



## SCHOOL-BOARDING DAYS AND PILFERED BHAKRIS

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It was the year of desolation—the cruel drought of 1972–73—when the heavens above Maharashtra seemed to have forgotten how to weep. Over Shevgaon taluka, the earth split open in thirst, its surface fissured like the calloused palm of an aged labourer. The fields, stripped of green and hope alike, stretched out in mute defiance, mocking the dream of harvest. The monsoon—once the benevolent pulse of the farmer’s heart—had turned traitor. Clouds drifted across the sky like helpless mendicants, arriving with promise and departing without mercy, leaving behind only dust, silence and despair.

The famine was not of food alone—it was a famine of hope. In village after village, men, women and teen-agers abandoned their fields to work under the *Rojgar Hami Yojana* of Indira Gandhi, the first lady Prime Minister of India, digging trenches by the roadside in the sweltering heat of the sun. I was one among the countless unfortunates consigned to labour, a mere speck in that sea of despair. With blistered hands and a hollow stomach, I dug trenches near Gumpha, along the dusty Shevgaon–Newasa road, where the sun beat down like molten brass upon our bowed heads in winter and summer holidays. The roads of Shevgaon taluka were lined with weary faces, shovels on shoulders, shallow metal baskets on heads and hunger in their eyes. Each Sunday, they queued up at the rationing-store at the far end of the main lane, exchanging their weekly wages for a few kilograms of grain—their only assurance against starvation.

In those days, I was studying in the 11th grade at Chhatralaya High School, Shevgaon, and staying in Sant Gadagebaba Boarding, a simple accommodation for boys mostly from the downtrodden communities. It was about five hundred yards away from our school on the Shevgaon–Pathardi road. The boarding stood quietly surrounded by big *margosa* and *jamun* trees whose wide branches seemed to tell stories to the passing wind. Even in the hottest months, when the earth cracked and the air shimmered, the trees gave us comfort and shade. The road outside was dusty and slow-moving, with bullock carts creaking by and children walking barefoot to school. Inside the boarding, life was plain but full of small joys—the laughter of boys echoing in the courtyard, the clatter of metal plates at mealtime and the calm evenings when we sat beneath the trees, talking softly about our homes, our teachers and the dreams we carried in our young hearts.

The boarding had been founded by Mr. Abasaheb Kakade, a middle-aged lawyer of generous spirit and firm principles—the kind of man whose very presence commanded respect. We often saw him in his black coat, a dark tie at his throat, and a light-brown fedora shading his thoughtful eyes. He would ride his bicycle to the boarding every evening, the faint squeak of its wheels announcing his arrival before his gentle voice did. “Boys,” he would say, standing among us with that gentle smile that seemed to carry both warmth and authority, “remember, poverty is no sin—but ignorance is. Work hard, keep your minds clean and the world will open its doors for you.” His words, spoken in the fading light of evening, lingered long after he left—like the echo of a temple bell in the quiet lanes of our young hearts.

He was a true philanthropist, a firm believer in education for the underprivileged and a guiding light for many of us who came from small villages and even smaller means. On



Independence Day or Republic Day, when he stood before the school with the tricolour fluttering above him, his words seemed to rise straight from the soil. He spoke of honesty, discipline and the dignity of labour—not as lofty ideals, but as simple truths to live by. His voice carried no ornament, only conviction. As I listened to his galvanizing speech, something stirred deep within me and I felt as though the very ground beneath my feet had grown steadier, strengthened by the faith his words inspired.

The boarding itself was humble—three tin-roofed halls with crumbling windows, each housing about fifteen boys. Our trunks lined the walls and at night, we spread jute sacks and home-made quilts on the rough floor. There were nearly fifty boys in all, hailing from villages scattered across the taluka—Joharapur, Khamgaon, Khunthephal, Bodhegaon Bhagur, Rakshi-Limgaon, Babhalgaon, Kharadgaon, Saradgaon, Akhegaon, Lad Jalgaon, Bhatkudgaon, Shahar Takali, Balam Takali, Kalegaon, Amarapur—names that sounded like a litany of dusty dreams.

