A Rain of Stones (Excerpt from the novel *Baarish-e-Sang* by Jeelani Bano)

– Translated by Nazia Akhtar

Today is sowing day.

Seeds of spring, seeds of hope will be sown today.

It was not yet morning. Gaining ground from the east, dark clouds had covered the whole of Chikatpally. Dawn arrived late in Chikatpally. In fact, it never came to some houses.

In the pitch dark, Ahmad Bi's undulating voice and the grinding of the millstone awakened the hope of light in the basti residents's hearts. They began to believe that there will soon be light.

Let's finish grinding our worldly wheat, my dear
With every breath, say Allah-hu Allah-hu
Throw in the grain with the right hand
Turn the mill with the left, my dear
With every breath, say Allah-hu Allah-hu

Allah-hu Allah-hu![1]

Salim sat up with a start. He quickly recited the kalima and kissed his thumbs and guessed from his Amma's soft singing that it would be dawn soon. He knew where in the pitch dark the millstone was and where Amma must be sitting. The children of Chikatpally were accustomed to groping their way about in the dark because the very name of their village was Chikatpally. The city of darkness.

It was very windy. The thatched roof of the goat shelter was flapping. The wind could be heard shrieking from the direction of the jungle.

The monsoon is here, Salim thought happily.

The summer ends with the advent of the monsoon. Every year the monsoon arrives either on a frog's back or riding a deer. Salim was curious to know which vehicle it had chosen for itself that year. The temple priest would tell people how the monsoon had arrived. If it had arrived on a frog's back, then it would rain heavily, and the crops would be fine.

"Rejoice!" He would tell them.

[1] I am grateful to Sajjad Shahid for his help with translating this verse, which belongs to a grinding or milling song from the Deccan. These songs – "chakki ke geet" and "chakkinaama" – are generally attributed to the arrival of the Sufi Khwaja Syed Muhammad Hussaini (1321–1422) in the Deccan, where he is venerated as a saint and known as Bande Nawaz and Gesudaraaz. Bande Nawaz arrived in Gulbarga in the fourteenth century, and the earliest written example of Dakhni literature is attributed to him. For more, see Shagufta Shaheen and Sajjad Shahid, "The Unique Literary Traditions of Dakhni," in *Languages and Literary Cultures in Hyderabad*, edited by Kousar J. Azam, New Delhi: Manohar, 2017, p. 99.

And if the monsoon rode in on a deer, then the rain would prance away just like a deer. It would rain only for a few days. There would be drought. The rivers would dry up. The crops would wither. People would thirst for water.

But last year, the priest had told them that the monsoon was riding a frog. Salim danced and shouted and shrieked in joy with his friends. He went about doing cartwheels through all the fields.

But not even six months had gone by, and people began to lament the scarcity of water. The fields belonging to Sabir Miyan, Venkat Reddy, and Dilawar Ali Khan yielded plentiful grain, but the crops in the other, smaller fields remained parched and drooping.

Had the priest lied then? Or had the monsoon arrived over Venkat Reddy's fields on a frog's back and then mounted a deer when it approached Salim's?

Salim could not understand what had happened.

Today is sowing day.

When the monsoon came, the tiller, who would sit idle for three months, would rouse himself, overjoyed. All the tillers would head for the fields. Ploughs worked the soil everywhere. Home would be cleaned rigorously, and walls would be plastered with cow-dung. Again and again, eyes would turn towards the sky.

"Oh God! May it rain abundantly!"[2]

On sowing day, everyone rose while it was still dark. As if it was the day of Eid. The older women looked at the faces of their bread-winning sons as soon as they had opened their eyes. Everyone would bathe and purify themselves. The Hindu tillers would park their ploughs and bullocks beside their fields and apply vermilion on the plough and the bullocks' heads. They would break coconuts and begin planting the seeds after they had been touched by the hands of a married, fertile woman.

Muslim tillers too would have the Fateha recited for Bade Pir Sahab.[3] They would send kheer-puri to the mosque. When they approached their fields and found that their hearts were still not content, they too would quietly place a vermilion mark on the plough and break a coconut. This was no ordinary work that they could keep the Muslim God on their side and turn away from the Hindu Lord!

Today is sowing day.

Now was when the spring harvest would sprout. They looked forward to replacing their thatch roofs, getting their daughters wed, and making offerings in gratitude to Bande Nawaz. New daughters-in-law would step into their houses. Bonded hands would be freed.

The children had attached hopes to the days that were to come.

---

[2] Here, Bano uses Telugu and offers an Urdu translation in parenthesis. The Urdu translation of the Telugu words is incorrect and should be "Oh God! It has not rained well!" However, I have translated into English from Bano's Urdu translation, in deference to her text and presumable intent.

[3] Bade Pir Sahab is a respectful reference to the widely venerated Sufi saint Abdul Qadir Jeelani (1079–1166).

The fragrance of the flowers of happiness …

Ahmad Bi's heart was a lotus flowering in the cool gusts of the wind.

Today, after years, she would have wanted to go to Mastaan if he were at home …

Every night of hers was spent turning from side to side, cursing and beating the children. Mastaan was bonded to work for the sahukaar. Venkat Reddy would not allow him to go home even for the night because all his illicit activities – which no one else but Mastaan could attend to – were conducted at night. That is why Mastaan would occasionally steal away, once or twice a week, and come home as if he were visiting a whore at a brothel. And Ahmad Bi would truly take on the airs of a coy new bride. She would tease him and make him yearn for her.

