

# बेटिकट मुसाफ़िर

## ticketless travellers

[www.ticketless-travellers.info](http://www.ticketless-travellers.info)



Ankur Society  
for Alternatives  
in Education

MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE  
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY



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# PROGRAMME

**01**

**14:30 pm -  
15:00 pm**

## *Welcome Address*

Ursula Rao  
(Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany)

Sharmila Bhagat  
(Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education, New Delhi)

## *Performing Ethnographic Stories (Ankur Writers Collective)*

Online Apmaan | Digital Scolding  
(Tehreen Bano)

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**02**

**15:00 pm -  
16:00 pm**

## *The Web-Journal "Ticketless Travellers": An Introduction*

Kavita Dasgupta  
(Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany)

## *Writing Practices in Working Class Localities*

Prabhat Kumar Jha  
(Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education, New Delhi)

## *Performing Ethnographic Stories (Ankur Writers Collective)*

Bhookh | Hunger  
(Tanishka)

Dukhad Dino Mein Doori | Living Apart in Difficult  
Times (Nandini Halder)

Karun Bhi To Kya Karun | Dilemma  
(Roshni Khatun)

**03**

**16:00 pm -  
17:00 pm**

## *A Pedagogy of Reading, Writing and Listening*

Ursula Rao  
(Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany)

## *Performing Ethnographic Stories (Ankur Writers Collective)*

Shamshaan ki Bheed | The Crowded Crematorium  
(Nandni)

Seal Gali Ke Raat Din | Nights and Days in a Sealed  
Lane  
(Sandhya)

## *Closing Remarks and Discussion*

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**04**

**17:00 pm -  
18:30 pm**

## *Reception*

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome aboard, the Ticketless Travellers!  
[www.ticketless-travellers.info](http://www.ticketless-travellers.info)

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“Ticketless Travellers” is a multimodal web-based journal which documents the writings of working-class residents of Delhi, India. The journal is a creation of a long collaboration between Prof. Ursula Rao, from Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany and Ankur, Society for Alternatives in Education, India. The texts, sound-scapes, podcasts, videos and photographs featured on the website, will take you on a deep sensorial journey through the labyrinths of Delhi as experienced by the workers of this city.

Scan to know more



Created in collaboration with:

## ANKUR SOCIETY FOR ALTERNATIVES IN EDUCATION

For more than three decades, Ankur has been working in the field of experimental pedagogy, with children, young people and communities in marginalised neighbourhoods of Delhi. Ankur seeks to empower the marginalised, through education, to reflect on their experiences and contexts and strive for a life of dignity.

*To know more, visit <https://ankureducation.net>*

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## MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology is one of the world's leading centers for research in socio-cultural anthropology. Common to all research projects at the Max Planck Institute is the comparative analysis of social change; it is primarily in this domain that its researchers contribute to anthropological theory, though many programmes also have applied significance and political topicality. Fieldwork is an essential part of almost all projects. The institute has three academic departments: Anthropology of Economic Experimentation, Anthropology of Politics and Governance and Law and Anthropology.

*To know more, visit <https://www.eth.mpg.de/2169/en>*

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## EVERYONE WHO LISTENS, HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

### Writing Practices in working class communities of Delhi

by Prabhat Kumar Jha

For us, writing is a practice; almost a daily one. We have learnt to write and to publish by repeatedly writing again and again. Our writers, write from ground zero. They write about a face of Delhi, which is missing and anonymous. We are uninvited guests in the literary world and even today travel ticketless on this writing journey. We have had many invitations though, and each of these encounters have given us a spurt of new inspiration to move ahead. There are some people who have welcomed our unauthorised presence. They have read our words, appreciated them, published them and given us a valuable place at the table.

We have always believed

Everyone who sees, has something to show.  
Everyone who takes, has something to give.  
Everyone who reads, has something to write.  
Everyone who listens, has something to say.

Everyone has stories to tell which reach no one's ears. We also have many such stories. These stories emerge from the lives of our writers. These are personal experiences which they have specially earned for themselves. But you won't find our stories anywhere. Neither in newspapers, nor in literature or in research. That is why we write our own stories. For us writing is a practice which we have honed year after year and generation after generation. These stories are astonishing because while they are about poverty, yet they are not about helplessness or powerlessness. Instead, they are about our strong, stubborn spirit to live. They are about our struggles but also about our hope. Whenever intellectuals have looked at working class lives from a prism other than that of sensationalism, they have viewed it from a perspective of lack. For instance, how these neighbourhoods are surrounded by deprivation - from material resources to humanity. In their eyes, this world holds nothing of value which they would like to know about or experience closely, be amazed and appreciate.

Ankur has been associated with such working-class neighbourhoods of Delhi, for the last forty years. During these years, our acquaintance with



these localities have deepened and our ability to draw out the deeply buried creativity in the people living here, has also strengthened. We have been somewhat successful in reaching the core of their lives, have learnt and grown from it and have been able to see it as an extremely rich and creative source. Around five hundred children and youth from seven working-class localities, participate in our daily writing practices. We have different *mehfil* (assemblies) for children and youth, which generate new waves of inspiration to the intellectual world of these neighbourhoods.

