

Contemporary Indian Short Stories

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Contemporary Indian Short Stories

by Russell Gonsalves

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Guide:.....

Internal Examiner:.....

They span the length and breadth of the nation. Written in villages and cities across the country, most of these short stories first made their appearance in local journals and publications. Translated volumes of compilations have brought them together and made them more accessible across borders. Although it would be impossible to convey in all accuracy every detailed thought and word of the author, the translators have done their best in “retelling” these works of art. Words that would not be done justice by a mere equivalent in the target language have been retained. *Meshomashai* for uncle and *Aai* for mother, carry with them an inherent feeling of personal belonging, within the respective cultures.

Stories are told, heard, seen, read, but most of all... felt. A good story has the uncanny ability to enrapture from the oldest to young. Combining subject, experience and message, each writer has taken an everyday theme and built around it a brief yet captivating drama - an essentially human requirement. But beyond the story itself, a short story can serve as a valuable and intimate account of a chosen subject, a place, an incident, a person. Without the employment of pigment or bristle a short story can at once paint a beautiful picture, unbound by time. And like painters every author seeks to capture a different subject. From the value of the love of a family to the use of a dining table, the stories are based on themes as eclectic as the people in this nation. However if there is one thread holding them together it is the feeling of every author's own personal experience that comes through in a rather compelling manner. In 'The Fig Tree Stands Witness' the author tells of a tragically materialistic world, through the hardships faced by his uncle when all his family cares about is his property and not his well-being. These messages though known to us come across more profoundly in these stories in ways we can more easily connect to. As compared to its older counterparts the delivery of a message in the contemporary short story is more graphic. Although there is usually no 'moral' that sums up the story in a single line, the story itself comes across as very real and tends to put the reader smack dab in the middle of events taking place. The message is thus experienced rather than read.

Along with relating an event or a theme, these short stories capture the local flavour of the places they are set in. As a reader one is taken on a brief, but intimate visit to the home of the author's words. And permeating this journey is a strong cultural undertone. India encapsulates a wealth of diverse cultures. And almost every short story takes us to their heart. And words here give us not just a description of the physical surroundings of a place, but an insight into the lives and lifestyles of the people living there. The way they think, their basic instincts, fears and customs are all peculiar to the place they call home. 'Thirsting for water' tells of a group of villages brought together by a common cause. The author talks of the land; beautifully details rituals and customs; but most of all speaks of the will of the people living there. With little embellishment and just enough detail, the authors of these short stories have outlined realities and emotions pertinent to every leaf, every brick in the immediate worlds surrounding them.

Ours is a generation where people are less afraid to voice their opinions and talk aloud of the so-called evils of society. Short stories have become an ample vehicle to carry these voices. Through them the authors have talked of issues that one would at an earlier date be castigated for the mere mention of. A story from 'Pages from a Diary' talks of homosexuality, a genetic phenomenon once considered a disease or a sickness. 'Argument' is the voice of a woman being prosecuted for aborting a baby, questioning the judge about singly bringing up a child in a harsh world, with no money to provide for it.

Many of the stories have been written in the first person. I do not know how many of these are real events as experienced by the authors, but as a reader I tend to connect to these stories on a more personal level. It's as if the author has shed all his masks, taken my hand in his and is looking me straight in the eye, while sharing with me the most profound experience of his life. For a short while I was a part of his life.

All of us have a story to tell. One that can touch a multitude. I have travelled a fascinating journey around India in these last few months... without having to once leave my favourite chair.

(An attempted editorial)

The project entailed the reading of an array of eclectic contemporary short stories from the around the country. It would border on impossible to completely alienate a story by assigning it to one category and not another. Thus no effort has been made in this direction. I have thus presented each as a separate synopsis. However certain stories put forth with conviction certain common and pressing issues. Notes have been added in the synopses to this effect. I have also included excerpts from editorials to fortify certain observations, with words from those in a far better position than myself.



Quintessentially Indian, these stories are wrapped in a certain magic that tries to communicate a culture, the 'codes, beliefs and acts of our daily life,' a way of speaking that belongs to a special little place in the world created by a language called Assamese or Tamil, Gujarati or Oriya - to name a few and yet is shared by all of us who are Indian.

Somewhere an editor of a reputed publishing house or magazine had chosen to publish a story that a writer herself or himself had singled out of all their writings... and out of this exercise have come stories whose common claim is only to excellence.

