An Anatomical Variant

Thursday afternoons are set aside for Radhika and Chitra, to help them read the scraps of glossies they have carefully retrieved. Radhika and Chitra are ragpickers by trade. They are like most girls of their age in their insatiable thirst for the glamour of the screen. Last summer, they were part of a literacy camp held in their slum, and since then, we have set aside Thursday afternoon for the serious business of catching up with Sridevi and Anil Kapoor.

But on this particular Thursday, Radhika and Chitra were not carrying their usual reading material. Instead, they stood bowed beneath their heavy polythene sacks, pretty faces tight with anger.

'We've come to tell you we didn't do it,' they announced in indignant chorus.

I was mystified. 'I don't know anything about it yet,' I pointed out.

Chitra blurted, 'Sankalp Colony! Messing up the garbage bins! They'll call the police, they've told us so. But we didn't do it. Why should we? Messing up the garbage only makes it more difficult for us.'

I saw what she meant. A ragpicker's daily income depends on the paper and plastic she is able to salvage from the refuse. It is not an easy job, and garbage messed about only makes it worse.

The story, when I heard all of it, seemed trivial enough. For the last fortnight, the residents of Sankalp Colony had been waking up to the sight of garbage strewn all over the colony, clearly brought in from the two large bins on the road outside. There are two large bins on that road, in addition to the dump at the end of Dixit Road.

Chitra and Radhika, and many of their friends scavenge these heaps of refuse for their living.

Radhika and Chitra live in a large slum adjoining the highway, named optimistically after a local politician. It is not an organised slum, but a long sprawling line of huts patched together with polythene, tin and packing-crates. There is neither sanitation nor water supply. The inhabitants are farm-workers from Salem, exiles from a parched land. The women and children are mostly ragpickers.

Lalli came to the door. She had been on the phone, and it appeared her conversation had something to do with the two girls. 'Are you the children the Sankalp Colony people are annoyed with?' she demanded.

'We didn't do anything!' the girls wailed. 'They've threatened to call the police.'

'They have called the police,' Lalli informed them, 'and I'm it.'

The girls looked dubiously at her. Clearly, she didn't conform to the menacing picture their mothers had conjured up while warning them to stay clear of the police.

'So you didn't do it. But do you have any idea who could have?' Lalli asked them kindly. 'You can see, can't you, that the Sankalp people are not going to let you alone till they know who is responsible. Run away now, and think about what I've said. If you have anything to tell me, drop in anytime.' Their glum faces relaxed somewhat, and they left, dragging their feet, looking very young and defenceless.

'It's a strange problem,' Lalli said. 'I'll tell you about it after lunch.'

When we had cleared up, Lalli made herself comfortable on the sofa. 'I know Minu Jasnani slightly,' she began. 'He's one of the patricians of Sankalp Colony, but he unbends enough to address us proles occasionally. Savio asked him to call me. Since a fortnight, on eight different occasions, the garbage from the bins outside the gate has been found strewn all over the asphalt drive.

'Let me explain. Sankalp Colony has two large bins outside its gates, across the road. Garbage from the flats is collected by the sweeper every morning and dumped in the bins. The municipal

van empties the bins every alternate day. Sometimes, of course, the van doesn't turn up for a week. Sankalp Colony is the sort of place where people don't have a qualm about tipping their filth out on the street, so long as it doesn't splatter against their front steps.

'Well, a fortnight ago, residents who take an early constitutional were horrified to find garbage strewn all over the asphalt drive that leads in from the gate. The sweeper was scolded, and the matter forgotten.

'Three days later, it happened again. This time, the sweeper was fired. The logic behind this is not very clear, but I suppose they felt some action ought to be taken. Scarcely had the sweeper departed, when it happened again. Now the residents were truly perturbed, as they had to clean the mess up themselves. The sweeper was wooed back, but it took them three days to mollify him, and in those three days, the incident recurred. Now the residents have seized on the children who scrounge for the rag trade as the most likely culprits. Savio does not agree, and neither do I.'

'Why are they so certain its the ragpickers?'

Lalli shrugged. 'Class prejudice. Some loose talk of malice and revenge. Let's walk down to Sankalp Colony and see for ourselves.'

