

The Factory Whistle

Maria Elsa da Rocha

Sudar's wife was in Banda, Sawantawadi. He'd come to Goa to teach Marathi at a primary school.

The letters he got from Sawantawadi, from his father-in-law, came regularly, very regularly indeed . . . And how boring they were! They relayed in great detail every step of his legal wrangles with the owner of the neighbouring palm grove, another Sawant like him, Sudar Sawant . . . Long, drawn-out letters, always the same, and always ending with a request for money towards the upkeep of the man's daughter, his wife, and apostrophising:

"What is it you do with all the money you make in Goa? They say primary school teachers in Goa earn a comfortable wage . . ."

Damn it Sudar was fed up! Always the same refrain. He couldn't take it any more . . . In the end he decided just not to open the letters. They began to pile up beneath the spicy 'rare' books that he and the others from Banda swapped amongst themselves!

His landlady's rooster crowed soberly in the little pen next door: Wake up! Life in Goa was easy and pleasant; that was the word, pleasant! What had life been for him in Banda? *Uff!* Enslavement to work, enslavement to the clock . . .

Sudar didn't want to remember Banda, but it came to him from time to time without warning! Most often in the strident voice of the whistle at the textile factory where he'd worked! It's metallic screech, piercing his eardrums, slicing time into parcels of toil. At the first call of that whistle, Sudar was already up and busy in the kitchen as his wife came back from the well. At its second shrill he and his wife were out the door . . . Their urgent movements, the warm morning above, but what was the point? "Quick, hurry, we must get to the green gate . . ." And off they rushed, until they reached the high fence around the factory. After collecting his access card, by the fourth squeal of the whistle, which undulated like a powerful sitar, Sudar stood before his loom, testing the thread, while his wife was in the back aisle, by the carding and finishing machine.

Sudar's hands worked at the threads in the loom, but his mind was free, scaling mountains in search of a little light, high up on the summit. Ah! That light was so beautiful! Another blast from the whistle . . . Thank God for that! It was time for lunch.

From every door workers flooded out, heading for their favourite spots. Sudar and his wife too. Under a huge jujube tree Sudar opened their tiffin box, which always contained the same unchanging, unvarying meal: vegetable sauce and a violet onion sitting atop a small heap of white rice. Sudar grabbed the onion and squeezed it hard so the little shoot would pop out. He placed it on his wife's portion. Yes, he did that! They ate in silence . . . Often a voice would bid Sudar clamber up the mountain towards that little light! But he couldn't. The whistle was there to yank him back down with its long monstrous claws!

The tea had been boiling for ages! He was reaching for the pan when a boy from the school appeared:

"*Guruji*, the headmistress wants you immediately. The Inspector has arrived!"

"What?"

"Yes, the inspector's here. She got your pupils to simmer down. They were making such a racket!"

"What?"

"Yes. Here, she sent this for you . . ."

He handed Sudar his class register, which hadn't been updated for a fortnight!

Bap ré! Eight o'clock! Lessons were meant to start at half seven! There was no time to drink his tea, which was scalding hot. Tough luck! He hurriedly got ready. Good thing he lived near the school! When he entered the schoolroom his pupils greeted him with an uproarious *namaskar* . . . He was panicked! In Goa there were no whistles, but they did have this plague of inspectors, he thought. He must sign in, the book was in the headmistress's office . . . To hell with the sign-in book! That's strange, the head . . .

"*Guruji!*" The headmistress called him into her office.

Now he was for it! Now the inspector is going to throw his weight around . . . He walked towards her room, but not without first puffing up his chest like a Gurkha from an Indian regiment. *Apré!* Why was he so on edge? What was it? What did being a few minutes late matter? Who didn't arrive late?

He stepped in, greeting the headmistress and the inspector . . .

The inspector spoke first, somewhat mockingly:

"Ah, *Guruji*, you'll have to go to head office. The District Inspector wants to see you!"

"To see me?"

"Yes, you!"

"What for?"

"No idea!"

Damn it, that bloody assistant inspector was refusing to let on!

"The chump! Wanting to put on a big show!"

In his head the Banda factory whistle sounded, slicing time, guillotining minds.

“Did you hear, *Gurujī?* Tomorrow, about 10 a.m.”, the assistant inspector repeated.

“Oh, yes”, said Sudar, tearing his mind away with difficulty from the mountain it was trying to climb.

What could the inspector want with him? Some disciplinary matter?

The children outside the office got to their feet. The assistant inspector stuffed his papers into his case, stuck his helmet on his head, and marched over to his scooter like an astronaut . . .

Sudar glanced at the headmistress in the hope of some explanation. But none was forthcoming, nothing! Damn fool headmistress. He signed in next to a red question mark by his name, and, feeling rather uneasy, headed to class.

Damn! That school day never seemed to end . . . Back in his room he could find no peace of mind. That meeting set for the following morning . . . His gaze stuck to the pile of unread letters from Banda. Odd . . . He leant over and picked them up . . . the top ones weren't in his father-in-law's hand. He hadn't even noticed! He read them all, one after the other . . . No, they didn't ask for money. They informed him that his father-in-law had passed away and that the court case was won. It was Sudar's wife who had written them. He didn't even know she was literate . . . She announced she wanted a new direction in life; that she couldn't wait for him, Sudar, any longer . . .