Then she would hide herself in his embrace and start weeping. As if her man had returned after spending twelve years in exile.

Her hunger had persisted even after she had borne eleven children. She would burn in the fire of their separation.

With every breath, say Allah-hu Allah-hu
Let's finish grinding our worldly wheat, my dear …

All around Salim slept his brothers and sisters. They felt the cold less when they hugged each other and slept, lying as they would on torn sacks in the covered part of the courtyard.

"Chhee! What a big platoon of children Amma has erected!" Salim thought in disgust, as he sat nodding off.

Today is sowing day.

He stood up quickly when he remembered this. Venkat Reddy's torn shorts reached Salim's ankles. He tied the shorts around his waist with a piece of string. He put on Bawa's long qameez. Then he made his way slowly towards the courtyard, so that Amma would not know. He went to the drain and urinated there. Then he ran towards the fields. Maulvi Sahab had not delivered the azaan yet. He could hear the sound of Amma's singing till he had reached Jhatpat Bibi's dargah.

Let's finish grinding our worldly wheat, my dear
With every breath, say Allah-hu Allah-hu …

There was a cool breeze outside. A shiver ran through Salim's body. Dark clouds advanced from the direction of the jungle. Sometimes, when lightning struck, it would light up the hills behind the jungle. There was a temple dedicated to Pochamma in these hills.[4] Pochamma demands an annual sacrifice of one life. If people do not offer it willingly, she takes it by force. There could be a murder in the village. On other occasions, a virgin girl's corpse would be found lying at the foot of the hills. Pochamma's wrath would subdue the villagers. That is

[4] Bano explains in parenthesis that Pochamma is another name for Kali Mata, i.e. the goddess Kali.

why, every year, the Bonalu puja was conducted as soon as the rains begin. Hindu women bathed and, with their hair still wet, lifted the puja pots onto their heads. These pots would contain seven different kinds of coloured rice as well as jaggery and curds. Coconut, vermilion, and a burning lamp surrounded by flowers were placed in a brass thaali. When these married women – all decked up and glittering in colourful saris – would step out of their homes for the puja, the men could not help it. They would drop their work and look in the direction of the procession.

The sound of drums led the procession, and the sacrificial buffalo would follow. Behind the buffalo came the female ascetics, clutching neem leaves, their hair loose, swaying and dancing – like shadows of Pochamma. A coy and sparkling line of women would follow, decked up and looking like earthen dolls, carrying burning lamps on top of the pots on their heads.

The rain was never bold enough to put out any woman's lamp, no matter how plentiful it was. Salim had thought about this many times. One should push one of these women, he thought, to see if her lamp would go out!

He ran towards Venkat Reddy's land and made his way stealthily towards the hut on the edges of the field. He remembered where his elder brother Murad had stored the bags of seed that had arrived, laden on carts, from Venkat Reddy's house in the evening. Salim bent down inside the hut. He bit through one sack quickly and began to fill seeds in the gathered folds of his shirt. As he turned to leave, he collided with something. The guard woke up.

Dongalu! Dongalu![5]

Thief! Thief! In the silence, the guard's voice was flung far and wide. The winds in the jungle began to call out in all four directions. Dongalu! Dongalu!

Beyond the hills, Pochamma flashed her fearsome eyes. Dongalu! Dongalu! The guards of the fields awoke and sat up. In the dim light of dawn, they looked around. A fourteen or fifteen-year old boy was running along the banks between the fields.

Carefully holding the grain in the folds of his shirt, Salim stopped only when he reached the middle of his field, panting. He was trembling with fear.

His small field had been neither ploughed nor cleaned. How could it be? His elder brother Murad worked in Venkat Reddy's field. His father was bonded to work in Venkat Reddy's house. Now Salim with his mother and little brothers and sisters would plough and till the earth in preparation for sowing. They would borrow bullocks from someone. Then there would be the struggle for seeds. Every year Venkat Reddy would insult Amma, arguing over the seeds. For one paaili of seeds, they had to return five. What was left after that? With great difficulty, there would be two or two-and-a-half bags of yellow jowar. Because no manure or water was put in their fields. The saplings would bend as soon as they had risen from the soil. Like Bawa, Salim thought, they had prostrated themselves as soon as they had seen the lush green saplings in Venkat Reddy's fields. People would come from government offices to put

[5] Bano uses this Telugu word and then follows it up with the Urdu word "chor." In order to represent the structure and logic of Bano's work, which was written for an Urdu readership and for whom the narrator frequently acts as interpreter, I have retained the Telugu word as it is and glossed it in English, just as the narrator does in Urdu.

manure in Venkat Reddy's fields. The water engine would run on electricity. He had twenty or twenty-five bonded labourers, who worked in the fields day and night.

Salim, who was ten or eleven years old, would also work very hard in his field.[6] He understood after some time that it was the seeds that were important.

Reddy did not give them the seeds that he sowed in his own fields. That is why Salim had resolved at night that he would steal the seeds that were used in Venkat Reddy's fields and sow them in his own before sunrise.

[6] There is an obvious discrepancy in Salim's age, which is earlier gauged to be between fourteen and fifteen and here is said to be between ten and eleven. Either this is an error by the author, or there is something pointed to be said about Salim's appearance and/or the vagueness in informal assessments of birth and death.