As we walked, I wondered aloud why the residents did not simply lock the gates at night and employ a night-watchman, but as we reached Sankalp Colony, the reason became evident. Sankalp Colony had no gates. Only a wall, broken in parts, shielded the patricians from the low life. The wall ended in two posts which carried the rusting hinges of a gate now extinct.

We were met by Lalli's acquaintance, Minu Jasnani, who ushered us into the first flat. The governing body was in attendance, consisting of ten gentlemen of venerable and urbane appearance, shocked out of their silver hair to find themselves discussing garbage.

'We will send for the ladies; you will prefer to speak to them,' one of them suggested brightly, attempting to impose a familiar pattern on our interview.

'Thank you, no. You will do just as well. No, I won't sit down. I have a few questions, and if you can answer them right away, less time will be wasted.' If they were put out by Lalli's manner they did not show it.

'First: Is the rubbish strewn all over the asphalt? Or is it dumped just at the entrance?'

They seemed to have elected Minu Jasnani as their spokesman. He cleared his throat importantly. 'I won't say strewn exactly,' he considered. 'It's spilt at regular intervals all the way up the path, a little here, then after ten yards or so, another little heap. There's never been any garbage dumped just near the gate, or even strewn around the bin.' The other men nodded gravely.

'Second: Have you any idea whether it takes place late at night, or in the early hours of the morning?'

There was an uncertain pause and then one voice volunteered, 'I think it happens early in the morning. I have returned very late once or twice, and I saw nothing. But I remember, on following mornings the garbage was found spilt on the path.'

A look of intelligence passed from man to man. It wouldn't be long before those late nights were avidly discussed over tea and farsaan in every flat.

'How late were you?' Lalli persisted.

He licked his lips nervously. He was beginning to wear a hunted look. 'Family problem,' he explained. 'One thirty, two.' There were a few murmurs. Someone patted him sympathetically on the back, while keeping up a volley of questions sotto voce, in urgent malice.

'I would like to see the colony now,' Lalli interjected firmly, putting an end to this byplay. Refreshments were pressed on us, but Lalli made a determined move towards the door.

Sankalp Colony consisted of ten two-storey buildings that faced the asphalt crescent. At one time, it must have been a modern, secluded, spacious housing area. Now, like its residents, it showed signs of decrepitude. The asphalt was fringed by five lamp-posts, each providing illumination for two buildings.

Lalli strode ahead at her usual pace, and did not pause to examine either the path or the houses. She had reached the last building when one of the men, who had been talking in an undertone to Minu Jasnani, claimed her attention.

He introduced himself as Dr Juneja, a retired Professor of Anatomy (All the residents of Sankalp Colony were superannuated, and wore the same fragile air of genteel decay).

'I have some information which might interest you,' he said. 'Perhaps, if you could step this way...'

He led us into the last building. A heavy-featured woman, whom I took to be his wife, let us in. To my surprise, she made no response to our greeting but turned silently and disappeared through a curtained doorway.

However, Professor Juneja more than made up in bonhomie for her coolness, and his manner verged on the effusive as he settled us comfortably in large old-fashioned armchairs. He left us for a moment, returning like a genie with tall frosted glasses of sherbet. 'I'm sorry my family is not in a fit condition to receive visitors,' he apologised. 'That was my wife you met at the door. Her attitude must have surprised you.'

We made polite noises, disclaiming any such emotion. But he insisted on explaining. 'She is out of her mind with anxiety over Sindhu, our daughter. She's been very ill with typhoid fever, and is still too ill to walk. Indeed, I had despaired of her life at one time! When we shifted here from Satara, a fortnight ago, I had hoped to see a quicker improvement.'

'The journey must have been hazardous to her,' Lalli remarked.

Professor Juneja nodded sadly. 'It was terrible, simply terrible. But there was no way I could persuade her to stay a day longer in hospital. We could not stay any longer at Satara as I had to vacate the house immediately. The new man had already taken up his duties. And I had this property here. My wife and I were eager to settle down among our own people in our last years! But we have been in a sorry state since we arrived. Sindhu is recovering, but very, very slowly.'

An embarrassed silence followed. It was broken by Lalli who demanded, 'What is it you wanted me to know?' It was one of her bad-tempered days, and clearly, Professor Juneja's unctuous manner was doing her no good.