*Geeta Dharmarajan
(Editor - Katha Prize Stories)*

‘Blessed are my Sons’

Manju Kak

Set in the market place of Delhi. 'Blessed are my sons' is a story of a powerful man being humbled (almost humiliated) by the so called "weaker sex". A veritable 'David and Goliath'.

Shamim was the best butcher in Na Khas market. He personally served very select customers himself. The "less important" ones he let his brothers handle. Shamim was large and broad, with the fine Hindu Kush features of his forbears. Smartly hair sprung from his open kurta. And he thought well of himself too. His only "inadequacy" as he saw it was the fact that his wife had not borne him a son yet. This fact weighed him down.

One morning a new customer (a reporter) walked into the shop and insisted on being served by Shamim himself. But the order being small, Shamim made one of his subordinates serve her. But the woman demanded. "I buy. You serve. Understand?" No one spoke to Shamim like that. But he succumbed, and hesitatingly served her. A strong hatred brewed inside Shamim and the feeling kept inflaming the more the saw her in days to come. But despite his anger and powerful personality, Shamim felt an odd weakness around the reporter from the Delhi Diary. His gloom at not having been able to produce a son was now doubled and his frustration reached its peak. It was on one such night that he vented all of his imploding emotions in one burst of passionate love making with his wife Rehana. In his mind he bore the anger. In his mind was vengeance. In his mind was... the reporter from the Delhi Diary.

"This time it had been different. This time round it had to be a boy."

‘The Fig Tree Stands Witness’

Shyamal Gangopadhyay

Bengali

The story is one of material greed over affection. Based for most part in Calcutta and spanning over fifty years the story moves from simple family joys and relationships to greed and abandonment.

The author spent his childhood in the company of his cousins enamoured by them. But as time passed children became adults, had children of their own and then moved their separate ways. His children too were now grown up with children of their own. The only person who hadn't moved was his uncle (*meshomashai*). 87, frail and living alone in a tiny flat, the sight of him made the author's heart bleed when he visited him one day. His two sons did not want to accept responsibility for his care, and his daughter, Lotikadi, eventually took him in only for his property and money that he had saved up. She tried persistently and bluntly to get him to sign a deed, but *meshomashai* felt that his money should be distributed equally through a will after his death. His health was constantly neglected and his condition steadily worsened. The author was the only person who listened to him and cared. He became so distraught at *meshomashai*'s condition that his own life and family took a back seat.

One morning Lotikadi and her family took *meshomashai* to the railway station for him “to see the trains”. A month later he was in the paper in the 'missing persons' section. That morning at the station, Lotikadi put him on a train to Delhi to be picked up by some old friend. Almost ninety. Frail. All alone. He never reached.

That morning *meshomashai* had signed the deed.

Of translation...

Literature has long been translated into foreign languages in order to take it across national borders to wider audiences. India however hosts within itself many languages and dialects that are mostly varieties of 15 principal languages. India's schools teach 58 different languages. The nation has newspapers in 87 languages, radio programmes in 71, and films in 15. Thus translation becomes more imperative and that much more challenging.

We have been hoping to refute the belief that in India, translating between the languages can only be via English or Hindi. So much is lost in a second generation translation. We dared to take on M.T. Vasudevan Nair's story after he had warned us that it was 'highly untranslatable'. The word 'yakshi' gave our translator many a sleepless night. It couldn't be 'ghost' or 'spirit' for both these words came loaded with certain connotations, undesirable in the context of the story; hence we decided to leave 'yakshi' as yakshi hoping that Yakshi herself would be better able to explain herself than mere translators.

Geeta Dharmarajan
(Editor - Katha Prize Stories)

'Little Earthquakes'

M.T. Vasudevan Nair

Malayalam

The story of a little girl who saw the world the way she imagined it to be. Janakikutty lived in a house with her mother, elder brother and sister, mother's sister, her daughter, and grandmother's sister *Mutthashi*. Mutthashi was old and considered a burden by all, except Janakikutty. The two were deemed as the cause of any and all misfortune in the house. Astrologers confirmed these fears. However between the two was the only sign of real love that existed in the house. The others were self-indulgent people who lived in constant fear of the *yakshi* said to be living in the *parambu* that surrounded the house. Mutthashi. Ironically the only ones to see the *yakshi* were Mutthashi and Janakikutty. They often took walks in the *parambu*. Janakikutty became good friends with the *yakshi* who taught her many games and even came home unnoticed on several occasions.

