



## THE RUBRICS

Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Volume 4 Issue 3 June 2022

[www.therubrics.in](http://www.therubrics.in)

ISSN 2454-1974



### *A Corpse in the Well: A Saga of Dalit Social History*

**Dr. Bhanghe Prakash B.**

*Dept. Of English,*

*Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya, Purna (Jn.)*

#### ABSTRACT

In Hindu caste system, Shudra, known in modern times as Dalits, is one of the four varnas of social order in India. People deems them impure, less than human. They are restricted to the lowest jobs and compelled to obey the orders of the village chief or any higher authority. The difference in power that exists in villages, and how the Mahars, or Dalits, who are loyal serving their village, were not respected and treated the way they deserved. The unfair manner in which they are bossed around, and the bravery and sense of duty exhibited by Anna, father of Shankarrao Kharat – a narrator, serves to highlight a broken system and ideology.

**Keywords:** *annihilation, discrimination, abandoned, inhuman*

  
**Co-ordinator  
IQAC**  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani - 431511 (M.S.)



  
**PRINCIPAL**  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn.) Dist. Parbhani

## FULL PAPER

A Corpse in the Well is a short story, an extraction from Translations From Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies edited by Arjun Dangle and translated in English by Priya Adarkar from the book in Marathi Taral Antaral, an autobiography by Shankar Ramchandra Kharat (1921–2001), an established Marathi Dalit writer in the post-independence Indian literature panorama. Kharat was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of Dalit literature in India, whose engagement with writing wasn't only about a personal pursuit but genuinely a social movement — with the larger objective of annihilation of caste. Through his narratives, Kharat invited people to join the movement of building a just and equal society in which people who were kept out of the literary imagination of this country, could be humanized.

Traditionally, the Mahar, an Indian community found largely in the state of Maharashtra and neighboring areas, lived on the outskirts of villages and performed a number of duties for the entire village. Their duties included those of village watchman, messenger, wall mender, adjudicator of boundary disputes, street sweeper, and remover of carcasses. They also worked as agricultural laborer's and held some land, though they were not primarily farmers.

The short story focuses on caste discrimination that is deeply rooted in the Indian Villages. An outcaste called Anna in the story is asked to take care of a corpse that half fall into the well. Firstly he had to stand and guard the well throughout the night without a piece of bread till the corpse is sent for inquisition. Secondly how Anna is compelled to fetch the body from the well. And thirdly dead body is more valuable than the life of the untouchables. This is a story about duty and how it is engrained in the Dalits mind so thoroughly that they themselves can't see their servitude toward the caste system. It is about how the caste system proliferates for the betterment of the higher classes and how education can be the answer to annihilate the inhuman social system.

Here is the story of one of Shankarrao Kharat's experiences—a near fatal one and shivering at the thought of it. In the story, A corpse was floating in an abandoned well near the village. It had bloated and risen to the surface. Anna and one of the Ramoshis had both ordered by the village chief to be as on village customary duty at the place where the corpse lay. Anna had been waiting at the well for the entire night, when his son, the narrator, arrives to give him some food. But the father, in an exemplary display of loyalty towards

*[Signature]*  
Co-ordinator  
IQAC  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani  
Vol. 4, Issue 3



*[Signature]*  
PRINCIPAL  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn.) Dist. Parbhani

his duty, refuses, saying that he'll only eat once relieved of his duties. Both stayed up the whole night by the well, guarding the corpse. The narrator was at home on summer vacation and was sent by his mother to the well with bhakri wrapped in a cloth for Anna to eat. And he penned the painful experience on the name of village duty which explores insulting, inhuman in life of the Mahar. He explained the severity of the village duty.

I knew clearly the dangers of village duty. It was a perpetual noose around the neck of a Mahar! My father was crushed flat by this duty.

