

On A Visit

The path on which I toddled to school with a pink book-trunk had two stretches cut by a main road. One stretch was narrow with one side compounded by the wall of a yellow Catholic church whose tower all in the town could see and whose bells every one could hear from their homes. On the other side, there was a patch of an open toilet and bundled up huts, and at the end were lined-up butcher shops. Bones and street dogs were all around. The smell was a permanent part of my school-going ordeal.

The other stretch towards my destination came after I crossed the main-road, looking at neither side. On this stretch there were match factories that were little bigger than mines, and in them children in large numbers were working. After this came the first of my two favourite stop-points. One was the bunk-shop where I bought my jaggery sweets or gooseberries, which I packed in my trunk and ate through the day. Two handfuls cost ten paise, half my day's pocket money.

At the entrance of my school was the old woman eternally clad in a white saree. With one of her legs stretched, she fried and sold sweet little "bondas". Each one cost the mammoth sum of two paise. But she liked me, I guess: for three paise she gave me five.

My school began with an assembly of all the students. The option to escape standing in the sun was to attend the prayer at the church that stood as one entered the school. Having gone late, I invariably ended up attending the prayer to avoid getting punished. And invariably I was kneeling down throughout the prayer time.

I rode again through this path on a visit recently. The Catholic church remained the same but looked a little small. The open toilet area had become more organised with some kind of disinfectant sprayed over it. A covered toilet at one end of the patch remained closed with thorny bushes. The huts have become square blocks of concrete. The aging butchers were competing against broiler-chicken stalls. The bones, for a moment, became unfamiliar with the feathery stench.

The bunk shop had vanished. Its owner, 'Maap jahn anna' whose name I later understood to be Meh-a-boob jahan, appeared in my blurring vision. As expected, the old lady was not there, but the smell of my favourite bondas lingered on within that area of 4 square feet. The walls of the school had faded though they bore a fresh yellow distemper on them.

Some of my teachers had a frail remembrance of me and my pranks. I heard graying stories of death when I enquired about a few teachers whom I didn't see. The church remained the same and I saw the prayer-songs in white. There was a small shrine of Mother Mary in the front, which I remembered only after seeing it again. I didn't have to kneel down this time. I felt heavy.

With ashening cigarette between my fingers, I rode back. The match factories seemed to have escaped the travails of time. Small, young children were getting in and out of the buses that belonged to the factories.

At a butcher's shop, I stopped. He remembered me with I mentioned my father's name. There was a glass of tea that had come for him. He took it from the butchering plank and compelled me to drink. I was happy and drank the tea listening to his talk about the general state of affairs in town. When I gave back the glass, some fat was sticking to my fingers. I didn't wash my fingers. The smell was familiar. Lounging at my home thinking about the visit, I heard the clock strike twelve. I was reminded of the church bell. But I didn't hear it ringing.