One day the impending marriage of Janakikutty's cousin sister was announced. The household went into a preparation frenzy. The biggest worry however on everyone's mind however was the deteriorating health of Mutthashi. Except for Janakikutty this concern was purely for selfish reasons. It would not be possible to go through with the wedding with a death in the family. On the morning of the wedding however, Mutthashi breathed her last. It was decided that the news would be hushed up until the next day. Janakikutty refused to believe that her Mutthashi could be dead. She asked the *yakshi* for help. And when it came time to cremate her Janakikutty saw Mutthashi fly out of the funeral pyre and straight to her. Janakikutty would never be separated from those she truly loved. She would always be happy.

‘Argument’

Chalam

Telugu

A courtroom scene. The accused - a woman who has aborted her child. The whole story is a plea, a statement, a final argument put forth by the woman to the judge.

“Yes I aborted the child. Tell me why that is crime?”

She begins by questioning the judges judgment and sense of humanity and moral intelligence. She talks of her husband who impregnated her and then left her, leaving her with no one to care. And thus of bringing up a child alone in poverty. In a world where a poor singlemother will be sneered upon. The child ridiculed. Of a world that mistreats women laborers like maids. If a woman in her place doesn't have the right to choose her own fate and that of something that's inside her own body, then the fault lies in the system.

“Is this just? Is this fair? Answer me”



‘Values’

Rachakonda Viswanathasastry

The story is an account of one evening in the life of the author. One evening with a prostitute, and the price put on a brief period of happiness. The value.

The author meets her at the bus stand. She beckons him and the two of them get into a rickshaw and go to the sea shore. Where they spend together moments of passion and pleasure. When they are done, the time comes for payment. At this point a strong overwhelming feeling of guilt hits him. He begins to feel a deep sickness about trying to put a price on a person, like it were something he could buy at the market. He feels humiliated at having insulted the human race and sanctity of a woman. But as he gives her the money, she pulls him closer one last time, kisses him and smiles. She is above the ways of the world. Revealing to him the true greatness of a woman.

‘Bonsai Life’

Abburi Chaya Devi

The author and her husband one day received an unexpected letter from her elder sister, Akkayya as she was fondly called. She and her husband were coming over for a visit. It would be the first time that Akkayya had left her village. She was brought up in a time when women's education was deemed unnecessary. The author on the other hand was more fortunate and eventually moved out to the city, found a job and settled down. The reunion was a happy one. The talk initially revolved around the contrasting lifestyles of the village and the city. Both the sisters seemed to envy the other's life. After a while they stepped out into the balcony. There among others, Akkayya noticed a turayi tree planted in a small pot. She questioned this. Her younger sister explained to her the Japanese tradition of Bonsai trees. A little later, a sudden storm brewed. The author brought the pots in and quickly shut all windows and doors. As they watched the rain pouring, Akkayya pointed out to a large Turayi tree outside.

“Look... it has provided shelter to so many.”

She went on to explain how a woman's growth was restricted and delicate like that of a Bonsai. With proper nurturing, both a tree and a girl can grow to be free, strong, and serve a multitude.



‘Eerie Venture’

Dharmendra Kumar

The author like most writers often looks for inspiration through various experiments... putting oneself in extraordinary situations and creating a story out of real life experiences. He decides to spend one night in an abandoned building all alone. This kind of thing has been done by many writers, adventurers. But each experience and story is unique, mostly based on perception, fears and doubts about what might have happened. In other words, the mind playing mysterious games with you. The author reached the abandoned building which belonged to a royal family eons ago. As he entered the dilapidated place, he was already expecting to find homeless beggars, thieves or even ghosts. As night fell his doubts turned to fear and the slightest sound would send shivers down his spine. So much so that he started seeing shapes and ghosts and in trying to insanely run for his life, hit his head against something and lay unconscious till dawn. In the morning when he opened his eyes, fear was displaced by sanity and security of daylight. He laughed at his behaviour and returned home pondering over his next experiment.

‘Hide and Seek’

Dhruva Shukla

Life yours, mine all around us is one game of hide and seek. Of trying to protect and shield ourselves. A constant endeavour to stay hidden until some one or something is discovered.