The boarding was meant for students from scheduled castes, tribes and nomadic communities, though a few rooms neighbouring to our boarding were occupied by Maratha boys—the “upper” caste students who cooked their own meals on kerosene stoves and kept largely to themselves. We, the others, often spoke in hushed tones when they passed, burdened by an inherited inferiority complex we could not name. They sneered, we withdrew—and yet, somewhere within us, a quiet pride was taking root.

Among the inmates of our boarding were boys from every corner of the region belonging to deprived communities —Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Laman, Dhor, Bhilla, Vanjari, Kolhati, Kaikadi—each carrying the quiet weight of his own village and hardship. Yet within those tin-roofed halls, with their rattling windows and cracked floors, we were bound by something far greater than caste. We shared the same daily decent meals, the same cold baths at the well, the same jokes whispered after kerosene-lantern lights-out. In that simple world, we were equals in hunger and laughter and that equality felt truer than anything written in books.

From Joharapur came my dearest friend, Tarachand Ghute—whom I fondly called TD. Together we entered the boarding school, our young hearts swelling with pride after conquering the seventh-grade board exams. TD was a boy of radiant spirit, his laughter quick and contagious, his bright eyes always alight with mischief that could chase away the darkest mood. His parents, Dadaba and Gaubai, were humble farm labourers—souls of unyielding endurance, whose calloused hands and sweat-streaked brows spoke of silent sacrifice and unwavering love.

The evenings in the boarding often grew long and wistful—the kerosene lanterns flickering like tired stars, the scent of cooking meals drifting through the corridors. Then, with a nudge and that familiar grin, he would whisper, “AD, when this drought ends, let’s go back and swim in the Dhora. The river must be missing us.” I would smile and reply, “Aye—and the buffaloes too—they’ve grown lazy without us.” Our laughter, soft and secret, would ripple through the stillness like the river we longed for, carrying with it the memory of sunlit waters and the unspoiled joy of boyhood.

We shared our long, echoing hall with boys: Manik and Dhodiba Tijore from Khamgaon—brothers of the Mang community— and Premchand Satpute, a plump, merry-hearted boy from the Chambhar caste. We called him Pema, a name that suited his round, easy-going nature. He carried with him the faint, familiar scent of sweat and bidi smoke. A rumour drifted among us that his mother was a Chambhar and his father a Muslim, a tale he met with mock fury. “Arre, don’t talk nonsense!” he would roar, puffing out his chest. “My father was a soldier!” And then the whole hall would erupt in laughter—deep, tearful laughter that shook the walls and made even the old iron windows rattle, binding us closer than any shared heritage ever could.

There was Shivaji Pate, or Shiva, from Bhagur—a short, robust boy with a loud laugh and a kind heart. Over time, he became my closest companion. Baban Gondhali from Balamtakali,



short and fair having profuse parted hair, was Tarachand's friend; Ankush Bhorje from Rakshi Nimgaon, who wore a white Gandhi cap, had a defect in his left eye but never in his wit; Sarse from Khardgaon, Bajirao Bhalerao from the Mang caste, and Anton Ingale, a Christian from Avane and Kalegaon Toke respectively, joined our group later when we reached the tenth standard.

We studied side by side, argued over lessons, and sometimes whispered our dreams into the darkness before sleep. No one ever spoke of caste or asked who belonged which religion. In that small world of ours, hunger, laughter, and punishment were the great equalizers, binding us together more firmly than any bond of blood or birth could.

Every Monday, TD—and I set out from Joharapur to Shevgaon on foot, a journey of five kilometres that stretched endlessly beneath the blazing sun and over the cracked, thirsty earth. By Saturday noon, when the half-holiday bell released us, we would begin the long walk home again, our books tied neatly in cloth bundles and our hearts buoyant with the thought of the Dhora River waiting for us—its cool waters glimmering like a promise after a week of heat, hunger and study.