The everyday life of these people opens up and reveals itself only through a very long association of living closely with them. The soul of these places cannot be accessed by some reporter in search of a byte or a teacher detached from their life. Ankur's effort in these places is to speak less and listen more. Write less ourselves. Instead, we encourage them to write. On behalf of our collective, Ankur organises *mehfil* (assemblies) to listen, read and recite. Our first invitation is to listen and people listen until the point where they develop a deep desire to speak. The company of new and old friends in this collective, provides ample opportunity to learn and in return teach each other. This constant and active listening, after a time, gives birth to a desire to tell one's own stories. A shared *mehfil* (assembly) is a space which is derived from everyone's participation. Here the collective members meet for two hours every day. They read, write and then listen to what each of them have written. Their writing journeys, sometimes begin alone and then other writers join it. The meaning of *riyaaz* (practice) is - a struggle with one's internal self and an immersion in our own internal tune. Listening-seeing, smelling and tasting- these everyday feelings, realisations and its consciousness, are actualised right in the midst of the community. Such an intense practice props up learning in new and better ways. It is through the details created during these practice sessions, that the collective members are able to nurture their writing. This is not an easy process. Children will start writing only when you give them a steady group to work with. This group initially listens to them patiently and with fascination, and in doing so reassures them that what they have is worth expressing. A humiliated or disrespected childhood isn't able to hear their own voice. Through these stories our writers find a way to validate themselves.

No creation ever emerges in its entirety in a day. It takes many rewrites and redrafts. Such a practice is needed on a daily basis. This is true for the lives

of our writers as well. Initially we begin with just a glimpse at a possibility of a creative idea. It takes a lot of patience to see and nurture this slice of imagination. The works of these writers, requires a different kind of hearing, which can sense the potential and expanse of creativity from the initial draft which they hear. This is what we do. We begin with open questions which will aid their writing. Open questions, which are beyond the response of a straightforward yes or a no. These questions are then able to interact with their experiences and have the ability to pull out a story. These are stories which are perhaps being told, retold and written for the first time. These amazing stories are bubbling somewhere in the depths of our collective and our members are able to identify them and bring them to the surface. We are able to convert the oral into a written text but that can only happen because of our long duration of practice.

We write, then we read, then we send it across WhatsApp and read each other's reviews. The writers then choose the feedback that they would like to incorporate into their writing. After this stage, the stories are read yet again and another round of feedback is given and a new draft made for the story. This process of writing several drafts and reading again and again makes the stories richer. In this stream of reading and writing it becomes important to appreciate the rawness of both the language and the story itself. This world is based on the oral word and is often divergent from the written world. To hear these stories in their entirety and without intervention becomes possible, only when we are able to understand the value in their words rather than providing critical evaluation.

Outside the collective, the writing practitioners first readers are the community they belong to. As a creator, every writer reworks their stories again and again. With every new draft, their stories are polished further and further. Another important thing is that there remains a certain roughness in these stories which do not disappear despite the many reviews and rewrites. This rawness in their writing reflects the lives which are lived in the localities. Through this rawness you will be able to see the intimate relationship between the writer and the characters they create. They are not only familiar with, but often live the every day joys and tribulations of their characters and their circumstances. The writer inhabits the same space as the character. They both live in the *basti*<sup>1</sup> together. To an outsider, these stories might be

fantastic, but for the writers they are things they see, hear and experience in their regular lived lives.

We have spent a quarter of a century telling-listening-creating-reciting these stories. The journey that began with oral conversations has gone from notebooks to blogs, videos, YouTube, podcasts and has become a part of the columns of alternative-mainstream newspapers and magazines. An entire series of books have been published. This city has also changed, and we have documented the changing city from our own perspective. We have reflected and analysed these changes. At times we have loved our city while at others we have critiqued it and today when we sit down to discuss urban futures, we at least have the satisfaction that we continue to provide testimony through our stories. We hope that our stories and our voices will continue to reflect upon the changing moods of this city.

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<sup>1</sup> A place where human beings settle down and build homes and a life world. Over the years, in northern parts of India, the word has become associated with describing slums or dwellings of the poor in an urban area.



A daily-wage labour waits for the start of a new day outside the New Delhi Railway Station



## ETHNOGRAPHIC STORIES WRITTEN & PERFORMED BY ANKUR WRITERS COLLECTIVE

The members of the Ankur Writers Collective live in Delhi's working-class neighbourhoods and are in the practice of finding their authorial voice on their own terms. The writers of these pieces are young women, who in their cohorts meet almost every day in a *mehfil* (assembly) where they read out their stories, usually responding to a mutually decided prompt. They draw on their own experiences and on interviews, on observation and imagination. Comments, critique, and suggestions from other members of the collective help them revise and polish their drafts.

### LIST OF STORIES

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Scan to know more  
about the contributors



## ONLINE SCOLDING

We children have all changed during the lockdown. Now we have started seeing that which we did not see earlier or even if we did, we took never seemed to notice it.

The second wave of Corona brought another lockdown in its wake. Everyone was restricted indoors. Classes were being held online. School friends, playtime, gossiping with friends, everything stopped suddenly. All the sights we saw while walking to school were gone. A smart phone had replaced both our school bags and our classes. It was as if, those children who did not have a phone, were no longer enrolled in school. Many children had left for their villages along with their parents. No one knew when they would return.

One day my online class was about to begin. I had one eye fixed on the wall clock. As the blue light from the television spread through the room, Papa suddenly announced, 'From today the cable TV will be disconnected'. He hadn't been able to pay the monthly bill. He was silent for a while and then said softly, 'There is no work. How would I pay for it?' He then began searching for his mobile agitatedly. When he saw me with his phone, he screamed, 'Your eyes have been stuck to the phone since morning. The sky won't fall on our head if you don't study for a day.' I could understand that he needed his phone back so he could look for work.

