

BURNING
FOR **F**REEDOM

**"O Goddess of Freedom, Life is to die for you,
Death is to live without you!"**

A N U R U P A C I N A R

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Dedication

In early 2009, I found myself armed with an utter conviction that the story of Savarkar should be told to the world, coupled with an absolute determination to do it—and not much else. Aware that I needed help, research sources, and a connection to Savarkar, I very hesitantly sent out a feeler thousands of miles away through cyberspace to www.savarkar.org and found a kindred soul—Dr. Shreerang Godbole.

To find someone who shared my passion—for bringing Savarkar to light, preserving his heritage, plus counteracting the anti-Savarkar propaganda—and to find it in a person of his dedication, intelligence, and caliber was a godsend. It still amazes me how such a successful endocrinologist, busy social activist, author of many books, and a bold and dynamic writer had faith in me—a faceless, unknown budding author making tall claims about writing and publishing a novel on Savarkar! It was his faith in me, his willingness to make time in his busy schedule to encourage me and give me whatever help I needed, that were crucial to me in finding my “writing feet” and gaining confidence, especially in that first year of writing.

For all this, and to have the name of my Kindred Soul linked to Savarkar and my book for posterity, I dedicate this book to Dr. Shreerang Godbole.

Acknowledgments

I could never consider my work on this novel complete without recognizing all those who were there for me during the process.

First of all, I thank God for bringing me so far in realizing my dream. I was always aware that besides hard work, grim determination, and dogged perseverance, I was going to need some divine intervention!

Without the unstinting understanding and cooperation of my children, Siran, Alexan, and Kapriel, I could never have started writing—never mind finished!—my novel.

I owe much to the late Dr. Arvind Godbole, who was Savarkar's physician. His faith and encouragement went a long way toward easing my path. I freely tapped into his vast store of knowledge to write several scenes. He read my completed novel—at a *great* inconvenience to himself—and gave me very valuable feedback. Mere gratitude is not enough to cover all that he means to me and my novel.

The Dedication already expresses what Dr. Shreerang Godbole means to my novel. Over and above, I can say that but for him the novel would not have been completed in this form. His contribution to my novel is everywhere in all aspects of it. On him I could depend on a frank, unbiased evaluation of any scene; his yardstick of plausible/improbable was a terror, but *so* essential, as there were scenes that needed revising. I kicked up a fuss sometimes! Rewriting scenes is quite the bane of an author's life. I also had what amounted to a writer's block when it came to the Keshu-Lakshmi romance. That was strange for I

had the scenes pegged out for ever. It was only after thoroughly analyzing the psyche of Keshu with Shreerang that I realized I had quite the wrong angle. Thereafter the words flowed out. Meeting him was the best thing that happened for my novel.

I must thank my parents, Dr. Prabhakar Sawkar and Dr. Indrayani Sawkar—who is a renowned author in India—for giving me tips. Their praise and appreciation of my novel gave a tremendous boost to my confidence. Without my mother's help I could never have translated Savarkar's poems into poetic form. I considered it imperative to intersperse quotes of them throughout this book, since Savarkar's heart and soul is in his poetry.

Thanks to my aunt, Nirmala Vaidya, who knew Savarkar and his family very well, I got a little glimpse into some private thoughts of Savarkar.

I am very thankful for the support of my friend Daniela Santos. Without her to look out for me, and especially for my youngest, Kapriel, it would have been impossible for me to write.

Very endearing were my sister-in-law, Mayda Gigian, and my friend, Anna Gyulakian. From the beginning, even before I had gained any confidence in my ability, they had no doubts. How often have they said to me: "*When* your novel is published . . ."—never an "*if* . . ." or a "*how* . . . ?" Every budding writer should be so lucky.

Thankfully for me, for they would be my sample readers, my lawyers Richard Feigenbaum and Eleanor Uddo, offered to read some excerpts of my novel. For two nail-biting, tension-filled days I was on tenterhooks. Then came Eleanor's e-mail—they had loved it! I was certainly down on my bended knees thanking God.

I am indebted to Shridhar Damle who went out of his way to help me in my research, despite the fact he had grave doubts about my being able to pull off such a complicated true-life story in a novel form and had reservations about Gandhi being so frankly revealed. Arguing with him on the subject gave

me great clarity of thought. The scene with Keshu and Bapat practically wrote itself after one of our arguments!

In the early days, my aunt, Medha Marathe, and my cousin, Madhuri Paranjpe, were the first to read the draft of part I. Their appreciation and enthusiasm sweetened the path I was walking on.

It was my friend Anita Craig's input that gave me the brainwave to split my novel into two books, for which I am very grateful. It caused me some heartache, though, for I had thoroughly enjoyed developing Keshu's story—the assassination plot, police case, and the courtroom scene—which is withheld from this novel. It will be an upcoming prequel to *Burning for Freedom*.

Most providentially for my novel, I met Christopher Manley in the nick of time—he sold me my new roof. His all-encompassing customer service included allowing himself to be roped into giving me *vital* tips on Mohini's death scene! *That* little scene would have held up the submission of my manuscript otherwise.

The day of submitting the novel was around the corner. There I was—tearing my hair out *and* going cross-eyed—chasing those errant commas and missing periods when my friend Cameron Cunningham came to the rescue. She offered to read the whole of my novel—in four days only . . . ! I could have fallen around her neck, sobbing tears of gratitude. She not only read it but gave her written comments—hallelujah . . . !—throughout the novel. This input was *invaluable*. Not only did it give me great joy to read her appreciative comments, but she put her finger on some pertinent points that I needed to clarify for the reader. At times I also have this quaint—what my kids call “language of the past”—style of writing. Cameron pounced on all such phrases (that had escaped my vigilance in editing) and I have faithfully, if with a regretful pang or two, made the changes. She also gave crucial tips on highlighting certain parts of the text. I am without words for expressing my gratitude to her.

Even as I write the acknowledgments, I feel so strongly that truly there has been a *great* deal of divine intervention in this venture of mine.

Lastly, I must thank all those nameless, faceless people who have worked hard to upload all kinds of details, books, and information on the Internet. Without this resource, I would have been stumped. There was so much to ferret out, some of it so obscure—like the name of the Queen of Jhansi’s horse, which I was fixed on having for that scene—but armed with a few keywords on Google and oodles of patience, it was there to be discovered.

Anurupa Cinar

Author's Notes

Incredible as it may seem, this is a true story. *All* facts, incidents, and situations in this novel—whether directly given or referred to in conversations—are true and documented. I have taken particular care in researching the freedom movement of India from many viewpoints to separate the wheat from the chaff. Finding my way through the politics of India between 1942 and 1948 was a challenge! Many times I was taken over by a distinct feeling of being given the runaround by the various accounts. V. P. Menon's book, *The Transfer of Power in India*, was of invaluable help in getting to the kernel of truth.