On Sundays, time itself seemed to pause for us alongside the Dhora River, near my field at Khatkali—a kilometre south of Joharapur. There, life felt lighter, the world gentler, as if the river carried away every burden with its sparkling flow. We washed our school uniforms on the smooth, sun-warmed stones, scrubbed our dust-covered skin with rough river pebbles, and plunged into the crystal water like untamed buffaloes reveling in freedom. “Who’ll dive first—AD or me?” TD would bellow, his voice cutting through the morning stillness. And before I could speak, he’d spring into the river with a jubilant splash, sending a cascade of silver ripples dancing downstream—his laughter lingering in the sunlit air long after he vanished beneath the gleaming surface.

We spread our clothes across the sunlit meadow to dry, keeping a wary eye lest the grazing cattle mistake them for fodder. The blazing sun overhead, the musky scent of wet earth, and the distant cry of herons filled the air with a quiet magic that made us forget the sting of drought. In those golden hours, with nothing in our pockets but laughter and youth, life itself felt rich—complete in its simplicity, abundant in its freedom.

That year—1968—marked a turning point in my life. Having cleared the 7th-grade board examination, I sought admission in Chhatralaya High School, Shevgaon, paying the modest one-rupee fee that felt less like a transaction and more like a passport to a new world. The school and its boarding house were managed by the F.D.L. Society under the leadership of Abasaheb Kakade—a man revered as a *Karmyogi*, a steadfast worker, and a staunch communist whose ideals were shaped by the philosophies of Karl Marx, Lenin, and Comrade Dange. His wife, whom we addressed with deep respect as Kakade Tai, taught English at our school. Tall and poised, with a fair complexion and an air of quiet authority, she carried herself with the dignity of an Oxford scholar. Her speech was crisp, her pronunciation flawless; each word she uttered flowed like music, leaving us spellbound and eager to learn.

The moment she stepped into the classroom, a hush of reverence would fall over us. We sat bolt upright, our backs straight, our eyes alert. “Good morning, children,” she would say, her voice warm yet commanding. “Good morning, Madam!” we would reply in perfect unison, our voices echoing with affection and awe. Teaching, for her, was not mere duty—it was devotion, a flame that could melt even the hardest of hearts. Her favourite poem was “*Ferry Me Across the Water*” by Christina Rossetti, and she brought it to life with such passion that every word seemed to shimmer in the air. “Now, who will be my boatman today?” she’d ask with a teasing smile, her eyes twinkling. Instantly, sixty eager hands would shoot up—“Me, Madam! Me!”—as we transformed the dusty classroom floor into a rippling river. With imaginary oars in hand, we rowed in rhythm, chanting, “*Ferry me across the water, Do, boatman, do!*” None of us had ever



seen a real boat, yet through her voice and vision, we journeyed across unseen waters, carried by the magic of poetry and the wonder of learning.

If the boarding was our home, then Chhatralaya High School was our temple—a sacred place where we worshipped not gods, but learning itself. It stood on the far south-edge of Shevgaon, humble yet dignified, its walls washed in the pale ochre of age, as though stained by the touch of countless hands and prayers. The tin roof, warped and weary from many monsoons, glimmered faintly in the morning sun. Each day began with the sharp clang of the school bell, cutting through the drowsy air, followed by the rise of our voices in prayer—hesitant at first, then full and sure, as if we truly believed our words could reach heaven. And when the last notes of the national anthem drifted across the courtyard, mingling with the smell of dust and chalk, we felt a quiet pride stir within us. The school was no grand structure, yet to us it was a world complete—a place where hope wore a torn uniform, and faith in the future was written on every young face.