'I think I mentioned that I retired as Professor of Anatomy,' he began expansively. 'The infinite variations in the anatomy of the normal have always fascinated me. Indeed, I have made a study of some fifteen peculiarities of the human skull which I believe to be indigenous to the state of Maharashtra.' He paused triumphantly. 'I understand these scientific facts are a little difficult for the lay public to comprehend,' he continued kindly, 'but you may have some rough idea when I tell you that the moulding of the bones of the skull sometimes presents startling differences. Of course, these cannot be easily appreciated by the untrained eye.'

'Of course,' Lalli purred. I am always wary of her when she purrs.

'Well then: to get to the facts. The very first time we discovered the rubbish, I noticed, among the people outside, a man lounging at the bus-stop. He appeared to be one of these good-for-nothing loafers from the slum. The reason I noticed him was because of his peculiar skull.

'It was a most interesting variant. His forehead was a heavy ridge, low and overhanging his deep-set eyes, but flattened and slanting, giving an impression of a low brutish intelligence.' The Professor chuckled, quite delighted with his description. 'In fact, if one were to look at his skull, it is not the *Homo sapiens* of today that one would be viewing, but our early ancestor, *Homo sapiens Neaderthalensis* of whom perhaps even you ladies may have heard.'

Lalli did not appear eager to claim acquaintance with her ancestor, and merely contented herself with enquiring what had happened next.

'I must have stared at him, I was so taken up by his appearance. At any rate, he made a gesture of annoyance and moved away. I was disappointed, for I had hoped to persuade him into letting me make a few measurements of his cranium. I kept an eye peeled as I went about my business for the day, but I did not catch sight of him again.

'Imagine my surprise when, two days later, on the next occasion the garbage was spilt, I saw him again, lounging at the bus-stop! This time, make no mistake, he was staring straight at me. There was such malice in his glare, that it robbed me of my purpose and I did not attempt to speak with him. Since then, I have noticed him every time the garbage is spilt. He stands at the bus-stop, staring at the colony. I haven't mentioned it to my friends as the man seems a rough character, and I don't want any trouble. God knows I have enough on my hands! Besides, nobody else seems to have noticed him.

'And there's one more thing. On more than one occasion I've noticed him talking to the two girls who pick rags here. I questioned these girls, but they are hardened characters! No morals among these people, no manners, no respect, nothing!'

Lalli rose abruptly, 'I shall keep your information in mind, Professor. Thank you very much.' She swept out, leaving the Professor in mid-sentence.

'What's the tearing hurry?' I grumbled when we were out in the sunshine.

'I needed air,' Lalli said. 'I felt claustrophobic in that house.'

I stared at her in surprise. I'm the imaginative one in our menage, and I wasn't so sure Lalli had any business usurping my role.

As we walked towards the road, someone called out from one of the buildings, with that awful pressure-cooker noise that suburbia uses to summon strangers. I turned, while Lalli strode ahead with regal unconcern.

I noticed a woman waving from one of the windows. I waited, and she soon hurried out—a tiny old woman with bright black eyes, brisk and inquisitive as a sparrow.

'You're wasting your time here,' she told Lalli. 'These men are fools, making a fuss over no concern of theirs! You won't find anything here, I can tell you that!'

Lalli looked at her curiously. 'Do you know, I'm inclined to agree with you,' she said with quiet emphasis. 'I think there's been a great fuss over nothing.'

The old lady nodded vigorously. 'I knew you'd understand. Go now, and forget about it.'

'Yes, I think we should all forget about it,' Lalli said again with the same curious emphasis, 'especially since it started just a fortnight ago. I shall have to see that it stops, though.'

The old lady nodded again, and walked back without a word.

'What do you think is most curious about this problem?' Lalli asked me as we sat over a refreshing cup of tea, back in her sparkling kitchen.

'The Neanderthal Man,' I answered readily. 'What if he really were one!'