Funnily enough, the easiest to research was material on Gandhi. *Vast* amount of it is written in a sycophant style—glossing over pertinent facts in its efforts at eulogizing Gandhi—but fortunately, plenty is still available factually written with no bias either way. Dhananjay Keer's biography on Gandhi is one such masterpiece. Indeed, it reveals many *shocking* things I have not been able to include in my novel.

Sometimes it took *months* to get to the bottom of things, such as the facts in the case of the ₹550 million owed to Pakistan and the sequence of events of the violence in Punjab in 1947, to name but two examples. The Moplah riots, too, are not widely publicized. Fortunately, there is a contemporary eyewitness account that is extant. I also found documents of the British government communications which were very helpful.

The words written between quotes in a different font throughout the novel are an actual quote (or its translation) of

the person mentioned in connection with it. A comprehensive list of the major books I have researched from can be found at the end of the book. The scenes in connection with my fictional hero Keshu and his family are based on real incidents.

I have largely avoided giving citations/attributes as I consider them inappropriate in a novel. I do intend to post them, at least the critical ones, on my website, www.anurupacinar.com. Occasionally, I have taken the liberty of taking things out of their real-time sequence or adding something fictional (Keshu's romance, some characters, or a conversation here and there). I point it out in the notes below.

I read my first biography on Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (May 28, 1883-February 26, 1966) written by Mr. J. D. Joglekar at the end of December 2008. Savarkar's intellect and personality, his unwavering principles, and his ability to face adversity and move on fascinated me. But most of all, being a deep believer in the Bhagavad Gita, I was captivated by the realization that he was a foremost exponent of the Karmayoga.¹ I scoured the Internet, read everything I could find on him or that was written by him, and bought his books. I was shocked—*shocked*—to find that there seemed to be an active anti-propaganda campaign against him, a willful misrepresentation of his words and actions. Was it not enough that he was victimized, over and over, in his lifetime? Must his memory be besmirched so? The need to do something about it was eating into me. But what could I do? How was my voice to be heard? Who would listen?

And so the dream was born. I woke up one morning with the certainty that I would write a novel to showcase Savarkar as he was to the whole world. It was ridiculous, really, for I had never written anything past the schoolgirl essays that my teacher, Mrs. Kutti (St. Columba High School, Mumbai), used to love. Upon that flimsy foundation I took the plunge! The next

¹ A precept of the Bhagavad Gita, one of the sacred books of the Hindus, of acting in accordance with one's duty (dharma) without consideration of personal desires, other influences, or any attachment to the fruits of one's deeds.

day, I had my plot clear in my head. Out of the vast amount of material to choose from, I zeroed in on the events I considered essential for this novel. Very regretfully, I had to put aside two important phases of Savarkar's life—Savarkar in London and Savarkar in Ratnagiri. These are stories in themselves. I intend to write books on them in the future; at present, I am writing a book presenting documentation and analysis of the Hague Arbitration of the "Savarkar Case" (1910-11), including the details of Savarkar's heroic, incredible escape and the circumstances surrounding it.

For this novel, I needed a fictional character who could be with Savarkar throughout, and who also had links to both Pune—because I love it—and the Calicut area, where the Moplah riots took place. I wanted to show the world how and why the youth of India, coming from comfortable, educated backgrounds with secure and brilliant futures ahead of them, still chose to sacrifice all for the freedom and love of their motherland. I also wanted to touch upon the pathos of the plight of widows. And so Keshu was conceived. Every factor that went into developing his character, no matter how arbitrary it may seem, is rooted in something relevant. I had a lot of mental adventures working out his story, but those explanations belong to the prequel—Keshu's story.

For the purpose of simplicity in writing and not overloading the reader, I have limited the characters and scope of my novel; several people who deserve to be mentioned are either omitted or only briefly touched upon. One such is Appa Kasar, Savarkar's devoted bodyguard. He was my inspiration for Keshu's role as Savarkar's bodyguard—including the torture—and so I couldn't very well have him as a character in my novel. I do regret that very much.

The website, www.savarkar.org, is a wonderful website for comprehensive material on Savarkar. My write-up on the architecture of the Cellular Jail—which I was fortunate enough to visit—and my translation of Savarkar's poems are uploaded there.

The following notes can be read before or after the main novel at the discretion of the reader; they do reveal key parts of the story.

Chapters 1-7

- I have used Savarkar's own words recorded in his *My Transportation for Life* to develop his dialogues.
- The dates of the events in the Cellular Jail are not always accurate, as they were unavailable. The events occurred somewhere within the time frame.
- Keshu's experiences in jail are taken from the true-life experiences of the political prisoners. The electric shocks were applied to Babarao.
- Vishrambaug Wada was not being used as a prison at the time.
- The jail disciplinary system was made up of tindals, jamadars, petty officers, and warders, but I have used only warders for simplicity.
- Molestation of young convicts was a regular occurrence in the Cellular Jail, and Savarkar was vigilant in saving those he could.

His first instance of saving a young boy from molestation was in 1913. Based on this fact I determined the whole of Keshu's character, age, his story etc. so that he could be brought to the Cellular Jail in 1913. I considered it a most effective entrance for Savarkar and a way of forming an immediate bond—so essential to my novel—between Savarkar and Keshu. The actual description of the scene itself is fictional and I developed the whole scenario from Savarkar's accounts of Barrie and of such situations.

- Dara, Sarfaraz Khan, Bhaskar, Bimal Ganguly, Raghu, Dhondupant, and Mrs. Mary Scott are not real characters, but characters I have made up to illustrate life as it was in the Andaman Penal Colony.
- Dr. Ayer, Mangaram, and Parikh are fictional names I have given to real characters.

- The conversation about “two life sentences” had taken place earlier in a mainland jail between Savarkar and another jailer.
- Barrie’s conversation of “night and day” was in reality not with Nanigopal but with someone else.
- Sir Reginald Craddock was knighted in 1923.
- The attempted poisoning of Savarkar is a true event; that the poisoners came from the Malabar area is fictional.
- The Keshu-Mirza confrontation, Savarkar seeing the peacock, and the Keshu-Mrs. Mary Scott scene are fictional incidents.
- Lala Lajpat Rai’s article was actually written in June 1916.
- The episodes with the Chinese convict, the credulous one, and Parikh happened later in Indian mainland jails.
- Gandhi’s comment on the Armenian Genocide being a rumor is a fact, that Savarkar mentions it to Babarao is my fiction. I made it a *point* to hunt out a Gandhi-quote on it since I wanted to mention the Armenian Genocide as a tribute to my husband, Kapriel Vahan Cinar, who passed away on October 4, 2002. Recognition of the Armenian Genocide was a subject close to his heart.