Each day unfolded with a quiet, sacred rhythm—the march past on the dusty school ground, our bare feet leaving faint prints in the brownish earth; the murmured recitation of poems that rose and fell like prayer; and the measured voice of a teacher, steady and sure, cutting through the morning air. There was nothing grand about it—no luxury, no applause—yet in that humble order we discovered something lasting. Discipline was not forced upon us; it grew within us, like faith. The sameness of the days, the ringing bell, the chalk dust, the patient voices—these were not mere routines but small acts of devotion that quietly shaped our hearts and minds. In that simplicity, we learned the grace of endurance, the dignity of effort, and the silent strength of a well-lived day.

Among all our teachers, Kamble Sir stood apart — obstinate, stern, and utterly uncompromising. Yet beneath that hardness lay an exceptional teacher of Sanskrit, one whose precision and command of the language were beyond reproach. He always appeared immaculate in his spotless white attire, his bulky frame moving with authority, and his oily black hair, neatly parted from left to right, shining in the classroom light. But his discipline was feared: he would strike mercilessly at any boy who failed to recite the Sanskrit *shlokas* he had assigned for homework.

One day, he instructed us to learn three *shlokas* by heart. When the school day ended at five, my friend Tarachand and I strolled back to the boarding, chattering and laughing as usual. Once there, we went straight to the well, drew up cool water, and washed the dust and oil from our faces. Afterwards, we joined the others for a round of kabaddi on the open ground in front of the hostel. The evening boarding-bell rang at six, calling us to our simple sunset meal under the open sky.

After dinner, Tarachand and I sat down with our Sanskrit text-books, determined to master the *shlokas* assigned by Kamble Sir. What began as a routine recitation soon became a challenge of spirit. Within two hours, we had memorized the three verses — and then, in a sudden surge of enthusiasm, resolved to learn all thirty-five *shlokas* from the entire textbook. Under the dim glow of a kerosene lantern, we recited them again and again, our voices rising and falling through the still night air. Sleep never came to us that night; only the sound of our chanting filled the darkness like a steady hymn of devotion.

The next morning, Kamble Sir called us before the entire ninth class. Standing side by side, Tarachand and I told him with quiet confidence that we were ready to recite any three *shlokas* he chose. He looked at us keenly, then said, “Very well—let’s hear *shlokas* nine, eighteen, and twenty-seven.” He turned first to Tarachand. With his usual spark, TD began—his voice steady, each syllable ringing with clarity and devotion. When he finished, a faint murmur of appreciation stirred among the students. Then my turn came. My heart pounded, but as soon as I began, the



rhythm of the Sanskrit verses took over, rising from my lips with reverence and resolve. The class sat in complete silence, every eye fixed on us.

When I concluded, Kamble Sir's stern features softened into a rare smile. "Excellent," he said, nodding with visible pride. "This is how one must learn—with discipline and faith." The air in the classroom shifted—some students looked inspired, while others trembled, knowing they had not studied. A moment later, the whistle of the rod cut through the quiet, landing on a few careless palms—a harsh but familiar lesson in diligence. As we returned to our benches, Tarachand and I exchanged a silent glance of triumph. Our night of devotion under the flickering lantern had borne fruit, and for a moment, the pain of discipline felt almost sacred.

The other teachers were no less formidable than Kamble Sir. In those days, discipline was not merely a rule—it was a creed, a sacred code that governed every heartbeat of the classroom. Each teacher wielded authority like a sculptor's chisel, shaping not just our minds but our very characters. Among them, Dhakane Sir and Badadhe Sir stood out—men of few words but unbending will. Dhakane Sir, who taught us English, carried himself with quiet precision, while Badadhe Sir, the Civics master, embodied the law he preached. Punctuality, obedience, and spotless homework were their holy trinity, and any breach invited swift correction. Yet beneath their stern exteriors glowed a rare sincerity—a conviction that only through discipline could greatness be forged. I still recall how Dhakane Sir made us repeat English phrases until they echoed in our dreams; his lessons, etched deep in memory, became part of our very speech and spirit.