Mummy quickly shut the television and said, 'Nandini has an online class from ten until two. You can take the mobile phone from her after that.' Any information Papa gets about his work restarting will be over the phone. Earlier he would scold me for playing games on his phone. But now the phone gives me anxiety. If I don't have access to it, then I will have to miss classes and my homework will get delayed. Some children who have poor network connections in their homes, run around from here to there, so that they may attend their classes.

Earlier, once at school, we were all equal. Now we also have to keep in mind the dignity of our own homes. My friend Deepika spreads out her books to cover up the stained bedsheet in her home. One day she collected all the



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## HUNGER

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Geeta has had to bear many sorrows in life. However, the apprehension of hunger is something she had never faced before this.

Their family ate what they earned but they had never needed to beg. Even before the onset of Corona and the resulting lockdowns, Geeta had to pay her daughter's school fees. The additional time her teacher had allocated to pay the fees had long since passed. When the teacher called Geeta to school for the pending school fee, she expressed the difficulties she was facing at home. The teacher understood her circumstances and offered to pay the child's fees herself. But Geeta asked for another day. She went to the house where she worked as a domestic help and asked for an advance from her salary and paid her daughter's fees with it.

Geeta was proud and she earned her own living. She worked hard to run her household. She would have preferred never to ask for a loan. But even if she had to, her heart remained restless until the day she could return the money.

Today when Geeta sat down to cook, she realised that the cans of rice and lentils were both empty. What would she cook now? She couldn't keep her family hungry. That is when she thought of making wheat *lapsi*<sup>1</sup>, a dish which she relished as a child in her village. She called out to her daughter, "Paro are you studying? If not, then will you check how much wheat flour is left in the drum?" Paro peeked into the drum and said, "mummy about two cups left." Geeta said, "take it out in a basin. I am coming." Then she began muttering to herself, today I have managed somehow, but I will have to figure out what to do tomorrow. Saying this, she began roasting the flour in a hot pan. When it developed a light colour, she added the sugar and some hot water and let it come to a boil until it all came together nicely. That afternoon the entire family had *lapsi*.

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional north Indian dish made with wheat, sugar and water and cooked over low temperatures to create a fragrant, sticky texture and rich colour.

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clothes hanging from a rope in the room and kept them neatly aside. Spread a new sheet on the bed. Cleaned up all the stickers her brother had pasted on the wall tiles. Suddenly she thought, if her teacher asks her to put on the 'back camera' then the dirty kitchen counter would be visible. She quickly arranged all the scattered spice jars aesthetically, placed a mixer-grinder box in front of the dirty dishes and wiped down the cooking stove. The house was looking so nice, now that everything was clean and shiny. She washed her hands and face and joined the zoom link which had been sent. Arrey! As soon as zoom started, her teacher announced, 'All children will mute your mikes and switch off cameras because I don't want any disturbing khattar-pattar noises from your homes.'

Deepika often gets scolded online. There is only one phone in her family and is constantly with someone or the other. By the time it is her turn, the battery inevitably runs out. One day, she was only ten minutes late and her teacher asked, 'Is this the time to come for your class Deepika?' She said, 'Sorry mam. It took me a while to charge my phone battery'. The teacher said, 'That's a good excuse. When I had announced a day earlier that you will have a class then shouldn't you have charged your phone in advance? You are wasting the time of the entire class.' Deepika noticed that in all the while her teacher had been scolding her, she had lost seven percent battery! After a while she noticed that there was only five percent battery left and but twenty minutes for the class to end. When she asked to be excused her teacher got even more angry than before. 'First you say that it took you time to charge the battery and now you are saying it is already discharged. Who has taught you to lie so much?' But at this very moment Deepika's phone died and she became even more anxious.

Holding the phone for long hours during classes, hurts my hands and then I can't understand what my teacher is teaching. Constantly staring at the screen hurt my eyes and my head. My friend Prarthna says, 'Earlier we played outside for hours together but our legs never hurt. We watched all our favourite shows on T.V. for so long but our eyes and head never pained. But why does everything hurt now?'

I don't have any answers for Prarthna's questions.

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Today, there is nothing to eat at Geeta's home. Just the clatter of empty cans. Geeta looked for something to cook. She kept thinking how she would feed her family today? She sat on an empty can, biting her nails in one corner. Today a peculiar sound was emanating from her belly. Like a wet cloth being wrung and squeezed in water. Everyone's belly in Geeta's family, was making the same sound. Everyone was looking at each other's faces. Not only was there nothing to eat today, but the cooking gas cylinder was also empty. Her family members had taken to sipping water to assuage their hunger. Geeta couldn't keep sitting. She had to do something. She gathered all her courage and walked out of her home onto the street. Her children were hopeful when they saw their mother step out.

Geeta walked up to some houses on the road. Geeta lives in a camp for cobblers, where just like her, everyone is coping with hunger. She thought, perhaps she could get something to eat in the bigger homes on the main road. She wondered which house she could approach. Finally, she decided to go to a house, where she somewhat knew the lady from earlier. She knocked at the door of that house. The lady looked at Geeta and asked, "How are you, Geeta? Are you working somewhere?" Geeta said, "No one is giving any work nowadays. Do you have some work for me?" The lady said, "There is hardly any work Geeta. These are tough times." Geeta said, "Sister is there something to eat? There is nothing to eat at home." The lady said, "I have some wheat flour which it is full of mites. But it's almost five kilos of flour. I don't feel like throwing it away. It is food after all. Would you like to take it?"

Geeta said, "It's ok sister. Please give me the flour."