The story revolves around this little family of a father, mother, and their two children (little girls) playing hide and seek. The story takes the reader through all the things in their hidden world. The daughter tries to hide herself in the kitchen but the kitchen has no space to hide in anymore. Every nook and corner is occupied with jars and containers. Containers that hide salt, wheat, rice, tea, etc... Even the fridge hides a hoard of tired vegetables and fruits which shrink into its cool comfort. The television also hides an entire world within itself.

All our lives are spent trying to hide all we own, all we possess and all we feel. The desire to protect and shield forever at times we even forget what we hide assuming 'it' is lost until we find 'it' again... 'it' being anything from a stray needle, to an old shirt, to our darkest fear, to our happiest moment. All is hidden.

‘Incentive’

P Sathyavathi

Sarada represents the world of housewives who lock up their own dreams in order to serve the larger cause of 'improving the quality of life' for the entire household.

Sarada learnt to play the veena and often yearns to play it, but time does not permit it. She is a very dedicated housewife who spends all her time catering to every single need of the household and her husband, who works for a foreign company. His life is his work. All he talks about is his work. Even their two daughters have to listen to it patiently. And all he expects his wife to do is everything to help him impress his colleagues. When Rao is out of the house, Sarada sometimes sits by the window watching the ever-busy tea close to her house. It is run by Narayana who is a very honest and dedicated man. Twelve year old Venkatesu does all the work. He works non-stop like a machine. One day Sarada asks Narayana why he doesn't buy the tea stall from the owner so that he can make more money. Narayan laughs and explains how he barely gets a tenth the money made at the stall, which is far from being enough. Venkatesu earned about a twentieth. Every night before shutting down the stall Narayana gave Venkatesu a small chocolate as a token of appreciation for the day's work.

One day Rao returned from a successful business trip with gifts for his family. His company had presented watches to the wives as well. On receiving the watch, Sarada was painfully reminded of the chocolate – a petty incentive to keep the uncomplaining machine running.

‘Like lightning in the Skies’

Zamiruddin Ahmad

A story of forbidden love, hidden from the eyes of the world. Peshkar saheb's young wife was in love with a poet by the name of Ruswa. The author, friend to both, was the middle man who made it possible for them to meet secretly. He was Peshkar saheb's neighbour. One day she called him and asked him to tell Ruswa to stop seeing her. She was afraid that Peshkar saheb was becoming suspicious. Ruswa was angered when he heard this but decided that they should meet one more time before ending it. They would meet after a 'mushaira' at which Ruswa would read a poem he had written for her. After the 'mushaira' the two met at the rendezvous point. The author stood guard just outside. The conversation they had was of passion versus prudence. It was inconclusive. A few days later, she arranged for them to meet secretly in her house at night while her husband was away. Two days later she was nowhere to be found. Ruswa was very much present so it wasn't him that she had run away with. After several rumours floated around, the truth finally came to light when her body was found in the well. Her husband had found out about her secret affair and threatened to throw her out. She refused to divulge the name of her lover in order to protect him, and took her life instead to escape the pain and the shame.

“What an unfortunate girl, to have given up her life for *such* people.”

‘Mariam’s Magic’

Dharmendra Kumar

A story that is very real... very 'today'.

Two sons settled in the city and have almost forgotten the existence of their old father back in the village. A telegram about his bad health gets them rushing back to the village more as an obligation than sincere concern. In the village they meet a witch doctor called Mariam who claims to be able to cure their father of whatever it is that ails him. Over a period of five days Mariam administers various remedies and cures that the 2 brothers find utterly queer but dare not ridicule. While they wait for their father to be cured, both men get an opportunity to talk and bond like the brothers they were and not just mere relatives as they have been all these years. At the end of five days both begin to miss their families, their lives and confront Mariam as to how much longer would they be required to stay put? And the witch doctor makes her point...if these brothers already miss their families in 5 days how is an old father supposed to live abandoned by his very own sons? And the story ends happily with both brothers realizing their folly and taking responsibility for their father.

'No Regrets'

Prabha Dixit

This is the story of a woman called Batasiya. Married with three sons, one would have thought her life was complete. But this wasn't so. Her husband was like a stranger living under the same roof. So one day she left her family and eloped with a young debonair wrestler. She moved into his home and cooked and washed and cleaned and bedded him. She was in love with him and her entire world revolved around him. As is the inherent quality of any society...neighbours ridiculed her...made vile jokes and comments...abhorred her.

