

The true desperation of Odisha's Dalit lives



Shashi
Warriar

review

This is a retelling of a true story. In 2012, an argument over a missing vest ignited a storm that ended in the destruction of forty Dalit houses in the village of Lathore in Odisha. Upper caste anger over the unproven theft of this vest by a Dalit youth led to hours of fire and violence. The author says in his preface that he contacted senior administrators and police officials asking them to persuade the District Collector to help the victims, but nothing ever happened: at the time the book's translation was complete, the victims were still waiting.

As the story begins, Makaru Suna, a young Odiya tribal, is on the train to Lathore from Raipur, Chhattisgarh. In his third-class compartment, he witnesses fellow passengers dumping garbage — peanut shells, for instance — or encouraging small children to urinate on the floor. The mess is wiped up later by a skinny lad who prefers cleaning up other people's messes to begging, but the sight evokes an inexplicable rage in him.

Makaru has boarded the train on hearing of the destruction by fire of the Dalit *basti* where his relatives live. Along the journey, he takes a walk in his mind, remembering his own departure, years ago, from his village, Banjipali, near Lathore. As a youngster, he had been forced to violence by an upper caste lad — a serious crime. The reparations demanded were a large sum of money to be paid by next morning, or his own life. He and his parents fled to Raipur, where he found work as a peon, his father got a rickshaw, and his mother began to work as a housemaid. They now live a life of poverty, but have hope and some dignity.

His arrival in Lathore — Harishankar Road in Railways parlance — at the end of his present journey — opens up a whole new area of horror — and of the

discovery of how his life in Raipur has let him drift so far away from the culture and gods of his childhood. And the focus shifts to the one thing that hasn't changed in all these years — the troubles of Odisha's Dalits. Makaru's reminiscences include the troubles of his grandfather and his two brothers, who settled in three nearby villages, Lathore, Banjipali, and Larki, where they suffered at the hands of the upper castes and the British.

In Lathore, he meets Chitrasen Suna, *Chitra-da* to Makaru, who had worked his way up from the bottom and achieved some kind of status in his society. In the destruction of the *basti*, *Chitra-da* has lost his all, and, perhaps due to age, the will to fight to get it back. The days that Makaru spends with *Chitra-da* in the relief camp leave him with a sense of quiet desperation, for he sees victims treated like criminals while the bullies walk free. And so, when Makaru boards the train back to Raipur, he carries

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this quiet hopelessness back with him.

The story is enriched by insights into how the exploitation gathers momentum. For example, Marwari traders start with brass utensils for barter, then sell more wares, then lend money for interest, and, eventually, become usurers creating slavery through unpaid — and mounting — debt. They exploit the villagers hiding behind the more capable villagers, selecting them for better-paying activities than the traditional cattle-herding.

All in all, it's a disturbing, provocative read, but the translation lets the story down occasionally. From what this reviewer gathered, the Odiya version shines with simplicity and integrity. The translation dilutes both.

*Shashi Warriar is an author
and a columnist*