Geeta took the flour and walked home. She was happy that she had finally found some food. As soon as her children saw her, they immediately got up and gathered around her. The house had been still so far but now it was bustling with the children's excitement. Geeta began cleaning the wheat flour. She took out the flour in a basin and began separating the thicker coarse husk from the finer flour. Hearing these sounds, the children rushed to her and asked, "mummy can we eat this raw, without cooking? Our stomach is hurting from hunger and we are also feeling light headed and dizzy." She asked her children to wait and instead focused her attention on the flour. On looking carefully, Geeta could make out the red mites in the flour.

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On seeing this, she took the packet of flour outside the house. She spread the flour out evenly in the basin and began cleaning it. She would pick up each mite nimbly and leave them on the floor. She would shake the basin up and down rhythmically and then turn the flour on all sides and remove each mite at a time. Then she removed just enough for today on a smaller plate and began blowing on it, winnowing it and cleaning it. She seemed finally satisfied that she had removed all the mites and the husk from the flour and it was ready to cook.

The flour did not feel like the regular dough she made usually. It had many cracks and clumps. Now that the dough was ready, she remembered that the cooking gas cylinder was empty. She went outside and found some old bricks lying in her neighbour's backyard. She picked up six of them and brought them outside her home. She made sets three sets of two bricks each, piled on top of each other. She placed two sets on two sides and one at the back. It was easier to organise some firewood as she had some on the tin roof of her small *jhuggi*<sup>2</sup>. She took out two or three branches and snapped them in half and then placed them in her makeshift stove. She then placed an old cardboard piece so that it would catch fire quickly. She lit the fire and placed her griddle on it and started making *rotis*<sup>3</sup>. All the three children had surrounded her with their empty plates in hand. They kept chanting, 'Mummy we are hungry. Give us some food.' On one hand she could see her children's growing anticipation while on the other she was finding it tough to roll out the dough. The flour was full of husk. She had tried to sieve some of it out. But if she took out too much then there would be hardly any left to make the *rotis*. She finally abandoned trying to use her rolling pin and instead used her hands to pat them into shape. She had to make ten *rotis*. They were five of them so two for each one of them. But she also wanted the flour to last long, so she made the size of her *rotis* smaller and cooked them on low heat to make them crisp. The *rotis* tasted so good. In their hunger, no one noticed if the *rotis* were a little burnt or coarse.

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<sup>2</sup> A small shanty, usually made with collected or scavenged material, which acts as a home for urban poor in cities like Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> An Indian whole wheat flat bread made on a metal or clay griddle.

# LIVING APART IN DIFFICULT TIMES

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Sameer lived with his wife in a small rented room in Dakshinpuri. His family had arranged their wedding in January 2020. He had been working for the last two years in a small dhaba in Lajpat Nagar.

Before getting married, Sameer worked in the *dhaba*<sup>1</sup> until late in the night. But his life changed after the wedding. Isn't it said, that love changes all. That's what happened with Sameer as well. Before his marriage, Sameer would leave home early without eating anything. Now Reena wakes up early in the morning and makes *rotis* for Sameer which she serves him with pickle. Sameer eats this breakfast and leaves for work by nine every morning. He had just stepped out of his house when his phone rang. "Today, the twenty second of March has been declared *Bharat Bandh*<sup>2</sup>. I will call you once work resumes," said the owner of the *dhaba*. Sameer understood that he did not have to go to work on this day but he was a little puzzled about the reasons for the nationwide closure. He scratched his head, puzzled and walked back home.

Reena had been busy with house work when Sameer opened the door quietly and announced happily, "Today I don't have to go to work." Sameer and Reena had been married for just two months when the lockdown was first announced. New couples like them, felt lucky because of the lockdown. Tender relationships like theirs which are ensconced in love and affection, reveled in this bonus time given to them. They could never imagine the brooding shadow of Corona.

After the first day of curfew, it was declared that there would be a twenty-two-day lockdown. Everywhere people were saying the same thing- lockdown, lockdown, lockdown! People had never heard this word before. But now, we not only have to hear it but also bear it. All the challenges Sameer and Reena faced, would fade in the light of their togetherness. In the initial days of the lockdown, they managed with their previous month's savings. It was fun to

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do all the household chores together. But as the days went by, the joy of just staying at home began slowly fading away. After all for how long could they just stay home? They looked for novel ways of entertaining themselves. At times they would play games on their mobile phones and at others, call up long lost relatives.

Before the lockdown, Sameer would leave his home early and get back home late. So many Sameers like him, worked and struggled hard every day. They have rarely spent an afternoon in their own homes. These are people who wake up before time, go to bed well after and worry constantly what the next day will bring them. For four or five days of the lockdown, Sameer caught up on his leftover stock of sleep. However, as the days passed, getting sleep became more and more difficult. How could they get any sleep? There were so many worries which clouded their minds. Worry about how to run their household expenses and the incessant worry about getting back to work. With the growing number of days, their worries also grew alongside. In these difficult times, there was no loss of love between Sameer and Reena, but the subject of conversations had changed. They no longer discussed which songs they liked the most, or what to cook or which vegetables to buy? Now they would constantly discuss work or rather the lack of it.

Initially the owner of the dhaba where Sameer worked, had promised that he would be given half his salary during the lockdown. They somehow managed to pull through the month with this half salary. Once the lockdown ended, Sameer began looking for work. The only skill he had was to cook at a dhaba. So, the first thing he did was to call the dhaba where he worked earlier. The bell rang but no one picked up the phone. This had been Sameer's only hope. Sameer tried the number several times that day. Finally, he got through to them. A loud and confident voice answered from the other side. Sameer also tried speaking confidently, "Hello. Are you speaking from the dhaba? This is Sameer. I worked with you earlier." As soon as he said this, the phone was disconnected. Sameer thought perhaps the disconnect occurred because of a bad network. Undaunted, he began looking for work afresh.