'A touch of sun,' my aunt said sympathetically, 'or else indigestion. Go stick your head beneath the tap.' I looked up from the encyclopedia on my knee. 'It says here that the Neanderthal man was a distinct geographic race at one time. And I thought Neanderthal

was first cousin to an ape! They *say* he became extinct,' I said, 'but you never know, he may have been quietly propagating in some forgotten village for all of a hundred thousand years—'

'Shades of Rider Haggard!' Lalli cried with scorn.

But I was not to be put off. The encyclopedia was bristling with facts about this misunderstood ancestor who had me firmly in thrall so that when the bell rang it was Lalli who went to the door.

'He disappeared around 35000 B.C.,' I informed Lalli as she returned.

'Well, he seems to have come back,' she broke in tartly, 'he's at the door, and what's more, he's asking for you.'

'And you left him there!' I babbled. 'You ought to call the police!'

'I am the police,' my aunt reminded me gently, 'and don't behave like an idiot.' Chastened, I followed her to the door.

The man was not very different from his picture in the encyclopedia, though the orange T-shirt and checked lungi added considerable brio. He certainly had a look of low cunning in his small deep-set eyes. He leered when he saw me, exposing a row of irregular teeth like tobacco-stained tiles.

'Chitra, Radhika,' he muttered, rubbing his hands.

'What about them?' I demanded sharply. 'Who are you? What do you want? How did you know where to find me?' I probably would have kept on with the artillery if Lalli had not put a restraining hand on my arm.

The Neanderthal slunk (if that could ever be true of a man of his bulk) into his shell, and simply stood there shaking his head till I wanted to scream.

'You had better go inside,' my aunt said coldly.

So I returned to the kitchen, and shut the encyclopedia with a bang. From now on, I was sticking to Homo strictly sapiens sapiens.

'Well, what did he want?' I demanded crossly when Lalli returned. 'I hope you warned him off.'

'Warned him off what?' she snapped. 'Really, I thought you had better manners. Why did you pounce on the poor man like that?'

I was quite ashamed of myself by now, after all the man could not help his appearance. I told Lalli so.

But this only made her angrier. 'It isn't him that's retarded,' she said nastily. 'The man's simply shy. He isn't used to talking

to strangers. What he told me was this: Chitra and Radhika are not to be blamed, because they know nothing about it. And I am to tell her to stop searching, because he has it at home, and it's safe.'

'Tell whom to stop searching for what?'

Lalli shrugged. 'That's all he was willing to say.'

'Who is he anyway?'

'His name is Gaffar. He lives in the slum, does odd jobs when he can get them. He did promise to show it to me sometime, but not, he says, by daylight.'

It quite worried me, this picture of Lalli being lured by twilight into some dim lair in pursuit of the dubious *it*. I sought comfort in the thought that not even Lalli would willingly plunge into such a madcap venture. I looked up, relieved to find her looking quite sane, feet up on the sofa, absorbed in a book as far removed from anthropology as possible—being simply, the telephone directory. I left her busy with the phone, and settled down at my typewriter.

But my thoughts were far away from the people in my novel, and leaving them to writhe in existentialist nausea, I went back to the mysterious Neanderthal. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Professor Juneja was right. Who could say what went on in a mind like Gaffar's? Perhaps there was something ritualistic in his actions, a throwback to some ancient totemic memory? It would be kinder not to put a malicious construction, then, on his actions. But I imagined it would be difficult for the patricians of Sankalp Colony to view him with any sympathy.

'The telephone is a wonderful invention,' Lalli said happily, replacing the receiver.

'Now I have all the facts I require. All that the problem lacks is its solution.'

'I don't think it would be fair to press charges against the man,' I ventured. 'Perhaps all he needs is a little counselling.'

I was interrupted by the telephone: it was my mother, urgently summoning me home. I left in some alarm, only to find to my disgust that the panic had been over my niece swallowing a coin from her piggy bank. As the loss was no more than 25p, the child easily consoled herself by extorting thrice that sum from her

gullible relations. A wise pediatrician and a bunch of bananas accomplished the rest, and but for the worry that the child might grow wise to the lucrative potential of this strange diet, peace was restored, and I was free the following morning to return to Lalli.

It was getting on for nine when I arrived, eager to hear the sequel to the Neanderthal's visit. To my surprise, Lalli was not alone. Fast asleep on my bed was a tired young woman.

