just come out of the village when suddenly he was astonished to see a fire blazing over in the direction of his cane-held. His heart started to hammer. A field had caught fire! He ran wildly, hoping it wasn't his own field, but as he got closer this deluded hope died. He'd been struck by the very misfortune he'd set out to avert. Buddhu had started the fire and was ruining the whole village because of him. As he ran it seemed to him that today his held was a lot nearer than it used to be, as though the fallow land between had ceased to exist.

When he finally reached his field the fire had assumed dreadful proportions. Jhingur began to wail. The villagers were running and ripping up stalks of millet to beat the fire. Among the men Buddhu was the most valiant fighter; with his dhoti tucked up around his waist he leapt into the fiery gulfs as though ready to subdue the enemy or die, and he'd emerge after many a narrow escape. In the end it was the men who triumphed, but the triumph amounted to defeat. The whole village's sugarcane crop was burned to ashes and with the cane all their hopes as well.

It was no secret who had started the fire. But no one dared say anything about it. There was no proof and what was the point of a case without any evidence! As for Jhingur, it had become difficult for him to show himself out of his house. Wherever he went he had to listen to abuse. People said right to his face, 'You were the cause of the fire! You ruined us, if you hadn't fought with Buddhu would all this have happened?'

Jhingur was even more grieved by these taunts than by the destruction of his crop, and he would stay in his house the whole day. Jhingur thought and thought and decided that Buddhu had to be put in a situation exactly like his own. Buddhu had ruined him and he was wallowing in comfort, so Jhingur would ruin Buddhu too.

Since the day of their terrible quarrel Buddhu had ceased to come by Jhingur's. Jhingur decided to cultivate an intimacy with him; he wanted to show him he had no suspicion at all that Buddhu started the fire. One day, on the pretext of getting a blanket, he went to Buddhu, who greeted him with every courtesy and honour--for a man offers the hookah even to an enemy and won't let him depart without making him drink milk and syrup.

These days Jhingur was earning a living by working in a jute-wrapping mill. Usually he got several days wages at once. Only by means of Buddhu's help could he meet his daily expenses between times. So it was that Jhingur re-established a friendly footing between them.

Spring came and the peasants were getting the fields ready for planting cane. Buddhu was doing a fine business. Everybody wanted his sheep. There were always a half dozen men at his door fawning on him, and he lorded it over everybody. He doubled the price of hiring out his sheep to manure the field; if anybody objected he'd say bluntly, 'Look, brother, I'm not shoving my sheep on you. If you don't want them, don't take them. But I can't let you have them for a *pice* less than I said.' The result was that everybody swarmed around him, despite his rudeness, just like priests after some pilgrim. Buddhu's house also began to grow. A veranda was built in front of the door, six rooms replaced the former two. In short, the house was done over from top to bottom. Buddhu got the wood from a peasant, from another the cow dung cakes for the kiln fuel to make the tiles; somebody else gave him the bamboo and reeds for the mats. He had to pay for having the walls put up but he didn't give any cash even for this; he gave some lambs. Such is the power of Lakshmi: the whole job--and it was quite a good house, all in all--was put up for nothing. They began to prepare for a house-warming.

Jhingur was still labouring all day with but getting enough to half fill his belly, while gold was raining on Buddhu's house. If Jhingur was angry, who could blame him! Nobody could put up with such injustice.

One day Jhingur went out walking in the direction of the untouchable tanners' settlement. He called for Harihar, who came out, greeting him with 'Ram Ram!' and filled the hookah. They began to smoke. Harihar, the leader of the tamers, was a mean fellow and there wasn't a peasant who didn't tremble at the sight of him.

After smoking a bit, Jhingur said, 'No singing for the spring festival these days! We haven't heard you.'

'What festival? The belly can't take a holiday. Tell me, how are you getting on lately?'

'Getting by,' Jhingur said. 'Hard times mean a hard life. If I work all day in the mill there's a tire in my stove. But these days only Buddha's making money. He doesn't have room to store it! He's built a new house, bought more sheep. Now there's a big fuss about his house-warming. He's sent *paan* to the headmen of all the seven villages around to invite everybody to it.'

Then Jhingur and Harihar began to whisper, plotting their course of action--the method, the time and all the steps. When Jhingur left he was strutting--he'd already overcome his enemy, there was no way for Buddha to escape now.

On his way to work the next day he stopped by Buddha's house. Buddha asked him, 'Aren't you working today?' 'I'm on my way, but I came by to ask you if you wouldn't let my calf graze with your sheep. The poor thing's dying tied up to the post while I'm away all day, she doesn't get enough grass and fodder to eat.'

'Brother, I don't keep cows and buffaloes. You know the tanners, they're all killers. That Harihar killed my two cows, I don't know what he fed them. Since then I've vowed never again to keep cattle.'

But yours is just a calf, there'd be no profit to anyone in harming her. Bring her over whenever you want.'

Then he began to show Jhingur the arrangements for the house-warming. Ghee, sugar, flour and vegetables were all on hand. All they were waiting for was the Satyanarayan ceremony. Jhingur's eyes were popping. When he came home after work the first thing he did was bring his calf to Buddha's

house. That night the ceremony was performed and a feast offered to the Brahmans. The whole night passed in lavishing hospitality on the priests. Buddha had no opportunity to go to look after his flock of sheep.

The feasting went on until morning. Buddha had just got up and had his breakfast when a man came and said, 'Buddhu, while you've been sitting around here, out there in your hock the calf has died. You're a fine one! The rope was still around its neck.'