Chapter 8

- Pongur is a fictional village.
- Details of the Moplah riots are true to the accounts of it.
- The correct sound of a properly wielded sharp sword would be “HIS-S-S-SHT” and not “SWOO-O-O-SH.”

Chapter 9

- Keshu-Lakshmi romance is fiction.
- The temple in Aundh is extant.
- Savarkar did have his secret meetings on the Hanuman Tekdi and the surrounding hills.
- The temple atop Hanuman Tekdi did not have a bell.
- Vijaydurg is my granduncle’s home.

- My great-grandfather, Ramchandra Sathe (himself a widower), married a thirty-five-year-old widow, Venutai Namjoshi, in 1917. He took this bold step in the teeth of severe opposition by society when even the great reformers advocated remarriage of child-widows only. I take much pride in this! Venutai lived in Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve's Mahilashram for widows and orphan girls in Hingne. A wing has been dedicated to her memory there.

Chapter 10

- The full names of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League are: Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha and All India Muslim League respectively.
- Shera is not the real name of the hit man sent to kill Savarkar.
- The change of plans on Acharya Atre's say-so happened at an earlier date.
- The Jodhpur Palace incident actually took place in 1956. Jadhav and Bahadur are fictional characters. The palace description is imaginary.
- Savarkar's speech is an amalgamation of his various speeches.

Chapter 11

- Vishwasrao has noted their problems in school in his memoirs; possibly the school concerned was in Ratnagiri and not Bombay.
- Mai used to call Shantabai Lakshmi, not Shante.
- The family dinner incident actually happened, but the reason why Savarkar did puja for Shantabai is my interpretation.
- The scene in the car with Bapat occurred at a later date.
- Mohite and Kambli are fictional, but such conversations with Babarao were a frequent occurrence. He always

carried the article in his pocket and showed it to people as proof.

Chapter 12

- The jail scene is an amalgamation of a few real accounts. All the characters were participants but were not necessarily there in the same jail or at the same time.
- Moghe is fictional.

Chapter 14-15

- There is a great paucity of material regarding Savarkar's breakdown and recovery. While the bare facts are available and true, the conversations and thoughts I have attributed to the various characters are a product of my imagination and my own personal experiences.
- The actual date of Savarkar's suspected heart attack is January 20, 1946.
- The description of Seth Gulabchand's home is imaginary.

Chapter 16

- Dutt in Noakhali is fictional. The incident is coined from accounts available.
- Mountbatten and Gandhi's conversation actually took place on June 4, 1947. Mountbatten had gotten an urgent message that morning from the Congress members saying that they feared Gandhi would denounce the Plan and its acceptance. Mountbatten immediately asked for a meeting with Gandhi and the conversation took place.

Chapter 17-18

- The conversations between Savarkar and Nathuram Godse are developed from available sources, especially Nathuram's statement in court.
- The Keshu-Nathuram meeting on January 16 is a mere fictional scenario I am presenting of what *could* have

happened when Nathuram visited Savarkar Sadan, as given in the time line in Manohar Malgonkar's book.

- The conversation following it between Savarkar, Keshu, and Gajanan is also fictional.
- I am not sure which jail Gajanan Damle was actually taken to; from Savarkar Sadan he was taken to the Police Commissioner's office near Crawford Market.

Chapter 19

- Gadre and Sakharam are fictional.

Introduction

The day—July 8, 1910; the hour—early morning; the place—the harbor at Marseilles, France. As the fingers of dawn curled across the sky, a tiny figure wriggled out of the porthole from the belly of the *SS Morea* and took the historic leap into the ocean, the cry “Hail! Victory to Mother India!” on his lips. That was the twenty-seven-year-old Vinayak Damodar Savarkar devoted heart and soul from childhood to just one cause: India for the Indians!

By the early 1900s, Indians were brainwashed into being satisfied with their slave status under the British rule. In this ambience, Savarkar—a Chitpavan Brahmin Hindu with the blood of the warrior Peshwas² flowing through his veins—was the first freedom fighter to proclaim that nothing less than total independence would do for India. Certainly, more drastic measures were required than the mewling of the Indian National Congress³ to the British government for mere concessions for India. Savarkar applied his considerable brilliance, intelligence, and charm to the problem. He established Abhinav Bharat, his secret revolutionary society, which spread surely and swiftly within India. In July 1906, at the age of twenty-three, he set off for London, ostensibly to become a barrister. In reality his goals were manifold: studying the British law to circumvent it in his mission; spreading patriotism in the hearts of the intelligentsia of India, the

² Prime Ministers of the Maratha rulers wielding the actual power.

³ To be referred to as Congress throughout the novel.

Indian youth studying there; contacting revolutionaries of other countries and making a common cause for freedom of all slave countries; and making the plight of India an international issue.

This young lion was extraordinarily successful in his mission. The British realized the danger Savarkar posed to their empire. But they had only enough proof to make a case against him for supplying arms to India. To doom him for eternity on that flimsy evidence, he *had* to be extradited to India. The laws there were molded, like putty, to quash the first sign of any threat to the British Empire. They had no grounds for it, though. Desperate, they tangled Savarkar in a concocted charge by using a speech he had given four years earlier in India! A warrant was then issued to extradite him to Bombay, India. He was charged with sedition, waging war against the King of England, and procuring and distributing arms in London and India. After a few gyrations by the courts in London, to circumvent Savarkar's valid legal appeals that he be tried in England, an order was issued to execute the warrant. Now the Jaws of Hell—the judiciary system of India—could swallow him whole!

And here he was on this day making a final bid to escape just that fate. He swam single-mindedly until he reached the nine-foot high quay wall. At the second attempt—with *only* the grout between the dressed stone of the wall for toes and fingertips to grip!—he scaled that sheer wall. *Incredibly*, he had made it . . . ! He now had a right to claim asylum in France. But no—he was not yet safe; his guards were chasing after him down the ramp to the quay. With no time to even catch his breath after that courageous, daredevil escape, he ran for his life—the guards hot on his heels. Seeing a French sergeant, he stopped and tried desperately to communicate his plight to him. But it was too late . . . ! His guards swooped down upon him in *French* jurisdiction—quite, *quite* illegally—and dragged him willy-nilly back to the *Morea*—trampling all over the territorial sovereignty of France in the process.

His escape plan had failed, but in this failure was also success. Such gross miscarriage of justice would not, *could* not, be swept under the rug. An international hue and cry was raised. Savarkar's heroic escape and the treachery of the British were exposed throughout the world. But the die was cast. Savarkar was now at the mercy of the British to do with him as they pleased. He was sentenced to a total of fifty years transportation⁴ to the Cellular Jail in the remote and dreaded Andaman Islands.