'You're in time for the denouement,' Lalli remarked, silencing my questions. 'Here, I think, come our visitors.'

Professor Juneja and his wife appeared, distracted with worry. 'You have some news?' he burst out as they entered.

Lalli held up a hand to stem his flow of words.

'Please be seated,' she said calmly. 'Yes, I do have news for you. I made a few phone calls yesterday. This is what I learnt. You left Satara four months ago, ostensibly on a pilgrimage. You visited Banaras, Gaya and Hardwar. Eventually, having made your plans, the three of you arrived at Sankalp Colony by night. The next morning you let it be known that your daughter was an invalid, too ill to move or meet people.'

'Yes, yes, but of what use is this now? Did I not tell you Sindhu is missing?' the Professor broke in angrily. 'Please don't play with our feelings. Have you any idea what we're going through as parents?'

Mrs Juneja burst into tears and the Professor clutched his chest and groaned for a glass of water. Lalli restrained me with a gesture.

'And what did you feel, Professor Juneja, when you flung your daughter's baby into the garbage bin?' Lalli's cold words rasped like hailstones as they hit the silence.

Professor Juneja gave a hoarse cry. He clutched his chest again and rolled his eyes. His wife cried, 'Water!' wildly. Lalli poured out a glass and put it on the table next to him. 'I am waiting, Professor,' Lalli's voice was distant, but inexorable.

'I see you know our secret,' Professor Juneja said at last. 'When Sindhu brought this shame on us, what else could we do as respectable parents? We had not planned it this way. Our plan was to put Sindhu in a nursing home, as she came closer to term, and give the baby away for adoption. We had made arrangements for that, and Sindhu would have gone there within a week of arriving

here, and we would give out the story that she had suffered a relapse of typhoid fever.

'But Sindhu went into labour a month before her time, probably the journey had been too much for her. I did not dare fetch a doctor, or call the ambulance or the whole story would have been out.

'I delivered the baby myself. But it never breathed. It was God's will, our honour was saved! Sindhu had fallen into a stupor, I had sedated her deeply. So I told my wife, let us get rid of the baby now, before she wakes up, and before daybreak. So I wrapped it in newspaper, with the afterbirth, and walked to the bin at the end of the road. Not the ones outside the gate, I swear it, but the dump at the end of the road. I dropped it there.' He shuddered. 'I did it for my daughter's sake. I wanted her to have a normal life, marry a good boy from a respectable family, not carry this stigma for the rest of her life—'

'You told your daughter that the baby was dead, and you had thrown it away so that people may not learn of it. "We are safe." Were those not your words? What was her reaction?'

'Naturally she was distressed at that moment, but I hoped, in time, she would recover—'

'She did recover—with one fixed objective, to search for the body of her child! Stealing out of the house at night, she would scavenge the bins outside bringing in armfuls of garbage to examine by lamplight, searching for some sign of her dead infant.'

The horror of Lalli's words silenced us all.

'I am an old woman, Professor, and I have seen much,' Lalli continued slowly, 'but nothing as piteous as what I saw your daughter doing last night.'

'I tried to restrain her,' he said in a sullen voice, 'but she would get away somehow.' He turned vindictively on his wife. 'It's all your fault, you refused to lock her in, and now the whole world knows our shame!'

'You were observed that night, Professor, we have an eyewitness.'

'Impossible! There was nobody on the street!'

Lalli smiled. She went to the door and led in a tall woman carrying a swaddled infant. Behind her, grinning sheepishly, came the Neanderthal man. He drew back at the sight of the Professor, and muttered to the woman. She looked venomously at the old couple.

'This is Mayamma, and this gentleman is her husband Gaffar. Mayamma, can you tell us what happened on Monday night, two weeks ago?'

