



FROM CARCASS TO CLASSROOM: A DALIT BOY'S JOURNEY

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I was born in the Maharwada of the village Joharapur—a small settlement pushed to the margins of the village as if it were an afterthought of society. It stood at the far edge of the village, where the narrow dusty path slowly disappeared into fields and wasteland. The Maharwada was not merely a physical location; it was a silent reminder of the place assigned to us by the rigid order of caste. Our homes were clustered together like weary travellers seeking comfort in each other's company, far removed from the grand houses and wide courtyards of the upper-caste landlords.

In those days, the village was not simply divided by fields, houses, and wells; it was divided by caste, by invisible yet powerful walls stronger than stone. These walls could not be seen with the eyes, yet they governed every movement of our lives—where we lived, where we walked, where we drank water, and even which gods we were allowed to worship. The boundaries of caste were guarded not by gates or fences but by deeply rooted beliefs and centuries-old customs that people rarely questioned.

At the outskirts there lived families from the Mahar, Mang, Bhilla, and Chambhar communities. Though we belonged to different sub-castes, our shared experience of poverty and discrimination brought us together. We lived like a single extended family, sharing our joys and sorrows, our hunger and hope. The children played together in the dusty lanes, unaware for a time of the cruel distinctions that society had drawn around them.

Our settlement stood far from the main village lanes where the caste Hindu landlords resided in large, tiled houses surrounded by spacious courtyards. Their homes were built with stone walls and strong wooden doors, while ours were humble huts made of mud, bamboo, and thatch. During the monsoon rains, water would seep through the roofs and the walls would grow damp and fragile. Yet these fragile huts sheltered our families and witnessed our daily struggles for survival. Life in the Maharwada was shaped by hardship. Most of the men worked as land labourers on the fields of the wealthy landlords. From early morning until sunset they toiled under the scorching sun, ploughing, weeding, or harvesting crops that they themselves could scarcely afford to eat. Their wages were small and uncertain, often paid in grains rather than money. Women too worked tirelessly—fetching water, gathering firewood, cooking for the family, and sometimes labouring in the fields alongside the men.

Despite the poverty and endless labour, there was a quiet resilience in the Maharwada. In the evenings, when the day's work was over, people would gather outside their huts, sharing stories, laughter, and the warmth of human companionship. In those moments, the harsh realities of caste and poverty seemed to fade, replaced by a fragile yet enduring sense of community.

But beyond the boundaries of our settlement lay a world that constantly reminded us of our place in the social order—a world where dignity was measured not by humanity but by caste. From the very beginning of my life, I grew up witnessing these silent divisions, divisions that would later shape my understanding of injustice, struggle, and the long journey toward self-respect.

Most of the men in our community worked as land labourers. Their survival depended on the mercy of the landlords who owned the fertile lands. Along with this labour came duties imposed



upon us by the rigid caste order—duties that none of us had chosen but were forced to perform. One such task was to remove the carcasses of dead animals from the village.

Whenever a bullock, cow, or buffalo died in the village, the responsibility fell upon the Mahar community. My father Dashrath and my uncles—Natha Appa, Bhima Appa, and Bhanudas Appa—would take the dead animals to a dry brook near the river Dhora, close to the land of the Kakade brothers. There they would skin the carcasses and dispose of them. It was not merely work; it was a burden placed upon our community by tradition and caste hierarchy.

One afternoon, my father had gone to look after our small field called Khatakali. While he was away, a caste Hindu landlord came to Maharwada and ordered my uncles to remove his dead bullock lying in the backyard of his wada. Noticing that my father was absent, one of my uncles called me to accompany them.

Reluctantly yet obediently, I followed them. The dead bullock lay stiff and heavy on the ground. The smell of decay had already begun to rise in the hot air. We loaded the carcass onto a bullock cart, but there were no animals to pull it. Instead, we ourselves pulled the cart by hand, straining our muscles as the wheels creaked along the dusty path towards the dry brook near the river.

When we reached the spot, we pushed the carcass down from the cart. My uncles brought long, sharp knives to begin their work. Natha Appa called me and asked me to hold one leg of the dead bullock while they cut the carcass. I obeyed without question.

At one moment, while trying to pull the heavy flesh, I lost my balance and fell flat on my back. The fall was so sudden that everyone burst into laughter. My uncles laughed loudly, their tired faces brightening for a moment. I too joined them in laughter, even though my body ached. In that laughter there was something strange—a brief relief from the harshness of our fate.

After the carcass was removed, we brought the hide back to our neighbourhood and placed it in front of my house. My mother was washing clothes on a flat stone outside the hut. She knew what was to be done next. Fresh hides had to be preserved with salt so that they could later be sold.

She asked me to go to the only grocery shop in the village and bring a good quantity of salt. I ran quickly and returned with the salt. By then my uncles had left. My mother instructed me to carry the hide onto the roof of our mud-thatched house. Under the burning sun, I rubbed the salt all over the raw hide. After this ritual, the hide was left to dry in the scorching sunlight for three or four days.