One day, an incident occurred that remains etched in my memory. I was in Class 8A, attending a Hindi lesson by Shejul Sir, when a boy entered and announced, "Dhakane Sir has called Arjun to the tenth class." My heart skipped a beat. I had no idea why I was being summoned before the seniors. Still, gathering my courage, I walked to the tenth-grade classroom, where Dhakane Sir was conducting an English lesson. Without preamble, he said, "Arjun, show them how to use the word 'Let' in expressions." My nervousness gave way to confidence, for I knew this well. Standing before the class, I began: "Let me stand. Let me sing. Let me go." I spoke several such sentences, my voice steady, my heart swelling with pride. When I finished, I bowed slightly, ready to leave.

But before I could retreat, Dhakane Sir caught me by the collar and ordered, "Now, slap those who failed to use 'Let' correctly." My hands froze. Before me stood a line of students—some towering boys, some tall, bashful girls—heads bowed in shame. With trembling hesitation, I struck the boys lightly on their cheeks, hoping the teacher would spare me further. But he barked again, "Slap the girls too—properly!" A wave of shame and fear swept through me. My palms burned as I forced myself to obey, delivering mild slaps that barely touched their faces. Still unsatisfied, he thundered, "Harder!" With my heart pounding, I complied, barely aware of what I was doing. When at last I fled the room, my mind was torn between pride and guilt—pride that I had spoken English before the tenth class, and guilt that I had raised my hand against my seniors, especially the girls.

Later that evening, when I narrated the incident to my friends in the boarding, they burst into roars of laughter, teasing me endlessly. But my amusement soon vanished when, after dinner, two tall boys—the Salve brothers, whom I had slapped—approached me, their faces dark with anger. They hurled abuses and threatened to thrash me. I was small and helpless, so I folded my hands and begged forgiveness. They left me with a string of curses, and I said nothing in return. The next morning, I mustered the courage to tell Dhakane Sir what had happened. His eyes blazed with fury. He summoned the Salve brothers and punished them severely before the whole class. From that day on, their hostility melted. They stopped teasing me, and before long, we became friends again. Looking back, that day taught me more than any textbook lesson could — about



fear and pride, guilt and courage, and the strange ways in which discipline, however harsh, sometimes led to unexpected bonds.

One night, we encountered a most curious episode in the boarding. It so happened that a group of eight of us, bound by friendship and youthful recklessness, slipped out to watch ‘Aradhana’ a Rajesh Khanna film — the first super star of Hindi cinema — at an open-air talkie pitched under a tent and guarded by a barbed-wire fence in the heart of the town’s bazaar.

When we returned past midnight, the stillness of the boarding seemed almost alive with suspense. Through the dimly lit back window of his quarters, Ukande Sir, our stern superintendent, caught sight of our stealthy return. Moving like a shadow, he intercepted us and, with icy composure, ordered us into his office-cum-living room. His words fell sharp and heavy — we would face rustication if we ever dared to leave without his permission again. “For three days,” he thundered, “you will have no meals. Go now.” We trudged back to our room in silence, our laughter long vanished. The night that had begun with stars and cinema ended with dread and hunger. The thought of surviving three days without food haunted us more than the threat of expulsion ever could.

It was Tarachand who, the next day hungry evening, came up with a marvellous—though slightly mischievous—idea: to pilfer a few stale *bhakris* from the boarding kitchen. The kitchen stood behind our living hall, and that night, cloaked in silence and mischief, we surveyed its surroundings like seasoned conspirators.

There was a small, slanted punch hole in the wooden front door through which we could glimpse a heap of *bhakris* piled high in a bamboo basket. But the hole was too narrow for a hand to pass through. Just then, Shiva Pate, always inventive, found a three-foot-long metal rod lying nearby. With the cunning of a locksmith, he bent one end into a hook and tried to insert it through the hole, hoping to fish out a *bhakri*. But the attempt failed—he couldn’t see the basket clearly in the dark.