During the initial days of the lockdown, Sameer had somehow managed to pay that month's rent. But that was no longer possible. The landlord had accommodated them by saying that they could pay only half the amount. But even paying that was tough for them and was giving them sleepless

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<sup>1</sup> A small road side eatery prevalent in Northern parts of India.

<sup>2</sup> Nationwide curfew.



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nights. Once the lockdown was unlocked, the practice of sitting leisurely in a restaurant over a meal was over. The only business was in packing take aways. The need for staff was therefore reduced. Sameer could not find new work. This was the harbinger of trouble for their household. The young couple felt cornered by these difficult times. Reena tried to bring some order into the cluttered room, as if she was trying to sort her own life. If they didn't find work soon, then they would have to leave this house. Where would they live then? She would look helplessly at Sameer. "Tomorrow I will go and speak with the owner of the dhaba," said Sameer. "I might get some work." Reena adjusted her sari and said, "You are again speaking of the same work. If they had to give you a job, then they would have called by now. It's been so long since the lockdown has been unlocked. You must look for some new work." Hearing Reena, Sameer sat down hopelessly. She said, "How will we survive without work? Perhaps even I should start looking for some work now." The lockdown had been unlocked but within that time everything seemed to have become even more expensive than before.

Reena had come to realise that there was a chance that Sameer might not find work after all. But there was a difference in just thinking about looking for work and doing an actual search. In the shade of her father's protection, Reena had never felt the need to work. But circumstances had changed now. Since getting their next meal was becoming difficult, Reena was determined to find work. Reena's search for work was on. When Sameer saw Reena trying so hard, then he also doubled his efforts. They together called up all the people they knew. When Sameer saw Reena anxious, he said, "Don't worry. I will find something." Then after a while he said, "Don't give up Reena. I am sure you will find something." This way when one of them became weak, the other gave hope and they held together strongly.

Finally, Reena found some work. She had to care for an elderly person. For this, she will get paid seven thousand rupees a month. The first day went by in understanding her duties. The lady of the house explained all the different tasks she had to accomplish along with a detailed time schedule. She had never imagined that she would earn money for the work she did.

Reena would leave at nine every morning and be back by eight in the evening. She would now wake up early in the morning and go for a bath. In the meanwhile, Sameer would take out her clothes for the day, prepare tea and

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heat up leftover *rotis* for her breakfast. All the chores that Reena took care of before the lockdown had been taken over by Sameer now. It did not take long for circumstances to turn.

On the first day of work, Reena left early. She quickly had the breakfast Sameer had prepared. By the time she came back from work, Sameer had finished all the household chores. Someone has to care of the house as well, since Sameer was home, caring for it became his responsibility. Reena's work had come as a lifesaver for their family. Soon after the first lockdown was unlocked, the second lockdown came in its wake.

It had been over a month since Reena had been working. But more and more people were being diagnosed Corona positive. The second wave of Corona was even more dangerous and widespread than the first. The lady of the house told Reena, "I will give you a room to stay. You live here with us." Reena instantly agreed without giving it a second thought. She was still unsure when Sameer would get work and felt they had little choice in the matter. She came back home to share the news with Sameer.

She returned home by four that evening. As soon as she entered the house, Sameer welcomed her with a smile. He was happy that she had returned early. But Reena remained pensive. She didn't want to burst Sameer's joyful bubble. They both had their evening meal together and then she said, "Listen, I will now have to live at my workplace for a while." She looked at Sameer quietly. He had just been about to sip his tea but was left shocked with what Reena had to say. He was also silent for a long while. Then he took a deep breath and said, "What will I do all alone without you?"

Reena had tears in her eyes, "It's just for a few days Sameer. Please take care of the house. At least one of us needs to earn, otherwise how will we survive?" Saying this she began keeping some of her clothes into a bag she had brought from her parents' home when they got married. Sameer also helped her gather her things. As he mechanically put her belongings in, he was finding it difficult to come to terms with Reena's departure. But their circumstances had got the better of them.

After a while, Reena picked up her bag. She got her small purse and took out some money from it and quietly kept it under a glass. She looked intensely

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into his eyes and said, “take care of yourself. I will call you often.” Saying this she left for work with a heavy heart.

Both for Sameer and Reena it was difficult to comprehend that now they would have to live separately in two different houses. The meaning of home for them was their togetherness.

They had many difficulties earlier, but being together had made everything bearable. But corona had not only wrecked their home but also broken up their togetherness.

## DILEMMA

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Bhawna was caught in a deep dilemma. She had always wanted to keep her family happy. But somehow, she always fell short. She tried to compensate for this shortfall with her love. She knew that she would not be able to give them all the things they needed, but that would never defeat her spirit.

During the lockdown, which lasted from twenty fourth March until thirtieth May, Bhawna had found it increasingly difficult to manage her household expenses. She was trying very hard to somehow emerge through these testing times. How could she manage without taking a loan? Bhawna sometimes got work but often she didn't. After all how many loans would she be able to pay off, just by making *momos*<sup>1</sup>? She barely managed to make hundred rupees a day. She hadn't been able to pay her house rent for a while as well. They would have to vacate the house if they weren't able to pay up soon. Bhawna felt very lost.