They had a daughter together whom they called Lakshmi. Soon however, the little girl became the centre of the wrestler's attention and Batasiya began to lose him. He would snap at her for being a careless mother for something as trivial as her jewellery box lying in the open least the baby should trip over it. Batasiya began to miss and ultimately crave the warmth of the wrestler's body against hers. One day she ensured that she kept Lakshmi awake all day through a zillion games and antics just to ensure she would fall asleep when the wrestler returned. But she failed. The wrestler rejected her and went back to spooning time with his daughter. He began building this invisible wall between Batasiya and her own daughter. He began to abhor her and from there began a series of abusing and beatings. The wrestler would thrash the living daylights out of Batasiya and leave her outside on the street till his temper calmed down. The neighbours felt this was only fair considering her 'character.' One night after the usual beating session the wrestler did not take Batasiya back into the house. She waited... raved and ranted with sheer insanity and yet he wouldn't let her back into his house and his life. Through all of this the wrestler's disciple Basati witnessed the pain and agony of Batasiya's life. Soon the sympathy turned into pity. Then the wrestler left a will in Basati's custody and after his death left all his belongings to Batasiya claiming she was the only family he had, but he had not forgiven her. So Batasiya finally returned to the house that had become her destiny...it had become her...but without the wrestler who completed her. The story of many Indian woman who crave for none but a little love... for whom their husbands become the beginning and the end, while everything else is darkness.

‘One Step’

Vivina Murthy

A typical village scene. An entourage with an eligible groom has come to visit a prospective bride. The girl is asked to talk, sing and walk for approvals. Then the elders close the deal and the engagement takes place and both families rejoice.

One day something happens that shocks the girl's parents. The groom writes a letter to the girl, Lalita. Bewildered the father responds to it. The groom then writes to the father seeking his permission to let Lalita write to him. The village gossipmongers have a field day as the letters become the hot topic of discussion. What's next they contemplate...a movie? The bride in the grooms bedroom before marriage? But the elders decide to be broadminded and encourage Lalita to write to her fiancé under close adult supervision. The groom now pleased to receive a response begins to comment and advise Lalita on her various attributes, the way she should think, the way she should write, what she should read, and so on. The elders force Lalita to keep up to the grooms every expectation. After a deluge of letters, one day Lalita refuses to write. The elders are once again in a fix. 'If this engagement is broken who in the world will want to marry this rejected girl? She will be tainted for life!' So they persuade Lalita into writing to her groom. And write she does. And when she emerges after writing this letter, she has the glow of freedom on her face. For this final letter to her groom tells him in so many words that she refuses to change her entire being to suit his. She tells her father to post the letter or else she would do it herself.

‘Pages from a Diary’

Bhupen Khakkar

A brief and intriguing account of a seemingly ordinary assistant at Ambika Mill. He is called Sundarlal. Ink-black complexion, inch deep hollows in both cheeks, yellow teeth, bushy hair. By no measure a technically attractive man... but a man worth meeting. As efficient and hardworking as the next. A single chair sits in the waiting area opposite Sundarlal's desk outside the boss's cabin. Wait there, restless, nervous... and Sundarlal will put you at ease. He will strike up conversation about the boss. Gossip. Once Aundhatiben told the boss, "I feel more attracted to Sundarlal's bushy hair than your porcupine hair."

‘Salaam America’

An Indian's account of his stay in New York. A Keralite married to a nurse called Tessy who lives in one of the many sky scrapers of NYC. While Tessy works long insane hours as her profession demands, her husband stays home handling all the chores and babysitting their infant. A role reversal that might be frowned upon in India but is next to ordinary in a city like NY.

The protagonist is however a living paradox all the way. While he is completely in awe of the fast lane and the bustling city that is New York, deep inside he yearns for his hometown and the backwaters. He relishes the money, speed and addiction that is New York and yet cannot connect with the 'white men' and their ways. One of his favourite pastimes when he isn't drinking expensive liquor is driving around freeways just for the immense rush. And when his busy wife was too exhausted to satisfy his physical needs, he sought love (or lust) elsewhere with his Spanish neighbour Josephine. Life is as good as it gets. However one night when Josephine's husband walks in on them the fairy tale ends. Tessy packs off her ungrateful husband back to India. And though he is now back to his roots, the home he yearned for, now and again he finds himself reminiscing about Tessy... whether she would ever accept him back... about Josephine and the crazy city that is New York.