The British had hoped, no doubt, that this was the last they would hear of this Prince of the Revolutionaries. They could not have been more wrong. At sixteen, he had taken an oath to fight for the freedom of his beloved country—Mother India *must* be freed from the British stranglehold; her honor *must* be reinstated! And even under the most *horrendous* conditions, there was never a day, never a moment, that Savarkar swerved from his path.

He suffered within the walls of the Cellular Jail from July 4, 1911, until May 21, 1921; he was then transferred to the Indian mainland jails as the Andaman Penal Colony was closed down. Hard labor, even being yoked to the oil mill like a bullock, was his lot for almost thirteen long years before he was conditionally released—though not set free—from jail on January 6, 1924.

Throughout his life, Savarkar remained ever uncompromising of his principles and duty. He says in his poem, *Upon the Death Bed*:

Those for the essence of the welfare of the human race,
 Only such deeds did I consider to be righteous.
 Joyously have I borne this burden of my duty,
 Ever true to my oath have I been.

He stood, unequivocally, for freedom and equality of all people. His ultimate political goal was a World Commonwealth

⁴ Exile to a penal colony.

of Nations. Savarkar believed that Hindus could work toward freedom and equality in the whole world. But first they needed to be free themselves.

Hail! Attaining freedom themselves—
To uphold the cause of love and equality,
For the protection of the good people—
The Hindus shall set free the world!⁵

To this end he developed and published the concept of Hindutva in 1923—while still incarcerated—and later put forward his basis for a constitution for free India. The heritage and history of Hindustan⁶ is age-old, going back thousands of years before the birth of the three great monotheistic religions. The people of Hindustan should feel a sense of belonging to it; Hindustan should be their fatherland⁷ and their holy land. That is the crux of Savarkar’s Hindutva. As Savarkar puts it:

O Beloved Hindustan, you are
Our holy land! Our fatherland!
Our honor and our pride!⁸

In 1937, Savarkar once again burst upon the political scene of India, free after twenty-seven years of British bondage. India was in dire straits; the political milieu then was one of Muslim appeasement, one of sacrificing Hindu rights. Injustice to

⁵ Quote from the translation of Savarkar’s poem, *Hark What the Future Portends*.

⁶ Age-old name of India. Meaning of Hindustan is “Land of the Hindus.”

⁷ In Hindutva, perspective of Hindustan is *pitrubhumi*, “the Land of the Ancestors.” *Fatherland* is the closest English translation of that Sanskrit word.

In the freedom movement, perspective of Hindustan is *matrubhumi*—motherland—the Divine Mother who gives birth to and nurtures the Hindustanis.

⁸ Quote from the translation of Savarkar’s poem, *Beloved Hindustan*.

anyone was intolerable to Savarkar. Undeterred by adverse publicity, maligning, or misrepresentation by his detractors, he fought to defend the rights of the Hindus; he fought to preserve the integrity of India, to reinstate the honor of his motherland without ripping her heart out or chopping off her arms and legs.

Burning for freedom, his heart beat but one refrain:

O Goddess of Freedom,
Life is to die for you,
Death is to live without you!⁹

⁹ Quote from the translation of Savarkar's poem, *Hail to You!*

Savarkar's Proposed Guidelines for the National Constitution of Hindustan

- (A) Hindustan from the Indus to the Seas will and must remain as an organic nation and integral centralized state.
- (B) The residuary powers shall be vested in the Central Government.
- (C) All citizens shall have equal rights and obligations irrespective of caste or creed, race or religion—provided they avow and owe an exclusive and devoted allegiance to the Hindustani State.
- (D) The fundamental rights of conscience, of worship, of association etc. will be enjoyed by all citizens alike; whatever restrictions will be imposed on them in the interest of the public peace and order or national emergency will not be based on any religious or racial considerations alone but on common national ground.
- (E) “One man, one vote” will be the general rule irrespective of creed, caste, race, or religion.
- (F) Representation in the Legislature etc. shall be in proportion to the population of the majority and minorities.
- (G) Services shall go by merit alone.
- (H) All minorities shall be given effective safeguards to protect their language, religion, culture etc. but none of them shall be allowed to create “a state within a state” or to encroach upon the legitimate rights of the majority.
- (I) All minorities may have separate schools to train their children in their own tongue, religion, or culture, and can receive government help also for these, but always

in proportion to the taxes they pay into the common exchequer.

- (J) In case the constitution is not based on joint electorates and on the unalloyed national principle of one man one vote but is based on the communal basis, then those minorities who wish to have separate electorates or reserve seats will be allowed to have them, but always in proportion to their population and provided that it does not deprive the majority also of an equal right in proportion to its population too.

PART I

Prologue

February 1913, India

Barrister Madhavrao Phadke paced his cabin, back and forth. He had been at it for hours—no, *days*. The luxury of the cabin went unheeded. The curtains, too, were drawn across the porthole; he couldn't bear the sight of the sun's rays twinkling gaily on the brilliant blue water of the Arabian Sea. Oh, the cruel, cruel ocean, taking his beloved nephew far away to his doom! Oh God! Oh God! If only he could turn the clock back, if *only*! He didn't want to be here. Tomorrow he would disembark at the port of Calicut and head for his sister Mohini's house in Pongur. He had the most horrendous news to tell her. How should he do it? With what face could he tell her? What comfort could he offer her?

He stopped pacing and looked blankly up at the ceiling, brow furrowed, one hand pinching the bridge of his nose, the other running desperately through his hair. For days—since December 31—he had himself under rigid control. His house of glass had shattered that night when he held his dead son in his arms. Since then, he was living a lie. He flung himself in the armchair, his body wracked by sobs, both palms pressed tightly, very tightly, over his mouth. No sobbing sound should be heard on the outside. It wouldn't do to arouse curiosity. Even here, it wasn't safe. From now on, it would never be safe—anywhere. Always, always they would look worriedly over their shoulders.