All the families living in her building, were on rent and none of them had much money. Bhawna had taken small loans from many of her neighbours and friends in the recent past. She couldn't turn to them any longer. With every passing day, her troubles grew. She not only had to pay her house rent but getting food was also imperative. Who knew for how long this second lockdown would last! The first lockdown had already wiped out everything. Now, God knows how much more this second lockdown would take away in its wake? Her eyes filled up with tears. She didn't know what to do? After contemplating for a long while, she suddenly had a thought. What if she could withdraw the *Ladli* funds, which had been deposited in her daughter, Roshni's bank account for the past few years. But how could she take that money? She must leave that money for her future. But maybe she could withdraw it now and as soon as she got work, she would put it back. She could maybe deposit fifteen hundred for the thousand she withdrew. She was in a deep dilemma! Let me speak with Roshni, she thought. She would have to take Roshni along with her to the bank. It was her account after all. Also, she didn't really know the process for withdrawing money from a bank account and would need Roshni's help.

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The next day, Bhawna was up by six in the morning. Staying at home without any work had in any case taken away her sleep. After a quick bath, she heated last night's leftovers for breakfast. Then slowly, the rest of her family members began to wake up. Bhawna made the beds and swept and cleaned the floor. Once ready, she called her daughter and told her, "Roshni, I am thinking of withdrawing the money saved in your bank account. As soon as your father or I get work, we will put it back again." Roshni was now studying in the eleventh grade. She studied in the local government school. Since she had been in her sixth grade, she had been receiving thirteen hundred Rupees every year as a scholarship from the Delhi government under the *Ladli*<sup>2</sup> scheme. She had received this scholarship until grade nine. So far, Bhawna had left this money untouched for Roshni's future. But now her choices were shrinking.

"Mummy, I don't know how much money there is in my bank account. I haven't visited the bank since last year. I don't even know if the school has been making the regular annual transfer."

Bhawna said, "Let's go and check."

Roshni said, "Ok mummy. Let's go."

Mother and daughter quickly wrapped up all their household chores in preparation for going to the bank.

That's when Bhawna's husband asked, "Where are you two going?"

Bhawna said, "There is no money in the house. We are going out to arrange for it."

Bhawna's husband asked, "Where will you go?"

Bhawna said, "There is money in Roshni's account. I thought I could withdraw some of it."

He did not say anything. Just sat his head bent. He also knew the condition of

their home. At this time, he had no other ideas and couldn't take any other decision.

As they stepped out of their lane, there was an eyrie silenced only pierced by barking dogs. A few random shops had their shutters up. Most of the shops had big locks hanging on their doors. As Bhawna walked towards the bank, her heart remained full of doubts. When they reached the main road, she noticed that there were eight to ten policemen who were questioning people about where they were going.

"Arrey brother! I am going to the bank to withdraw some money."

"Ok. Don't remove your mask. Why is your daughter with you?"

"The bank account is in her name. So, I had to bring her along."

"Ok. Go."

Bhawna and Roshni, both walked ahead. Finally, they reached the bank. The queue was so long that it seemed that every household might have the same story as their own. Bhawna and Roshni stood at the end of the queue. They all waited patiently for work to begin. Bhawna was optimistic that they had joined the queue early and it would soon be their turn. When it was time, Bhawna and Roshni both doused their hands with sanitiser and entered the transaction room.

Bhawna said, "I want to withdraw money."

The bank attendant said, "Give me your passbook."

Roshni took out the passbook from her bag and handed it over.

The attendant said, "Give me your adhaar card."

Roshni handed over her adhaar card.

After a while the attendant said, "Your bank account has been shut.

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<sup>1</sup> A type of steamed filled dumpling in Tibetan and Nepali cuisine that is extremely popular in India.

<sup>2</sup> A Delhi government scheme which provides girlchildren a scholarship every year for their education.



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## THE CROWDED CREMATORIUM

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Prakash's face is creased with age. He is dusky skinned, middle aged and of medium built. He looks like *Doraemon*<sup>1</sup>, with his round spectacles which have to be constantly cleaned as they become clouded when he breathes through the mask fixed around his mouth and nose.

Prakash's shop opens well before the opening time of the crematorium nearby. The crematorium opens at ten but Prakash's shop opens by eight, every morning. Earlier, the intense smoke and smell of burning corpses would bother him, but with time he has gotten used to it. The area is constantly smouldering and intensely hot and now in the months of June- July it seemed that even the skies were showering embers.

During these days of Corona, living close to the crematorium had become unbearable. Residents of the area keep their doors shut and the windows have curtains or old sheets so that the smoke and smell of the burning bodies don't engulf their homes. But even then, they have to bear the suffocation of being shut indoors. More and more people were falling ill and breathing was difficult.

During the second lockdown, the death toll rose rapidly and alongside, Prakash's work of selling all that was needed for a ritual cremation was also in high demand. The pile of wood needed for cremation was as high as a two storied house but would turn to ashes in a matter of seconds as more and more bodies were cremated. As the availability of wood diminished, often two or more bodies were cremated together in the same pyre. In the summer heat, the crematorium had begun resembling a live, searing inferno. At that time, the focus was not so much on following all the rites and rituals, rather a quick cremation was what people cared about. As the number of dead bodies grew, some were not even cremated entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> *Doraemon is a popular cartoon character from a Japanese manga series. He is a round faced, cute looking, earless robotic cat who has travelled back from the twenty second century to help a little boy named Nobita Nobi.*

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You will have to get a KYC done. It will take fifteen days and after that you can withdraw the money."