'Yes, I can tell you, madam! But I don't need to tell this old devil here, or his wife, they know it all. This man Gaffar is my husband, and a better man I defy you to show me! Yes, people laugh at him because of his ways, but he has a heart, my man has, and hardly a week passes but he brings home some sick helpless animal, a dog or a kitten, a kid once, and birds, and these he tends till they are well again. He should have been a doctor, madam, he has such healing hands! Monday night he couldn't sleep, baby had been restless, crying with a colic. So around three o'clock, he gets out of the hut for a breath of air. He's wandering down the road when he hears a baby cry, a newborn babe! He looks about him, but the street is empty. The cry seems to come from within the dump. Yes, he can see something stirring in the dark. Alarmed, he puts his hands on it, and yes, it's a baby, with its caul still wet, flung into the garbage. Then Gaffar remembers that a little while ago, as he was pottering about near the bus-stop, he had seen a man walk up to the bin and throw something in. And it was this man!' She pointed accusingly at the cowering Professor, and Gaffar nodded furiously.

'Thank God he took the baby out before the rats got at her!' She screamed at the Junejas. 'Did you think of that, you devils? Rats, cats, dogs, crows!' Mrs Juneja moaned and hid her face.

'Gaffar brought the baby home,' continued Mayamma, 'and you can see for yourselves whether I've cared for her or not. We have a daughter ourselves, and one more is no trouble at all. Then, two nights after he brought the baby home, Gaffar went out at night again. This time he saw something even stranger. He saw a woman rummaging in the bins outside the colony, and take armfuls of garbage inside. He followed her to see what she was up to, and watched her sift the rubbish beneath the light of the lamps. She did this over and over again. He said she looked frightened and ill, and when he told me all this, I knew it must be the poor mother of this infant, turned crazy with grief. I've nursed this baby, madam, it is now my child, but when you spoke to us yesterday, I realised the mother needs the baby, to recover her sanity. We can

make her understand that she must keep the baby, we can speak to her. Will you let us try?'

Without a word, Lalli led them into the room where Sindhu still slept.

'How did you know?' I asked Lalli, when our visitors had departed in a flood of forgiving tears. The fond grandparents had been sternly reminded of Sections 317 and 318 of the Indian Penal Code, which was enough to propel Professor Juneja towards the Municipal Office in a rigid state of moral rectitude to register the birth. Sindhu clung to the baby grimly, and refused to go home to Sankalp Colony. She was being taken to a nursing home now: the rest would give her sufficient time to make her plans.

'She wants that baby, and I'm going to make sure that she keeps her,' Lalli told her parents sternly. Mrs Juneja made a few half-hearted protests about what she called 'low class people' keeping her precious grandchild in their 'filthy slum,' but her daughter silenced her by clinging to Mayamma.

'But how did you know?' I persisted.

Lalli sighed, 'It was so obvious, the way he tried to distract us with all that talk about the anatomical variant. And why tell us all about his daughter? Simply to disarm us, and divert our attention from the fact that the peculiar problem had set in exactly a fortnight ago—just after the Junejas had moved in!

'It was obvious somebody was searching the garbage for something, for it was littered beneath every lamp-post. Yet, the repetitive nature of the act had something compulsive about it. The lady who met us at the gate knew something—the truth probably—and I sensed her trying to scotch a scandal.

'It was lucky for us that Gaffar called here yesterday. It saved me a lot of time. As it is, my plan was to keep vigil every night till I saw the culprit myself. I went with Gaffar to his house last night, saw Mayamma and the baby. They are truly good folk, and it pains me to see a man of Gaffar's talents go unrecognised for want of an education. He really does have healing hands.

'Last night, I waited with Gaffar at the bus-stop, and at about two in the morning I saw Sindhu.'

Lalli stopped, and looked out of the window. Her voice was very sad and old as she said, 'There's too much poison in the minds of people. I have tried, all my life, not to make judgements. That's not what I'm here for. Perhaps I'm just too old, but I can't go through seeing what I did for a second time.

'I went to her and told her the baby was safe, and if she would come with us, she could have the baby in the morning. She came docilely enough, and after a while, when she was calmer, began to talk. It was her father's words that broke her. "We are safe now." Those were his words.'

'What will they do now?' I wondered. 'Stumble again, through a thicket of lies.'

'Oh, I think the girl will fight her battle and win it.'

The patricians of Sankalp Colony lost interest in the matter once the garbage stayed outside their gates. Sindhu found a job and left home with her baby. She lives in Uran now, and is, I hear from Mayamma, very happy.

And as for the Neanderthal man, why, you can see him any evening assisting Dr Pant in her clinic, lancing boils, bandaging wounds, and enjoying himself enormously.