Britain had established her empire here in India during the last hundred years or so. Indians were slaves in their own country. They had no constitution, no rights, *nothing!* While a few people were clamoring for some rights, still fewer—the revolutionaries—were trying to launch an offensive, against all odds. Under his very nose, living with him in his home in Poona, his nineteen-year-old son Damu and his fourteen-year-old nephew Keshu—a mere boy!—had become revolutionaries. He had had not the least idea how much they had loved their country, how very much they had yearned to free her from the British yoke. Both had been inspired to it by the charismatic, daredevil revolutionary, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Inspired by his writings and actions, certainly, for they had never seen him! His call to the Indian youth to save their motherland, to reinstate her honor, went straight to their hearts. Their plan to assassinate District Superintendent Glencowrie was successful. Though fatally wounded, Damu had escaped. He died shortly thereafter with a smile on his lips calling out to his Mother India—*oh Damu, Damu . . . !*

Keshu in his attempt to save Damu had become the latest victim of the British brutality. It didn't bear thinking about! Incredibly, young as he was, he had still managed to keep his identity secret as planned, just to protect them all. The British were as vicious and ruthless to the families of the revolutionaries as they were to the revolutionaries themselves. From now on, Keshu was no more Keshav Wadkar, son of Ramdas Wadkar of the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin caste. He was now Pulakeshiraj Soman, a Chitpavan Brahmin. Keshu had picked the name Pulakeshiraj after much thought. Pulakeshi II of the Chalukya dynasty was a renowned Indian king in the early 7th century. Also Keshu could still use his nickname—but that was all he could keep of his old life.

Madhavrao had schemed and arranged things so that he was Keshu's defense counsel; their relationship was kept secret. But other than saving Keshu some of the hardship of prison, there wasn't much more he could do. The British were *not* going to

acquit Keshu. They tried him in the Special Tribunal Court. There such details as concrete evidence or proof were not necessary, nor could appeals be made. A guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion. But the sentence . . . ! Transportation—banished to the Andaman Islands for twenty-five years. A harsh sentence for one so young, especially for a crime that could not be proved! For the next twenty-five years, Keshu was going to rot in a hellhole—if he survived. Not many did.

Savarkar was suffering in Andaman, too, sent there by *two* such contrived trials as Keshu's; his total sentence: transportation for fifty years. That was unheard of . . . ! The British certainly considered Savarkar very, very dangerous to the stability of their empire. They were on the rampage, punishing all Indian leaders with the capacity to stir the nation. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was banished to Mandalay three thousand miles away, Aurobindo Ghosh was nullified, and so many others found themselves in jail or transported on the flimsiest of charges. What Britain wanted was a safe politician in India—someone whom the Indians would love, but who would not threaten their empire. *Ha!* What a hope—where would they find such a one?

Madhavrao commenced his pacing again. He blocked his mind to everything except what he would say to his sister. Her life had been miserable enough so far; first the trials of an inter-caste marriage—their family was Chitpavan Brahmin—then she was widowed at fifteen with a baby to care for. Widows were pariahs in Hindu society. They suffered unspeakable injustice at the hands of society. As an outcast, Mohini had chosen to live a secluded but independent life in her home in Pongur—near Ramdas's hometown, Calicut—rather than be dependent on him in Poona. Her Keshu, *only* her Keshu, was her life, her joy, her solace. She had entrusted his care to him, her brother, and he had failed her in the worst possible way. Tomorrow he would have to tell her that! Somehow from now until then he would have to find the words to break this news to her. But how? *How?*

Chapter One

February-March 1913, India

Febbruary 22: Keshav Wadkar awaited his doom in the Thane Jail. Shortly, he would be on his way to the Andaman Islands with a group of fearsome convicts, called the Chalan. The Chalan was confined to the barracks, bound hand and foot, but were the convicts sobbing with grief? Railing and ranting against their fate? No! Just for a night or two, until dispatched safely from this jail, the Chalan was in control. The warders cajoled and pleaded with the convicts to behave and even doled out the much-prized tobacco leaf as a bribe. But would the worst convicts from all of India slip away like common criminals? Never!

They constantly egged each other on: “You fools! Keep the reputation of our Chalan. Bang your pots, rattle your chains, break the walls! Come on! Come on! Be its jealous guardian!”

Coarse and foul language echoed amidst peals of demoniac laughter. Walls collapsed and bars rattled; some convicts were whipped, others had their heads knocked together. But the pandemonium thrived unabated.

Keshu huddled on his blanket in despair, covering his ears with trembling fingers. He had suffered—oh God, *how* he had suffered!—in solitary confinement this month past. He had begged God, in pitifully weak moments, for some human contact. Was the Chalan—a human contact by the bucketful . . . !—the answer to his prayers? His head pounded.

His brain screamed. He sobbed helplessly. Some convicts made fun of him, jeering at him for being a baby. He was past caring. Already he was reduced to this abject state. Just *how* was he going to survive in Andaman?

After sentencing, he was whisked away from the District Court straight to the Yerawada Jail in the outskirts of Poona—with not the barest of farewells to Madhavrao. What was his family doing now? How was his mother bearing up? He didn't know—he *couldn't* know! He was Keshav Wadkar, her son, no more. This lost and lonely pitiful soul was Pulakeshiraj Soman. Oh God! He had lost them forever. *O Ma, forgive me! Forgive me!* More sobs wracked his body. The euphoria of boldly facing the persecutors of his Mother India, of justifying Damu's death—*oh Damu, Damu . . . !*—by saying his piece in court that had seen him through the trial was long gone.

Inexorably, his thoughts went to the past days in Yerawada Jail. His pretrial stay in Vishrambaug Wada Jail had been a slice of heaven compared to his life there. With no Madhavrao to protect him now, he was at the mercy of the jailers. Solitary confinement, meals served in the cell with a piss-pot in the cell as the only toilet facility; no walks, no outdoors except to the bathing area when a bath was permitted; no books and no writing materials; wearing coarse prison clothes and no footwear—such was his life there.

At first, he had diligently applied himself to an exercise regime to maintain his tall, muscular build and stamina, and to pass the time. Thoughts of Damu, Mother India, and of course, his hero Savarkar were his only solace. Would he meet Savarkar soon in Andaman? Would he . . . ? In the dark, dark abyss of despair, he clung tenuously to this hope. So five days had passed. On the sixth day he was given a heap of grain and a stone grinder. All day he ground grain. Being strong, he met the required quota. Each day the quantity was increased. By the fifth day, it was impossible to do so. *That* gave the warder all the opportunity he needed.

“You dog! You wretch! You kill our chief and yet dare to shirk your work here!” cried the warder, using his baton to hammer blows upon Keshu’s unsuspecting shoulder.

Stunned, Keshu instinctively caught the baton.

“Shamshulbhai, Azizbhai! Come quickly! The convict is getting violent!”

Before he knew it, Keshu was locked up in standing handcuffs. For a week, he stood stretched against the wall during the day, hands overhead—dirty, dispirited, and alone—with no break for food or nature’s call and no bath at all. At night he crashed on his blanket trying to hold body and soul together. He saw no one except the sweeper who cleaned his piss-pot and the warders who brought his two meals and strung him up—and that only for a few moments; then followed a day of more grinding of grain. Of course, with his aching arms he could not complete his quota, so back it was to the standing handcuffs. As he stood, his head drooped wearily on his arm. It was impossible to stand proud, quite impossible! In the two and a half weeks of the tomblike silence he was even wishing for the much humiliating latrine arrangements of Vishrambaug Wada—the communal, public, sit shoulder-to-shoulder and do your business routine. At least that way he saw and spoke to someone. *How the mighty have fallen*, he mocked himself. *Is Damu regretfully shaking his head at me from up there? Does he fear that I am weak? Does he despair that I shall crumble? Stiffen up, Keshu, stiffen up. How much worse can it get?* He found out soon enough.