On hearing this Bhawna said, "What is KYC?" The attendant replied that this account has been inactive for a while. Your daughter hasn't withdrawn or deposited any money in it. That's why the account has become inactive. Once the KYC process is completed, the account will become operational again. The bank also needs to know if the account holder actually exists. KYC means, 'Know Your Customer.'

On hearing this Bhawna held her daughter's hand and walked back home.

Bhawna was now even more worried. Now she was wondering how they would spend the next fifteen- twenty days. Even the last ray of hope had dissipated. The coming days would be very tough for them.

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Prakash's establishment was thirty-five years old. He began working alongside his father when he was very young. That is when he learnt how to put together the ritual ingredients for cremation. He learnt to manage the shop quickly. Waking up at six, sitting at the shop with his father and handing over the ritual ingredients to customers, had become a part of his life. As dusk fell, Prakash would start carrying indoors, all the things on display outside his shop. But now, time had become dislocated. Usually, dead bodies were brought to the crematorium doors only until six in the evening. During these times of corona, it seemed that the rush would never end.

Prakash's shop was one of its kind in Dakshinpuri, and the profit of the business had risen exponentially. But the growing need for cremation ingredients had also led to a scarcity. In spite of trying many different sources, Prakash was finding it difficult to source the materials he needed. The wholesale supplier for his shop had been shut because of the lockdown. At this moment, Prakash thought of Mohan Kumar, who owned a similar though bigger shop in Madangiri. Whenever he fell short, he would approach Mohan for the things he needed. This time also he reached out to Mohan and got all that was over.

Prakash sold a complete package of ritual ingredients and objects for fifteen hundred rupees. If people needed anything more then he would charge extra for it. The standard package consisted of an earthenware pot, a plain white cotton sheet, small pouches of ritual material in colour coded packets of blue, green and red, a small bundle of brown coloured twine, a packet of cotton, a bottle of mustard oil and a jar of clarified butter (ghee). Prakash's shop was at the corner of the street. He had decorated the outside of his shop with colourfully wrapped byres so that people who did not know his shop would immediately recognise what he sold.

A small television was kept on a corner table. A blue cupboard contained most of his ware. The glass doors of the cupboard revealed the neatly kept bolts of white cotton sheets. Other materials of his trade were carefully displayed on shelves spread throughout the store. One shelf for cotton wool and one for the brown twine. A separate shelf for the jars of ghee and another for different kinds of incense. Tucked away towards the back of the store, Prakash had stored cartons of extra material and the two specially marked drawers were where he kept the cash. The earthen pots to be used for the last rites

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were arranged one on top of the other. The centre piece of the store was a bamboo byre wrapped in shiny strips of plastic. This special byre was used to carry the aged, who had lived a full life and seen the birth of many generations. They were carried with great celebration and joy on these brightly shining byres for their last journey.

Today Prakash had started organising a byre at six in the morning. By now, he was skilled and made them with great efficiency. The television announced the growing numbers of the dead even as he worked. With every passing ambulance siren, Prakash quickened his pace of work. As day broke, people started visiting his shop. They would place their orders and leave. Prakash could make out if people had lost someone close from the way they placed their order. A man wearing a pyjama, a light cotton t-shirt and slippers entered his store. He had a mask which covered both his mouth and nose. He kept dabbing his tears with a small handkerchief. He tried to stop the tears streaming down his face and asked in a grim voice for a package for cremation ingredients. But his tears started flowing again. Prakash looked at the man for a while and then said in his gruff voice, "Brother please don't cry. We all have to depart one day or the other." He packed all the things needed and handed them over and said, "brother you have to pay fifteen hundred rupees." The man quietly took out the money from the pocket of his pyjama, paid Prakash and left the shop still dabbing his eyes with his handkerchief. It seemed that he had lost someone dear to him.

Today Prakash has sold fifteen packages for the last rites of deceased people. When he finally closed his shop, he had earned a total of twenty-two thousand five hundred rupees in a single day. It is true that he has earned well, but his eyes are soaked with tears. Prakash was used to seeing dead bodies, but now rarely a day went by when his eyes were dry. It is true that this work had earned him money, however it had also left a strange grief in his heart.

# NIGHT AND DAYS OF A SEALED LANE

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“Oye! Sandhya. Do you know that since yesterday our lane has been sealed? Neither can we leave nor can anyone enter our lane.”

I said with a glum face, “Now that you have shared this sad news, you might as well tell me the reason for this?”

Sohima said, “Arrey! you know the old woman who lies on a string bed smoking *beedis*<sup>1</sup> in the corner of the lane? The one who is constantly cursing passers byes? Ramwati Amma! She is Corona positive! Because of her, the whole building, all the people who live on rent in it and the entire lane has been sealed.”

I leaned across the balcony railing and saw that the gate at the end of the lane, which is ordinarily never shut, has been tightly closed. A big fat lock strung with a metal chain is hanging from its bolt. There was a bustle in the lane. People were lined up in front of their own homes but everyone was looking outside. No one dared to stand too close. In a place where people would be stuck together every morning, now they were all standing apart, in front of their own homes. No one dared step out of the lane. Young boys especially were the first to run out of their homes every morning. Today, even the boys were standing apart.

Sohima said, “There is a poster outside our lane which announces in clear words that this lane has been sealed because it is corona positive. This is so embarrassing for us.” On hearing this, even I began feeling uncomfortable. My brain seemed to be feeling totally fried. I felt as if we were had all become zombies. Just then, we heard a loud noise outside. I ran to the balcony and looked over the railing. Most people had rushed to their own balconies and were looking over their railings. We could see a policeman on a motorbike with a police rider sitting behind, making an announcement on a speaker. He repeated that no one was allowed to go out of the lane. One member from

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every household would be allowed to go out to buy food and other essentials. Everyone else had to stay inside their homes. The policemen drove up and down the lane, continuing to make the same announcement.