‘Space’

Subrabharatimanian

Thangaraj, a coolie, lived in a small one room house with his wife, Jyoti and his parents. Every night when darkness came, Thangaraj would long for the proximity of his wife, but could do nothing for the fear of his parents waking up. Pending desire leads to frustration that he starts venting out on Jyoti by slapping her every now and then for irrelevant reasons “no salt in the food...” One day he instructs Jyoti to wake up when he signaled and come close to him. But she doesn't. “How could she be asleep when he yearned and suffered like this?” Anger and lust turns him into a vindictive monster when one day he viciously wakes her up, by pulling her hair and then starts slapping her. When his parents wake, he defends his actions with claims that she was calling out the names of other men in her sleep.

And he goes on... continuing to hit her.

‘The Magic Nymph’

Nataraj Kuliya

Achari is a 33 year old brahmachari who has never ever been with a woman in his life. A provider for 6 younger sisters and an ailing bedridden father Achari works as a clerk and his occasional self indulgence means a drink or two with his colleagues and friends but accompanied with guilt that the money could have been spent on his sisters.

His sexual misadventures began with a homosexual encounter with a neighbourhood lad, being physically attracted to his own cousin and sister. When in college, the very sight of a prostitute in her semi nakedness was enough to sustain and prolong his gratification. And so that day when he was at the Munsif court where his friend Ramaya worked...he was appalled and even excited to find a round up of prostitutes brought in after a raid. He watched all of them and spotted one particularly young spirited woman whom he even lended some money on her request. She promised to return the money the next day at a designated place. Excited in anticipation Achari reached the venue to find the woman coyly smiling at him. His advances with an innocent and cautious offer for coffee got a response indicating that they would have to look for a room. This direct proposal shocked and excited him at the same time. For the first time in his life he was this close to a woman and was filled with many confused feelings of lust and excitement and yet he longed to hold her tenderly and wipe away her tears and agony. When a pimp happened to notice the girl with Achari he stopped to make her a better, more lucrative offer. Achari's blood boiled at the thought of losing her but she stood there firmly insisting that she was booked by this man. A string of abuses later, the pimp left the couple walking hand in hand...Achari felt freedom as never before in his life.

‘The Politics of Living’

Indraganti Janakibala

Tara was married to Mohan, an ambitious and materialistic man for whom status and prestige were priority. So much so that when he was to marry Tara one of his biggest conditions was that Tara would have to be a work as well in order to earn for the family.

Tara's pregnancy turned into a nightmare when one day she was paralysed with pain and was rushed to a doctor after heavy bleeding. The doctor who was in a hurry to leave for the US declared that Tara had suffered a miscarriage. Having taken leave from office Tara rested at home to recover. During this time, Mohan turned up at her office to claim the all-important paycheck without telling her. A couple of months later however, a gynecologist told Tara that she was indeed pregnant and the miscarriage was a false alarm. But her joy was tainted when after the birth of her child, she received a notice from her office claiming she had committed a fraud by claiming leave for miscarriage. To add to her misery, Mohan threw a fit and threatened to leave Tara forever if she lost her job. Tara's father decided to help her to save the marriage. All her life Tara had dutifully lived by prescriptions of her parents. All for the ultimate goal of being able to marry a 'good, intelligent' man. But now didn't anyone even care about what kind of a man she was married to?

Tara's father managed to get her job back by proving the error in the doctor's diagnosis. She thanked her father for getting her job back, but to their dismay refused to go back to Mohan. She demanded a divorce. For the first time in her life, she was going to live by her own rules.

‘Thirsting for Water’

Milind Bokil

Set against the backdrop of a movement opposing the building of a dam, the story revolves around the social activist, Rohini who fronts the movement. The author beautifully highlights Rohini's professional triumphs and personal tribulations. Rohini is leading hundreds of villagers, tribals to stand as one and protect their lands and water And through all of it, her mother, *aai* serves as her strength... her sanity. *Aai* has come to visit Rohini at the place of the movement.