Then it was the morning of the next day. The head constable and another constable were expected from the police post, to conduct an initial inquiry about the corpse. Till then, as per routine, the Mahar and the Ramoshi would have to guard it. Anna was without food for a long time, mother sent him to the well with bhakari. On asking to have food his father refused it until the corpse is fetched out of the well and sent the corpse to the further investigation. According to his father the village duty is more important than the food. He says Anna that the constable will come after his meal.

When the corpse is fetched out of the well, the inquest will be held. Then we'll be free.'

The village chief has also filled his belly. Then why can't you too eat your bread? Why must you remain hungry?'

'Oh, they are officers! How can they work without food?'

'Then why should we work on an empty stomach? We're human beings, too.'

'That's what village duty is, my boy! Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies?'

At this point of time, the police arrived, and ordered Anna to fetch the body from the well. The constable and the village chief started bombarding Anna with threats and curses. They charged at him, overflowing with abuse, but Anna stood like a pillar. Perhaps Anna felt that if he said one word, if he said no, the constable wouldn't stop till he had drubbed him soundly. That must be why he kept quiet. In those days the oppressive power and prestige of the head constable were tremendous. Against this power, a Mahar was a mere wisp of straw.

Anna immediately replied,

'Constable, the Mahar's village duty is only to guard the corpse. How can we touch it? What would the heirs of this corpse have to say?'

Anna replied, The heirs will say, "Were we dead, that you touched our kinsman's corpse?" and they will have a grudge against us Mahars!'

Sarkar you will go away from here. You will leave this poor Mahar to his fate! We want to go on living in this village!'

Seeing and hearing all this was a shock to the narrator's young mind. He heard their curses, their threats, their shouting. He thought, whose dead body is this anyway? Whose well? Why should his father have to be cursed and threatened because of them? This was rank injustice to his father; He had not done anything wrong. His only crime was being the Mahar of the village.

When the constable begins to threaten Anna, pressuring him to retrieve the body from the well, the surrounding village elders respond by saying,

"Sarkar (government official), you will go away from here!

You will leave this poor Mahar to his fate!

We want to go on living in this village!"

In the above line, the author is conveying to the reader, the threat of communal violence. Neighboring villages, from whence the corpse in the well may have come, would not respond positively to their kinsman being touched by members of a lower caste, and thus, the Mahars in the community are responding not out of empathy and pity for the Mahar on duty, but more so out of fear of attack; serving to reinforce the aforementioned concept of injustice

Noticing the policeman's flaring temper, his father enters the well. There was a snake in the well. On noticing it the author become furious and alerted his father not to take any risk. Feeling the vibrations of his shouts, the snake retreated halfway from the water. He went back into the hole and lay peeping out.

Looking at the snake, the village chief said loudly, 'O Rama! It's not a snake, it's a reptile! It won't bite!'



Co-ordinator  
IQAC

Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani  
Volume 4 Issue 3  
201511 (M.S.)





PRINCIPAL  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn.) Dist. Parbhani

June 2022

In despairing anger his father said:

'Son. Let it is to happen let it happen to me! Let the village know that the Village Mahar Rama died of snake bite. Died while removing a Corpse from a ruined well, while he was supposed to be doing his village duty. Let the village know! Let the government know! Let the whole world know!'

Eventually the body and Anna are successfully drawn up from the well. As the son heads home, he reflects on the injustice and the deadly work involved in village duty. The head constable, or the policeman, is depicted in quite a negative light throughout the story. The fact that he, a police officer, a supposed implementer of the law, resorts to such primeval means of discrimination to get his job done, induces a sick sort of irony in the reader.