An English officer, very polite and respectful, came to his cell. He was released from the cuffs. *How extraordinary*, thought Keshu suspiciously. Sure enough, the officer was trying to get him to talk about the conspiracy. He had told them nothing, even through the trial—no names, nor how they had plotted to kill Glencowrie; nothing except his false identity and a false age, sixteen years. But the British government, apparently, had not yet given up on him.

“Mr. Soman, you are at our mercy now. Tell us all you know.”

“Officer, I can only repeat that I have nothing to say.”

“Be careful, young man. Do you see this contraption in my hand? It is an electrical battery. Hardened criminals have broken down with one application from it!”

Keshu’s heart contracted. How ominous it sounded!

The officer continued, “Why look for trouble? Tell all. Perhaps we can get you a pardon.”

Keshu laughed sarcastically. The officer proceeded forthwith to put wires on him. Spasm after spasm rocked his body as the shocks were applied. He cried out in anguish. This was torture indeed! They alternated questions with shock until he was senseless, but Keshu did not break. He did not know *how* he would survive his exile, or if indeed he could. But one thing was certain, his lips were sealed. The safety of a lot of people depended on his silence. They left him swooning on the floor. After three days they gave up. He was back to solitary confinement, unmolested by anyone.

On the twentieth he was woken up early, allowed to bathe and change, and brought to the Thane Jail. A doctor had checked him out and declared him fit; now here he was in the thick of this turbulent disorder.

Two nights of this rumpus, and thankfully they were on their way. The authorities by no means made their travel easy. Each convict had fetters on his feet attached to the waist with heavy chains. Around their neck was a metal ring with a “ticket,” a wooden badge stamped with their number and status. Keshu was a “D” grade convict, “very dangerous” category, like all the political prisoners. In addition, two convicts were handcuffed together. So they walked, barefoot, in a double line all the way to the railway station. Along every inch of the road people gawked, amused to see men being herded like cattle. Gathering every ounce of willpower, Keshu walked tall every humiliating step of the way—attached to the sweaty wrist of a fearsome convict by one arm, clutching his bedding under the other with a bowl in his hand. The sun was very hot, but he truly appreciated it and the fresh air. These had become rare luxuries in his life.

He breathed every lungful gratefully, remaining determinedly oblivious to the dirt and stones that harassed his unwary feet.

Too soon, they were cooped up in the train compartment. For three days and nights this miserable mass of humanity huddled together, still maintaining their state of uproar. There was not much else to do. The train streaked through wonderful scenic landscape, towns and cities, up the hill and down. But the Chalan saw none of it. The windows were kept shut. The boxed-in heat turned the compartment into a furnace. They traveled sitting, moving only to answer nature's call. Keshu shuddered from doing even that for, of course, he had to take his companion along. This was a wretched, *wretched* state of affairs.

They walked three miles to the pier from the Madras station. Here their handcuffs were cut off. The Chalan, feet still fettered, was piled into a small boat and taken out to the SS *Maharaja*, the ship plying trade from the ports of Calcutta, Madras, and Rangoon to the Andaman Islands. In the dark belly of this ship one end was portioned off by strong iron bars—a veritable cage! Into this cage they went. It was hardly big enough to accommodate so many. By the time they spread their bedding, there was not an inch to spare between any two on any side. There were only three tiny portholes located high up, supposedly providing ventilation. But they were no match for this stinking, reeking mass of miserable humanity. Mental pain and physical agony all had merged together. To Keshu it hardly mattered anymore. One had to hand it to the British—they were innovative in their inhuman treatment of convicts!

February 27: The *Maharaja* left the shores of Madras, sailing over the heartless ocean, taking these poor souls to untold, unimaginable horrors in the beautiful Andaman Islands. Some jumped at the window to catch a last glimpse of their motherland. Keshu was not one of them. Tears froze in his eyes as the wails of “Our homeland is left behind. Oh God, we are adrift!” swirled around him. He sat miserably on his

blanket; lying down was impossible—it brought him in touch with his sweaty, dirty, smelly neighbors on all sides. He closed his eyes to blank out the reality, but there was no escaping it.

The unnatural hilarity now subsided to a melancholy gloom. The convicts—illiterate, coarse, low, and the worst rogues—talked to Keshu kindly, if roughly, and tried to move their bedding to give him more breathing room. They held him in some respect for killing Glencowrie; they had no love at all for the police. This unlooked-for kindness brought more tears to Keshu’s eyes. But relief from the wretchedness was impossible.

There were two casks in the corner, which served as their toilet. For five unrelieved days, they all used it for their nature calls. Some were seasick and couldn’t make it to the casks in time. The throw-up was right there on the floor, bedding—wherever. It was a pitiable situation. Keshu tried hard to dissociate his body from his mind. Even the words of the Bhagavad Gita¹⁰ brought him no solace—impossible to overlook the filth and stench in the airless gloom. Oh, he was ever so very far from achieving that august state of the yogic mind! Was it only the arrogance of youth that had made him confident about withstanding torture and pain?

March 3: The *Maharaja* dropped anchor in Port Blair, Andaman. As he came out of the deep bowels of the ship, the full glory of the astoundingly beautiful Andaman Islands burst upon Keshu’s senses. It was an enchanting place! What irony that such a land of beauty should house the most desolate and desperate of human beings, inhumanly treated by a lordly handful!

The Andaman is a group of inhospitable islands with dense forests and high mountain peaks. Their beauty is an illusion except on the island of Ross which is developed, with as many creature comforts as possible, for the residence of the British officers. Development was done by the blood

¹⁰ One of the sacred books of the Hindus.

and sweat of the prisoners, many of them veterans of the Indian War of Independence of 1857. It rains here for the better part of the year. Malaria is a real and constant threat. The local animal life—insects, leeches, snakes, and boars—is very vicious. Birds—crows, sparrows, kites, cranes, bulbul, and even peacocks—have been imported here by the British. The natives, the primitive Jarawas, are unfriendly and shoot poisoned arrows to kill on sight. The jungle duty is the most feared duty of all.

The Chalan was taken to the shore by a little boat. From the pier a long, steep ascent led up to the Atlanta point, culminating in the majestic Silver Jail, the crowning glory of Port Blair. Its golden turreted façade stretched wide. A tall, graceful peepal, the fig tree so sacred to the Hindus, peeped over its roof. The backdrop of long, *very* long, three-storied red-bricked wings with arched façades was awe inspiring.