The day begins with *aai* reading the Dnyaneshwari at the riverside (something she does very often), while Rohini reminisces about her childhood. They then join the villagers in their annual procession to worship their deity, the Goddess before the meeting. The pomp and decorative nature of the procession has been described beautifully and great detail, reflecting the festive culture of a traditional rural Maharashtra. The day culminates with the meeting, after which *aai* blesses and leaves. Rohini is once again left with her thoughts.

For the first time in her life Rohini is at peace. She was once in a turbulent marriage. Now her life seems better directed. However, there is one thought that weighs her down 'she is welcomed with open arms into the houses of hundreds of villagers, yet where is home for her?' But in the end it doesn't seem to matter, and Rohini realises that her future will always be hers to seek... with someone watching over her.

In the story the author has captured the human side of a person committed to her calling but ridden with sorrows of her past and worries of her future.

‘Unnikatha’

M Mukudam

Old and frail, Muthashi, grandmother to a young boy looked forward to the stories he would tell her. These were bedtime stories for her. A complete role reversal where a grandson told stories to his old grandmother to put her to sleep so he could then go back to doing his homework. So Unni the little boy) started his story...

A rich man named Kuruna Panikkar was on his way to the temple on his palanquin carried by a string of servants. There he encountered a man named Malkkoran who claimed he was a mason in search of work. The rich man told the mason that there was no work for him. But Malkkoran insisted that there was indeed work to be done in the village. The old gaunt village tree was almost dead and he alone could replace it with a beautiful tree which would never grow old...never shed leaves...remain timeless forever. Kuruna Panikkar was tempted...after all the richman of the village should own such a unique priceless tree. So the mason first cut down the old tree and down with it came the nests of hundreds of beautiful birds. The birds hovered around the tree for a while as if hoping to protect it against any more damage. The mason finally succeeded in driving them away and set to work on his glass tree. He built the most exquisite glass tree complete with delicate green glass leaves and pretty flowers in white glass. The transparency of the tree gave it a beautiful sheen, which made everything right from the blush of the setting sun to the smallest shadow look bewitching. The rich man was pleased to own such a thing of timeless beauty.

But what is a tree that can bear no fruit...whose flowers have no fragrance...whose leaves offer no shade? What is a tree with nests made of glass with no birds to make them their home? What is timeless beauty if its purpose is lost forever?

‘Higuita’

N S Madhavan

Fr. Geevargheese was a big football fan. Actually he was more in awe of the role played by the goalkeeper. At times the goalkeeper was Jesus, who saved many balls. A little later he would become Goliath, and so on. The true test of a goalkeeper is the penalty. And according to Father, the most outstanding goalkeeper in such testing times was the Columbian goalkeeper Higuita. Higuita did not wait for the opponents to attack him. Unlike other goalkeepers, he confidently took the game to opposition.

Father's life was like that of a goalkeeper. A young girl named Lucy had come to Fr. Geevargheese asking him to help her with a problem she had. Jabbar, who had brought her and others from Ranchi to Delhi, was demanding that she go along with him and marry him. His intentions were unholy, and she knew this. Father accompanied her to Jabbar's house. There he was asked to leave. But suddenly as they stood, Father went back to his youth where he scored a game winner for his team. In a flash he used the same energy to hit Jabbar in the face. And then again. He instructed Jabbar to leave Delhi. He went home calm, with the confidence of Higuita.



‘Taxi to Infinity’

The story is about a divine experience encountered by the author while on his third trip to India to see Sai Baba. It was the end of his stay at the ashram, and his body was drained of all energy. Waking up at three every morning and then standing in long lines for 'darshan' had taken its toll. But after checking into a hotel for the night before flying back to his home in L.A., a sudden craving overcame him to go back and see Sai Baba one more time. The urge was uncontrollable, and tired as his body was, he woke up early the next morning, jumped into the first taxi cab he found to go to the ashram. But as he traveled, he realized that the driver did not know the way and did not understand English either. They were lost. When they stopped by the road, a man approached him and asked if he was headed towards the ashram. The man then got into the car and directed the driver in the local dialect towards the ashram. On the way, the man told the author that his wife had fallen very sick the previous night and that Sai Baba had come to him in a dream telling him that he would send a car to bring him to the ashram, where he would give him some holy ash to heal his wife. They reached the ashram an hour after the regular 'darshan' time. But on reaching found that Sai Baba had delayed the 'darshan' by an hour that morning. Sai Baba walked out at the exact time that they arrived, walked straight up to the man and handed him a packet. The man jumped back into the taxi and rushed home.