On the fifth day, my father told me to take the dried hide to the taluka town, Shevgaon, and sell it to a Dhor who dealt in such goods. The town was about five kilometres away from Johrapur. I coiled the stiff hide and placed it on my head. The journey was long and lonely. The smell of the hide followed me like a shadow as I walked along the dusty road.

At Shevgaon, I sold the hide for sixteen rupees. When I returned home, the money was divided equally among my father and my three uncles. My share was four rupees. My father smiled faintly and told me to use the money for my schooling.

With those four rupees, I bought an ink pen, an ink bottle, an eraser, a pencil, two notebooks, and a bar of Sunlight soap to wash my clothes at the community well. For me, those small things were treasures. They represented hope—hope that education might lead me away from the life imposed upon us.

Yet caste followed us everywhere.

We were not allowed to draw water from the village well used by the upper castes. If our own water source ran dry, we had to stand near their well and beg for water. Sometimes, we would wait for hours until a kind-hearted woman took pity on us and poured water into our pitchers from a distance.



Often I stood there thirsty, watching others draw water freely. When a woman finally poured water, I would fold my palms together and ask her to pour a little water into them so that I could drink. I dared not touch the vessel. I drank carefully without letting my lips touch the stream.

Nearby stood the temple of Hanuman. We, the so-called untouchables, were forbidden to enter it. The god inside belonged to everyone, yet the doors of the temple were closed to us.

Years passed. When I was studying in the eleventh class at Chhatralaya High School, Shevgaon, my friend Tarachand and I decided to challenge this injustice. It was the festival of Bail Pola, when the village celebrated the bullocks that worked in the fields. The temple was crowded with people.

With courage in our hearts, Tarachand, Chambilya, and I walked towards the temple gate. But as soon as we attempted to enter, some orthodox men saw us and began shouting abuses. “These Dhedage people need a beating!” one man yelled.

Another shouted, “They have become arrogant enough to pollute our temple!”

A crowd gathered quickly. Angry voices rose all around us. Some people were ready to thrash us.

At that tense moment, the village sarpanch, Arjunrao Palve, arrived. He was an educated man who had completed a B.S.C. (Bachelor of Science degree). Calmly yet firmly, he spoke to the crowd.

“These boys have the right to enter the temple,” he said. “Our Constitution gives every citizen the freedom to worship any god. Untouchability is illegal.”

His words slowly silenced the mob. Though many left cursing us under their breath, they could not oppose him openly.

With trembling hearts but unbroken spirits, we entered the temple. For the first time in my life, I stood before the idol of Hanuman. We broke a coconut as an offering and distributed the prasad among those who supported us. It was a small act, yet it felt like a great victory.

Later, the sarpanch became friendly with us. He often visited Maharwada and discussed village matters with us. Though he belonged to the Vanjari community, he believed in equality.

But many others in the village still clung to caste prejudice. They would not allow us to enter their homes, touch their wells, or sit beside them. They believed our presence would pollute them.

One day I went to work in the field of a Vanjari farmer named Aasaru Ugalmugale. His wife Changanabai supervised the labourers. About ten or twelve women were weeding the field along with me. I was then studying in the eleventh class and working for a daily wage of one and a half rupees.

At noon we stopped for lunch near the river. My mother had packed bhakri and chutney for me, wrapped in an old cloth. After eating, I went to the river to drink water. Some caste Hindu women saw me drinking.

Immediately they began shouting abuses.

Changanabai screamed, “You Mahar boy! How dare you drink from the river before we do?”

Her words pierced me like arrows. Anger surged within me like a storm. I picked up stones and began throwing them towards the women who were insulting me.

“The river does not belong to you!” I shouted. “It belongs to everyone. It is not your father’s river!”

Terrified of retaliation, I ran from the place as fast as I could. A few women chased me, threatening to beat me, but my legs carried me swiftly away.

I reached the village and found some friends playing marbles in front of the school. I joined them, though my heart was still burning with anger.

Later I returned home, but no one was there. I sat for a while in Mangwada with my friend Shesh. As evening approached, I feared that the women might come to complain to my mother.



To avoid trouble, I climbed a large neem tree near my house. From its branches I watched silently as Changunabai and two other women arrived and began complaining loudly to my mother when she returned from the fields.

My mother listened patiently without saying a word. After scolding and shouting for some time, the women finally left.

When the path was clear, I climbed down from the tree and approached my mother nervously. I told her everything that had happened and insisted that I was not at fault.

My mother listened carefully. Then she looked at me with calm eyes and said softly, “You did the right thing.”

Those simple words gave me courage that no insult could destroy.

Looking back on my childhood in the Maharwada of Johrapur, I realize that the humiliations I faced were not merely personal hardships but the harsh realities of a deeply divided society. From carrying the carcass of a dead animal on my head to sitting in a classroom with books in my hands, my journey was shaped by struggle, courage, and the silent strength of my parents, especially my mother. Education became my path to dignity and self-respect, helping me rise above the oppressive boundaries of caste. My life taught me that while society may try to confine a person by birth, determination and knowledge have the power to break those barriers and open the door to a more just and humane future.

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