The gigantic wings, numbered as blocks one to seven clockwise from the left of the entrance, converged like the spokes of a wheel into a central tower called *gomati*. An outer wall circled the boundary, touching each wing as it went, forming self-contained units. The walls stretching from block two and seven met at the two ends of the entrance building. The front of each wing overlooked the back of the next. The wings, unequal in length, had rows of individual 13' x 7' cells on every level. A wide barred veranda ran in front of them. The only lighting facility in the whole block was a lamp at each end of this veranda on every level. A staircase near the gomati end was the only access to the cells. On every story, a narrow walkway beyond this connected the blocks to the gomati. A barred gate stood between the block and this walkway.

The gomati was nothing more than a big central room with seven open arches encircled by a passage to receive the walkways from the blocks at each level. It had no staircase of its own. The only access to the roof of all the blocks was by a wooden staircase from the third story of the gomati. The gomati had one more level housing the bell.

Each self-contained yard had a workshop, a 15' x 1½' reservoir for bathing and washing purposes, and a toilet block. Some had wells for drinking water. Block 6 had workshops at the top level. Some first-floor cells in block 1 were reserved for hospital use. The yard behind the entrance had the double-story hospital to the left and gallows and the kitchens to the right. Block 1 ended just before the hospital building.

This distinctive architecture of the Silver Jail, designed to totally isolate the convict—from human contact, from nature, from anything that might, just *might*, gladden his soul for a brief moment—was entirely successful in its goal. Popularly called Cellular Jail, it was nothing more than a mammoth torture chamber.

And *yet* from the pier it beckoned warmly. How very like a palace it looked, with its outer trappings cunningly disguising the evil within. *Would this be just like a holiday camp?* wondered the stricken convicts. *Perhaps, just perhaps, we might find comfort and solace here?*

With this hazy fantasy glazing their eyes, the convicts hobbled up the path, clanking their chains. It was rough going. That gave the warders a chance to administer discipline. Thwack! Thwack! They wielded their batons skillfully on the backs of the poor convicts.

“Hurry up, you animal!”

“Are you dead? Move! Move!” they encouraged in the sweet way they had.

And it did, surely *did*, persuade the poor, tired miserable souls to push harder. At last they reached their “palace.”

The Chalan was held in the entrance hall. The front and back of this hall had no walls, only iron bar grilles with gates. A narrow flight of six or seven steps led to the offices on the left and right. Above these, on the walls, were hideous weapons of torture; heavy shackles for the feet, and metal bands for the arms competed with bayonets and handcuffs. A festoon of manacles of every size and shape was worked into the form of flowers. It was grotesque!

The words “Mr. Barrie is here! Mr. Barrie is here!” circulated through the room. Keshu had read about this terrifying jailer in the reports the political prisoners had managed to smuggle out to the newspapers. A most ridiculous figure swaggered to the top of the steps. Keshu gaped. This mere midget—five feet tall and some three feet across, with round eyes and a flat, reddened nose, his globe-like belly encircled by a wide-buckled leather belt, and a fat, four-inch long cigar sticking out from under his bristly mustache—*this* was the Terror of the Cellular Jail? *Impossible!* But so it was. Barrie in his long years of service had consolidated a tyrannical rule, using the worst of the criminals as staff to run the jail. Only recently had the terror system been receiving some jolts by the advent of the political prisoners.

“Listen, prisoners. Do you know where you are? You are in my kingdom. I am God in this little world!” This was Barrie’s set speech, meant to cast the Chalan into throes of terror. “There is one God in heaven, but he does not come within three miles of Port Blair! My name is David Barrie. These red turbans you see here are the warders. Follow their orders implicitly, for they give them at my command. Beware—I will show no mercy to those who disobey me. This place is impossible to escape from. Where will you go? The sea surrounds the island for a thousand miles. In the forest there are only boars, and of course, the leeches that will suck the blood out of you. Then there are the cannibal Jarawas. They will eat you—yes, eat you! So be warned!”

This tirade licked the already subdued and drained Chalan into a suitable shape. Barrie was immensely pleased. He thrived on bullying.

Then their fetters were cut off, as also was the *janeyu*¹¹ of the Hindus. The jail authority didn’t dare cut the beard of the Muslim or the hair of the Sikh, but the mild-natured Hindus were fair game! The Chalan trooped into the yard toward the

¹¹ Sacred thread worn by three Hindu castes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya.

reservoir. Each was handed a strip of cloth barely big enough to cover the genitals. Swallowing his embarrassment, Keshu hastily donned the miniscule strip. It was going to be heavenly to feel that cool water against his filthy, grimy body. He went to dip his bowl.

“Halt!” cried the warder. “Wait for my command! Use three bowls, no more!”

What unwarranted meanness! Why were the authorities so stingy? But no one cared to argue with the warder. And so they all awaited his indulgence.

“Now!” he barked.

Even this measured quantity of water was a joy to experience as it cascaded down the body. Eagerly, Keshu took some in his unbrushed, unclean mouth to gargle—and spluttered. Salt water . . . ! The Cellular Jail special! Apparently they would have the dubious pleasure of having sea water for bathing and cleaning. Sticky body, spiky hair, and nasty mouth joined by a heaving stomach—that was the result of the first refreshing bath in several days. *Will I ever get used to this?* thought Keshu agitatedly. Before leaving the reservoir, they were given two sets of shorts and sleeveless shirts of rough cotton, and a cap. No footwear, of course. *That* was a luxury of the bygone days.

Keshu was taken to block 6 and housed in a middle cell on the second story. The warder gave him a rough shove in, clanged shut the barred door, and latched it. The cell contained just two items: a low plank and the familiar piss-pot. That’s it. Besides the narrow door there was only one other opening, a small window set very high up. Barely any light dared to venture in through its awning. The whitewashed walls glowed eerily in the gloom. How like a cavern it was! The slightly curved ceiling heightened this effect. Desperately, Keshu tried peering up through the window, but all he could see was the underside of its deep, sloped awning. He rushed to the door. All that was visible through it was the barred arch of the veranda and a bit of the blank rear wall of block 7 beyond it. Even by craning his neck at all angles he could see no more. *Oh God! Oh God!*

He sank to the floor, overcome by the total sense of isolation. Eyes tightly shut, silent tears coursing down his cheeks, he crouched clinging to the bars. Surely he would go mad in a few days in this tomb? *What next?* he thought with dread. He opened his eyes; from this low position on the floor he could see the sky above . . . ! How welcome was the sight! Eagerly, he stretched out his hands toward that brightness. His spirit was so, so alone in this hostile territory. If only he could find one kindly soul, if only . . . Somewhere here was his hero, his guru, but how to find him? How to let him know he was here? In what state was Savarkar? How had the authorities used that valiant spirit?