The author never got to meet Sai Baba that day because of the crowd, but he returned home the next day happy with the love and grace of Sai Baba.

‘A Cool Ghost’

Laxmi

This is a story of two friends who set out to prove to themselves that there are no such things as ghosts or haunted houses. They select an abandoned building and make up their mind to spend one night there. To their shock, they meet an old man. Obviously been living there, who claimed that this was his home. And offered to give the two a guided tour through his “castle”. The fact that they found his house barren and empty offended him intensely and for fear of upsetting him, the two boys decided to play along. The old man seemed to be living in world of his own as if in a trance. Against all their sensibility the two boys began to wonder was this an insane man or a ghost. Suddenly the old man's expression changed to one of rage and he pulled out a knife from under his robe. All hell broke loose and the boys ran for their lives. On reaching some distance, they heard motorcycles approaching. Imagine their shock when the men on the bikes turned out to be their friends. One of whom was dressed as the old man.

'The Village'

Suma Josson

An old dying archaeologist's legacy to his son... a story of a lost civilisation...or one that is found.

The son grew up quite estranged from his father who all his life set out in search of discoveries and excavations leaving behind a family, that initially yearned for him but then got used to his absence. But now on his deathbed, the archaeologist confides in his son about that one village that he wished to explore... his mind and spirit yearned for it but his body had given up long ago. So he tells his son about his last wish - to reach this village and see what he could find. But before the son could fulfil this wish the old man passed away leaving the son determined to visit the village for his father's sake. To take forward his vocation too if possible. So he starts his journey to the village where a certain Dr B had employed him as a measly clerk. When he reaches the village at night he gropes around dark phantom roads trying to locate his employer only to be told that there are 11 Dr. B's in the village! So he wanders around ...feeling his way along a mysterious wall when he comes to a thin alley that leads him to an old lady's house. He spends the night here and discovers that the old woman knew his father...they had been in love. The woman asks him to leave the village at dawn as it is too dangerous to be wandering about. The incidents that follow leave him scarred for life...first he finds himself in the custody of 3 uniformed men whisking him to an unknown place. When he confronts them he is knocked unconscious with a blow to his head. The next thing he knows...the buss conductor pokes him demanding to know how far he is going to travel. Bewildered he realises, he is all soaked with a bandage on his head.

He reaches home and never talks about his experiences in the village. He had gone there to find answers for his father but returned with many more questions and doubts which would remain so forever.

‘Dining Table’

Dharmendra Kumar

In most Indian cities, especially Mumbai, space is a luxury that becomes dearer day after day. And in the eternal quest of space Indian families have learned to improvise...objects and belongings begin to serve much more than the purpose they are meant for. The author chooses the classic example of a dining table. Contrary to its English or American or European counterparts, the Indian dining table becomes a storage space. Whether it is things piled on top or shoved under it... it opens up a whole new plethora of options.

The author describes the impact of a mere dining table upon a typical lower middle class family in Mumbai. Firstly the decision to buy a dining table...weighing the pros and cons... the month's budget. Then the initial excitement of having bought something new. The family rejoices. They dine together and relish it. But then routine sets in and as life moves on. The dining table gradually becomes an option to store things as well. A rejuvenated craving for additional space... And for further acquisitions.

‘Bonsai Life’

Abburi Chaya Devi

The author and her husband one day received an unexpected letter from her elder sister, Akkayya as she was fondly called. She and her husband were coming over for a visit. It would be the first time that Akkayya had left her village. She was brought up in a time when women's education was deemed unnecessary. The author on the other hand was more fortunate and eventually moved out to the city, found a job and settled down. The reunion was a happy one. The talk initially revolved around the contrasting lifestyles of the village and the city. Both the sisters seemed to envy the other's life. After a while they stepped out into the balcony. There among others, Akkayya noticed a turayi tree planted in a small pot. She questioned this. Her younger sister explained to her the Japanese tradition of Bonsai trees. A little later, a sudden storm brewed. The author brought the pots in and quickly shut all windows and doors. As they watched the rain pouring, Akkayya pointed out to a large Turayi tree outside.

“Look... it has provided shelter to so many.”

She went on to explain how a woman's growth was restricted and delicate like that of a Bonsai. With proper nurturing, both a tree and a girl can grow to be free, strong, and serve a multitude.