Today the lane was silent and empty. Some songs were carried into the lanes from the homes, but the voices of men and women seemed to have been lost. I did not like this deathlike silence. It felt abnormal unless there were sounds of commotion, of people fighting and arguing out in the lane. The entire day passed in finishing household chores. Both mummy and papa were standing on the roof of our building. We live in a rented apartment on the top floor. We are lucky to have access to the rooftop. If we lived on the middle floor, then we would neither have a roof nor would we have a courtyard. The silence in the lane seemed to become heavier and it weighed us down every moment.

People in our lane were worried because every time someone stepped out for buying essentials, they would have to be frisked by the police. On their return, the police would again check them and their bags. Then they would have to sanitise everything. At our home, we were also planning on going out to get groceries. Papa went out and brought packets of sugar, cooking oil and some green vegetables. In his zeal for sanitization, he not only washed the vegetables but also the packet of oil. Thankfully he didn't wash the packet of sugar.

I joked with Papa, “Why did you leave out the sugar packet? You should have washed it too!” Papa stared at me and said, “Go, mind your business.”

There was a commotion outside in the lane. All of us dropped whatever we were doing and rushed to see what was going on. Our balcony is small, it's railing only accommodates two people at a time. Papa rushed to the rooftop. Everyone in our lane was again looking out from their respective railings. We saw a small white coloured, helicopter like object fluttering around. I was wondering what this object was and what was it doing? What was it called? How was it flying on its own? I had so many questions in my mind but not a single answer. Some children started screaming, “drone, drone, drone.”

What is this drone? Papa looked towards me and said, ‘This is the eagle's eye, darling. How would you know about it? You are after all like an educated

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<sup>1</sup> Local cigarettes from India which are hand rolled in Tendu leaves and stuffed with tobacco.



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country bumpkin! This is the flying eye of the police. It's a camera, a flying camera! Earlier they used it for photographing weddings, now it is being used by the police."

As soon as the drone began hovering over the lane, everyone rushed into their homes. People hanging out on the rooftops rushed downstairs. We also busied ourselves with our chores. Papa began preparations for cooking, I started kneading dough, mummy washing dishes while Sohima started sweeping and mopping the floor. After finished our work, we sat down and began discussing Corona over dinner.

The drone was back next morning at nine and once again, a commotion broke out in the lane. Well before 9 AM, people would wash the front of their homes and take their string beds and chairs indoors. It seemed like there was a curfew in the lane. People peeped out of their homes but on seeing the drone, they would quickly withdraw, afraid of being recorded. The drone came every day for the next one week but people remained wary of its gaze.

I was standing at the railing. The air seemed clean and fresh. This was bound to happen as there were hardly any vehicles out on the streets. In our home, the only places to enjoy the clean air is from our small balcony or on the rooftop of the house. I felt like going out, but I had learnt to curb my feelings. Today my heart was telling me something. Usually, my mind told me what to do, but today it was my heart. Please reopen our school. I am willing to fight for it, to die for it, to study yet again! But please, please reopen our school. My parents make me do too much work at home. But that is not what makes me sad. After I work so hard, they say that I do nothing. That I just lie around like a lazy lump! I was lost in my imaginary world, when I noticed a well-built man in the lane. He was dragging a thick, black coloured pipe. In all likelihood, it was a sanitizer pipe which was connected to a truck standing outside our lane. People were again back on their balconies to see what was happening in the lane. Maybe after the sanitisation is over, they hoped, the lane might open again.

After a while the man with the black pipe, began to spray sanitizer with great force. It swept aside all the lighter objects lying around in the lane. Some flower pots were smashed and a garbage collecting pan flew past. I stood witness to what was unfolding. Some people pulled their kids indoors.

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Perhaps the sanitizer had some medicine mixed in which might affect their brain, they thought. Some others said that in all likelihood, the spray was fake and mostly plain water.

Looking out of the balcony, the only people we could see out on the streets were those with a uniform. It felt like we were living on an alien planet. Or perhaps, my neighbours had left for an alien planet and left me behind. Once the sanitisation process began, there were some people who were constantly bickering. But I realized this was because largely people were scared. Officially, the entire lane and all its inhabitants were Corona positive. People were so scared that they were constantly asking each other to sanitise themselves.

These are tough times which are difficult for us to comprehend. First, the lockdown was declared and we were confined to our homes. Now they have put up huge locks on both the gates of our lane and sealed it. As though this was not enough, they have also placed uniformed guards with thick batons at both ends to welcome the residents! Big posters have been placed outside the gates announcing that this lane is contaminated. All this created a deep sense of fear. They should have at least spared a thought for those with blood pressure problems, shouldn't they! Slowly people have even stopped coming out to their balconies.

The only sound in the lane was music which floated out from home to home. Those spiral stairs where usually, you would find our girl gang hanging out, had become silent and lifeless. The house in the center of the lane, the one with a large courtyard, where all the women of the lane gathered like CCTV cameras, lay abandoned. It seemed that outside the lane, there was a battle being waged. But we had to be kept locked out from all that action. We would come out to our balconies, go up to our roofs, look out on the lane, speak over mobile phones. We were behaving like fluttering birds in a cage! It was as if a baby had been tightly clasped in her mother's arms for safekeeping. But the child was suffocating in her clutch and struggling to breath. The child wanted to break free!

The day after the spraying of sanitizer, people started emerging out from their homes.



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