So, Baban, Tarachand, and I crept to the backside of the kitchen where a tiny window gave us a clearer view of the prize. From there, we whispered directions in hushed tones. “Shiva,” we urged, “push the rod through the hole—yes, a little to the right... now lift, lift gently!”

After a few tense moments, our stratagem bore fruit—*miraculously so*. One by one, seven or eight *bhakris* emerged from the darkness like trophies of war. We hid them inside our shirts, hearts thudding with triumph, and tiptoed back to our hall before anyone could hear a sound.

Now came the question of curry. Each of us contributed five paisa to buy *Misal* from Golande Hotel, a kilometre away on the western side of the bus stand. The *Misal* cost 25 paisa, a quarter of a rupee. For this daring errand, we chose Premchand Satpute—affectionately called Pema—who demanded an extra five paisa for *bidis*. We accepted without protest; his courage deserved it.

Within an hour, Pema returned stealthily, clutching a small tin pot filled with fragrant *Misal*. Tarachand, our self-appointed captain, portioned it out evenly in our old German plates and shared the stolen *bhakris*.

For the next three days of our punishment, we dined like kings—on stale *bhakris*, spicy *Misal* and the homemade chutney made of red chillies we brought from our homes savouring each bite with the joy known only to the hungry and the young.

Whenever the superintendent punished us for some prank or petty mischief, we repeated the same trick. The method never failed us. At Sant Gadagebaba Boarding of Shevgaon, we may have been mischievous, but we never went to bed hungry.

Now, as I sit by my study window in the quiet year of 2025, those distant days at Sant Gadagebaba Boarding rise before my mind like the warm glow of a fading lantern. The world has changed beyond measure—buildings have replaced the open fields, machines hum where once the



crickets sang—but the memory of those stolen *bhakris* still carries the fragrance of freedom and friendship.

We were poor in pocket, yet rich in spirit; hungry in body, yet full in heart. Each stolen meal was more than food—it was the taste of brotherhood, of daring, of the laughter that bound eight reckless boys against the sternness of the world.

I often wonder where life has carried all my old friends. Tarachand, with his quick wit and laughter that could light up a room, still lives in Shevgaon, and we remain in touch even today. Shiva, the boy with clever hands and a restless spirit, is now in Panvel, while Anton has built his life amidst the bustle of Mumbai. As for the others, I have no news—their names drift through memory like half-heard echoes from another time. Yet those nights of mischief and *misal*, our laughter spilling under starlit skies, remain vivid and alive within me—moments untouched by years, glowing brighter than all the comforts that life has since bestowed.

Yes, the years have flown, carrying with them the dust of time and the ache of distance. Yet, whenever I recall those coarse pilfered *bhakris* we shared, I can still feel the warmth of that dim boarding room—the reckless thrill of our small rebellions, and the silent revelation that some hungers are never for food at all, but for the taste of companionship, the fire of youth, and the sweetness of being alive together.

Now, each time I pass by the old Sant Gadagebaba Boarding on the Shevgaon–Pathardi road, a strange stillness grips me. Its cracked walls, faded paint, and sagging roof seem to murmur our names in the language of memory. The old neem tree stands motionless, the *jamun* trees bear no fruit, and yet I can almost hear Shiva’s mischievous call and Tarachand’s bubbling laughter echoing through the hollow corridors. Those were poor days—undeniably so—but rich in the only treasure time cannot erode: the shared hunger of growing boys, the laughter born of scarcity, and the unspoken bond of friendship that made even the simplest meal a feast for the heart.

**Article Received:**07/07/2026

**Article Accepted:**18/07/2026

**Published Online:**30/09/2026

**To Cite the Prose:** *Jadhav, Arjun.* “School-Boarding Days and Pilfered Bhakris.” *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 04-10. [www.literarycognizance.com](http://www.literarycognizance.com)

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