The theme of injustice is one that permeates the entire story. The Mahars and Ramoshis loyally and whole heartedly serve their village, as is shown in numerous examples throughout the story. Anna's refusal to eat while on duty is one; another could be his risking of life to recover the body from the well, and yet another is the respect that the Ramoshis and Mahars show the constable; when the latter arrives, the Mahars have laid out a manger of grass and a pail of freshwater to sate the horse's thirst. Thus, when the Mahars behave in such a fashion, the reader feels greatly shocked and appalled by the way that the policeman responds to such bravery and loyalty towards duty. He abuses them and threatens to beat them. This obvious abuse of power, combined with the father's air of surrender present throughout the story; such as his giving into pressure from the policeman, coupled with a line in which he says, "Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies",

The dead body was bloated. It looked hideous and smelt foul. All had covered their noses. The preliminary inquiry was conducted oft the spot. The Mahars shifted the corpse into the bullock cart brought from the farm, and scattered over its neem leaves that covered the body completely. Then they took it along a cart-track to a doctor about eight miles away for a postmortem. Anna as the village Mahar, another Mahar, two Ramoshis and a policeman went along with it. Anna set out. The cart disappeared along the road; then Anna disappeared too. A storm of thoughts swept through his mind about the dangerous, deadly work involved in village duty. Why do Mahars do this kind of work?

  
Co-ordinator  
IQAC  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani 431511 (M.S.)  
Volume 4 Issue 3



  
PRINCIPAL  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn.) Dist. Parbhani  
June 2022

In the story whenever the son asks why it has to be the burden of the Mahars to do the dreadful jobs, the dad always exclaims the words "duty" and "tradition". When opposed a question to that, he remarks it's the duty given by god. This god an invisible, inconceivable, and immaterial "being" is impossible to pin the blame on, the real perpetrator are the upper caste men who can take life for granted. Through this way the lower casts continue to be treated unjust. This is because that's the only knowledge the Dalits ever had. But when people get education, such as the son of the father, they being to question the fatal flaws of such a wretched system and bring about a new era where religion too must evolve to survive.

The plot of the story is the story of how there lays a corpse in the well, and how it's the Mahars "duty" and "tradition" to take care of such things. Through the point of view of the of the Mahars son, it brings upon questions to the very existence to the caste system and how it has become so engrained into people's minds.

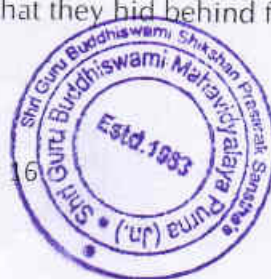
The characters in his novels and stories were rebellious — not in an angry/reactionary way, but rather, engaged in continuous struggle to find meaning in life, thus bringing a revolution within. Kharat's ability to portray his characters patiently and with great poise was the strength of his narrative style. But Kharat's literary stature wasn't just due to that. He didn't just make readers aware of the issues/milieu he wrote about — he intelligently invited them to be active participants in the struggles of his characters. As a result, readers could connect to his characters — not out of pity but out of a realization that changes needed to be brought about in their personal and social world. This was a strength of his narratives that Kharat maintained throughout his writing career.

The system of castes is still alive and well in India. It has always been that way. But the thing that nourished it was the willful ignorance of the upper caste intellectuals who claimed that they were simply unaware of the condition of Dalits in the villages and towns of India. Not to say that they examined the caste problem even in cities, but still, this was a very convenient excuse for them to not have to investigate further. However, eventually the Dalits themselves started writing about their experiences. These were the Dalit autobiographies and they brought with them a fresh perspective on the problem of Caste. These real-life experiences shed light on how untouchability is practiced in free India and denied the upper caste intellectuals the cloak of ignorance that they hid behind for so long.

*K. Kharat*

Co-ordinator  
IQAC

Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani  
Volume 4 Issue 3 (M.S.)



*[Signature]*

PRINCIPAL

Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani  
June 2022

## REFERENCES

*A Corpse in the Well*, Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies Edited by Arjun Dangle, Published by Orient Longman Ltd. Kamani Marg, Ballard Estate, Bombay.

<https://cuenglias.blogspot.com/2015/03/a-corpse-in-well-shankarrao-kharat.html> Date accessed: 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2022.

  
**Co-ordinator**  
**IQAC**  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn) Dist. Parbhani - 431511 (M.S.)



  
**PRINCIPAL**  
Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya  
Purna (Jn.) Dist. Parbhani