When Buddha heard this it was as though he'd been punched. Jhingur, who was there having some breakfast too, said, 'Oh God, my calf? Come on, I want to see her! But listen, I never tied her with a rope. I brought her to the flock of sheep and went back home. When did you have her tied with a rope, Buddha'

'God's my witness, I never touched any rope! I haven't been back to my sheep since then.'

'If you didn't, then who put the rope on her!' Jhingur said. 'You must have done it and forgotten it.'

'And it was in your flock,' one of the Brahmans said. 'People are going to say that whoever tied the rope, that heifer died because of Buddha's negligence.'

Harihar came along just then and said, 'I saw him tying the rope around the calf's neck last night.'

'Me?' Buddha said.

'Wasn't that you with your stick over your shoulder tying up the heifer!'

'And you're an honest fellow, I suppose!' Buddha said. 'You saw me tying her up?'

'Why get angry with me, brother! Let's just say you didn't tie her up, if that's what you want.'

'We will have to decide about it: one of the Brahmans said. 'A cow slaughterer should be stoned--it's no laughing matter.

'Maharaj,' Jhingur said, 'the killing was accidental.'

'What's that got to do with it!' the Brahman said. 'It's set down that no cow is ever to be done to death in any way.'

'That's right,' Jhingur said, 'Just to tie a cow up is a fiendish act.'

'In the Scriptures it's called the greatest sin,' the Brahman said. 'Killing a cow is no less than killing a Brahman.'

'That's right,' Jhingur said. 'The cow's got a high place, that's why we respect her, isn't it? The cow is like a mother. But Maharaj, it was an accident--figure out something to get the poor fellow off.'

Buddhu stood listening while the charge of murder was brought against him like the simplest thing in the world. He had no doubt it was Jhingur's plotting, but if he said a thousand times that he hadn't put the rope on the calf nobody would pay any attention to it. They'd say he was trying to escape the penance.

The outcome was that Buddhu was charged with the death of a cow; the Brahman had got very incensed about it too and he determined the manner of compensation. The punishment consisted of three months of begging in the streets, then a pilgrimage to the seven holy places, and in addition the price for five cows and feeding 500 Brahmans. Stunned, Buddhu listened to it. He began to weep, and after that the period of begging was reduced by one month. Apart from this he received no favour. There was no one to appeal to, no one to complain to. He had to accept the punishment.

He gave up his sheep to God's care. His children were young and all by herself what could his wife do! The poor fellow would stand in one door after another hiding his face and saying, 'Even the gods are banished for cow-slaughter!' He received alms but along with them he had to listen to bitter insults. Whatever he picked up during the day he'd cook in the evening under some tree and then go to sleep right there. He did not mind the hardship, for he was used to wandering all day with his sheep and sleeping beneath trees, and his food at home hadn't been much better than this, but he was ashamed of having to beg, especially when some harridan would taunt

him with, 'You've found a fine way to earn your bread!' That sort of thing hurt him profoundly but what could he do?

He came home after two months. His hair was long, and he was as weak as though he were sixty years old. During the two months many of his sheep had been stolen. When the children took them to graze the other villagers would hide one or two sheep away in a field or hue and afterwards slaughter them and eat them. The boys, poor lads, couldn't catch a single one of them, and even when they saw, how could they fight? The whole village was banded together. It was an awful dilemma. Helpless, Buddha sent for a butcher and sold the whole flock to him for 500 rupees. He took 200 rupees and started out on his pilgrimage. The rest of the money he set aside for feeding the Brahmans.

When Buddha left, his house was burgled twice, but by good fortune the family woke up and the money was saved.

It was *Savan*, the month of rains, with everything green. Jhingur, who had no bullocks now, had rented out his field to sharecroppers. Buddha had been heed from his penitential obligations and along with them his delusions about wealth. Neither one of them had anything left; neither could be angry with the other--there was nothing left to be angry about.

Because the jute mill had closed down Jhingur went to work with pick and shovel in town where a very large rest house for pilgrims was being built. There were a thousand labourers on the job. Every seventh day Jhingur would take his pay home and after spending the night there go back the next morning.

Buddha came to the same place looking for work. Once when he was going with a shallow pan on his head to get mortar Jhingur saw him. 'Ram Ram' they said to one another and Jhingur filled the pan. Buddha picked it up. For the rest of the day they went about their work in silence.

At the end of the day Jhingur asked, 'Are you going to cook something?'

'How can I eat if I don't?' Buddha said.

'I eat solid food only once a day,' Jhingur said. 'I get by just drinking water with ground meal in it in the evenings. Why fuss!'

'Pick up some of those sticks lying around,' Buddhu said. 'I brought some flour from home. I had it ground there---it costs a lot here in town. I'll knead it on the flat side of this rock. Since you won't eat food I cook I'll get it ready and you cook it.'

'But there's no frying pan.'

'There are lots of frying pans: Buddhu said. 'I'll scour out one of these mortar trays.'

The fire was lit, the flour kneaded. Jhingur cooked the *chapatties*, Buddhu brought the water. They both ate the bread with salt and red pepper. Then they filled the bowl of the hookah. They both lay down on the stony ground and smoked.

Buddhu said, 'I was the one who set fire to your cane-field.'

Jhingur said light-heartedly, 'I know.'

After a little while he said, 'I tied up the heifer and Harihar fed it something.'

In the same light-hearted tone Buddhu said, 'I know.'

Then the two of them went to sleep.

January Night

Poos ki Raat

Halku came in and said to his wife, 'The Landlord's come! Get the rupees you set aside, I'll give him the money. Munni had been sweeping. She turned around and said, 'But there's only three rupees. If you give them to him where's the blanket going to come from? How are you going to get through these January nights in the fields! Tell him we'll pay him after the harvest, not right now.'