Banda rose up like a lotus flower in the dull pond of *saudade*. Sudar saw his little wife, neat and pretty, with a *champak* bloom in her straight, shiny hair, waking up each morning by his side, and he oblivious to her beauty. He eagerly read the remaining letters! Deep draughts of nostalgia for his village, his little house and wife brought a lump to his parched throat! He was going to take leave, bring his wife to Goa. Sudar found his lips murmuring:

Oh Brahma, you are everything!
Let me enjoy the gifts of Vaikuntha
My faults are a sea of fire!
Oh Shiva, you are the Vedas!
Glory to Brahma . . .

He felt comforted. Devil take that district inspector! Sudar wouldn't hold his tongue! *Anb!* They'd see!

Just let them nag him: “poor timekeeping . . . syllabus out of date . . .” No, no, no!

Blast, what he wanted was to go to Banda. Would tomorrow never come . . . ?

He donned a fine checked bushcoat made of rayon and grabbed up his transistor radio. He had literally not slept a wink all night, which had honed his intellect. All by himself, he had devised various theses about the problems of humankind and was so hot under the collar that when he arrived at the inspector's office his eyes flashed like sparks from incandescent iron! He was early, they told him. The inspector would only arrive at ten. So he hung around,

waiting. Teachers came and went. The inspector's longhaired adjunct too. He smiled at the adjunct with the long hair, who replied:

"*Ptchut*, you can go in, he's back!"

In he went, placing his transistor radio, which had grown heavy, by his feet. He wasn't asked to sit. Nonetheless, Sudar pulled up a chair and sat down. The office was empty save for the district inspector, formal, but fidgeting with his pen against the side of the table.

Cowed, Sudar felt like a fish out of water!

Suddenly, the Inspector threw down his pen and pulled a heap of books and magazines to the middle of the table!

"Are these yours?" he asked angrily.

Speechless, Sudar shook his head . . . But, what was he being asked? If those books were his? But, yes, they were . . . Only then did he look properly.

"Are you out of your mind, *Guruji*? Have you no shame exposing colleagues to this . . . filth, this pornography?"

Now Sudar was left reeling. With great difficulty he tried to remain above this outer provocation . . . What was going on? Yes, he was being questioned by the District Inspector, but not for his timekeeping, no, but because of the books they'd found. Personal discipline, mental cleanliness. Well now! The rotters, making a big fuss about nothing when he had to get the bus to Banda . . .

"What's the problem with these books? I left them in my desk drawer on purpose for Kumari Kusum. She asked me for them. We use the same classroom. Me in the morning; her in the afternoon.

"Ah! Ah! Ha! Ha!"

The District Inspector shook with ill-tempered laughter. He was apoplectic with rage and dismay. Dismay? Yes, dismay, when Sudar, who'd recovered his poise, shot back defiantly:

"I don't lock my drawer, Sir! If you're so keen to protect the mental purity of your teachers, why don't you lock up their spotless minds?"

Eh pá, how well he spoke!

The walls of the office shrank back as his words echoed away.

"You can't lock up people's minds, eh? You can't find a way to do it? Well, go to hell then!"

And with that he scooped up his transistor radio and stalked out.

"*Guruji*, the bus to Banda left ages ago!" That was Atchut, the ticket seller.

"What? What about the eleven o'clock service?"

"*Va-vah!* What, *Guruji*? That service stopped, didn't you know? The driver got married to a good woman from Banda like you. Listen, they say she already had a husband here in Goa who was a *mastor*. Do you know him?"

Something very fragile shattered inside Sudar.

"What is it? Do you feel ill?" Atchut asked, seeing him stand there shrouded in pain.

Sudar didn't answer. He tore off like a madman, up to the small square in the junction of the roads ahead. He heard the call of the rat-poison vendor: "Kills rats, little rats, big rats".

Pthá, Pthá, Pthá . . .

There was that whistle, summoning the workers . . . With a violent gesture, he dashed his transistor against the pedestal of the statue. Just then he heard the sound of laughter. He whirled round: school children in uniforms with satchels and books. He smiled at them. The streams of people passing by on foot began to stop and ask what was going on. Now Sudar clutched jagged pebbles in both hands and was waving his arms in a threatening manner!

Who was he? Where did he come from? He might turn violent, murmured those gathered.

"Call the police", someone suggested.

The crowd swelled. The policemen arrived but didn't want to, or thought it better not to, approach the man: his hands were full of pebbles.

Sudar heard the squeal of the whistle, there in Banda, in Sawantawadi. He dropped the stones. The police advanced immediately, surrounding him and cuffing his hands.

He saw nothing, felt nothing: his eyes were fixed on the empty sky above. From around the pedestal of the statue the pedestrians dispersed. Now sad and pensive, the children from the school in the *taluka* headquarters set off for home, casting glances back at the checked bushcoat as it was led submissively away. The two policemen heard the man between them mutter to himself:

"I shall follow a light on high
I shall heed a voice that calls me
I shall scale a mountain
To be ever closer to You
And see the children smile down here on Earth . . ."

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

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Maria Elsa da Rocha (1924–2007) was one of the last Portuguese-language Goan writers. A primary school teacher by profession, her lyrical, intimist short stories, which often focused on female experience, appeared in the local press—particularly the newspaper *A Vida*—in the years following the integration of Goa into India, and were often broadcast on the last radio programme in Portuguese, All-India Radio's somewhat ironically entitled 'Renascença'. In 2006, a selection of her stories was published in Goa under the title *Vivências Partilhadas* [Shared Lives].

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