By the time the warder was back again, Keshu had managed to find a modicum of composure, but his head was pounding. He was escorted to the hospital. A cursory examination declared him fit. Realizing that if he didn't speak up for himself he'd be utterly lost, Keshu mentioned his headache. The doctor didn't care. But Barrie heard Keshu.

"You are not here one day and already you lie, you bombgolawala?¹² What headache, huh, what headache? Show me!"

"Sir . . . how . . . how can I show you a headache?"

"It's all lies, lies! You just want to shirk work, a big strong boy like you!"

"No, sir!" said Keshu, valiantly holding his ground. "I just want some medicine. I will do the work."

"Medicine? Ha!" jeered Barrie. "We give nothing without proof. You'll get used to our ways." That was that!

It was time for the lunch ritual. All the prisoners fell in line with their rusty iron plates in hand, rubbed their hands clean on the grass, and sat down—in the hottest part of the yard. The cook came and served the bread, rice, and a curry of what appeared to be leaves and twigs. The warders eyed the prisoners. With barely a wink they picked out their victims; those chosen

¹² One who makes/uses bombs.

handed over their bread to them, without a murmur! This was a daily fixture. Fortunately, it was not Keshu's fate today. He was hungry. Even this unappetizing food was a treat after days of dried lentils of the *Maharaja*. He broke a piece of bread and scooped the curry. *What* was this alien presence in his plate? He blinked and then jumped up in horror.

"Centipede! I have a centipede in my food!"

A warder stalked angrily to him. "Why are you standing up, you cretin? Sit down and eat quietly!"

"I cannot eat it." Outrage made him bold. "There is a centipede in my food!"

The warder looked in his plate, put a grubby finger in the food, and picked the offending culprit out. With one flick the centipede was cast off into the wide space.

"Show me this centipede," he demanded.

"I just did, and you threw it away!"

Barrie bustled into the yard. "What is all this shouting? Oh, it's you again, bombgolawala! How much fuss and trouble you make. You have more lies?"

Keshu realized the hopelessness of his situation. The warders and jailer were in collusion here. The proof was gone. He had nothing to show this self-proclaimed God. No one else, amazingly enough, was complaining. An insect was probably a regular savory to the sauce here! *Lump it, Keshu, just lump it*, he warned himself. He sat down and ate, choking on every morsel. It was impossible to leave some food unfinished, either! The warder was right there, slapping his baton on his hand.

"No wasting food here in jail. Eat every last bite!"

And that is what Keshu did. Ironically, he noticed some convicts had not finished eating; their plates were forcibly taken away and the food trashed.

For the rest of the day he was left alone in his cell to pass time in desperation, swatting flies and mosquitoes. After the evening meal, it was time to take the daily bath. On with the teeny loin cloth and off to the reservoir! Keshu was striking in appearance: tall, broad, and muscular; with chiseled features,

straight nose, and wide brow; and typical Chitpavan Brahmin light eyes, hair, and skin—a legacy from his mother. Exposed under the eyes of these convicts, he cringed. Some just stood and ogled him. *Oh for the familiar Chalan!* wished Keshu. The warder, Dara, even had the temerity to stroke his muscles.

“Wah, *chikne*,¹³ what a bod!” he marveled.

Keshu shrank, beating his hand off. The beast just laughed, stroking his beard.

“Turn around, turn around. Let us see you from every angle.”

This was awful. Why was this man gloating over his body? Oh, the shame of it all! *Oh, Mother Earth, hide me in your bosom*, he prayed. But no, he stayed right there, all but naked with so many greedy eyes feasting upon him. Then his savior arrived. A huge giant of a Pathan came to his side and put a protective arm around his shoulders.

“Dara, leave the boy alone. He is tender meat. Find someone your weight to play with.”

Dara cracked out a loud laugh and left. Keshu could have wept with relief. He looked gratefully at the Pathan.

“Thank you, kind sir!”

The giant squeezed his shoulder. A little frisson of alarm chased down Keshu’s spine. He was not comfortable with this brawny arm on his bare shoulder. How to say so without giving offense? The Pathan was saying, “I am Sarfaraz Khan. You can count on me any time. I will look out for you.”

Was this the kindly soul he had prayed for?

Every prisoner was locked up in his cell after dinner. The episode at the reservoir had completely unnerved Keshu. Enveloped in a blanket of darkness, he lay on his plank willing sleep to come. Desolate, he longed for his mother. “Ma, O Ma!” his heart cried. Plop! Something landed on his stomach. A lizard! Keshu jerked nervously, swatting it off. Next thing he knew, his plank had overturned—so delicately was it balanced—and

¹³ Smooth-faced one; good-looking one.

he landed on the floor with a bump. The lizard slithered off into the gloom. Keshu sat up, clutching his head hopelessly. “Ma, O Ma!” his heart cried again; then he heard a sob—an anguished, tortured, muffled sob. Was it his? But no, the sound was coming from the room to his right. Oh, what a wealth of wretchedness and despair was in that weeping!

“Hey!” he cried going to the wall, putting his lips close to it. “Hey, you are not alone here. Don’t cry, please!”

The crying continued, unabated. He rushed to the entrance and tried to rattle the bars. Somewhere from the roof of block 7 there was a coarse shout: “You there, go to sleep! Why do you trouble us so?”

It was useless to appeal to these stony-hearted creatures. Keshu disappeared to the back of his room. All night he huddled in the corner wrapped in a blanket, listening to the crying. He could hear it long after it had ceased. Would this be his state shortly?

At six o’clock, hollow-eyed, he began his day. Toilet facilities could only be used at fixed times and never during the working hours. The system was very familiar, but here they went one step further. The next in line were waiting right before the ones squatting and using it. Not a second could be wasted, apparently. At the blow of the whistle the exchange was done in a trice!

They were given a breakfast of *kanji*, gruel of boiled rice, made so it had the least possible taste. Keshu sniffed at it suspiciously. Kerosene in the *kanji*! Surreptitiously, he eyed his neighbors. Everyone was eating stolidly. Keshu followed suit. Why make the utterly fruitless protest?

Then there was the daily drill of checking the prisoners. The warders squeezed the maximum drama from this tedious ritual. All the prisoners had to stand in a perfectly straight line at the loud ringing of the bell. At each command from the warder they had to perform one action—pull off their shirt; fold it; place it on the ground. Next they would be checked and the reverse order would be followed. Were all these synchronized

moves really necessary? Surely that much freedom could be theirs? Anyone slightly out of tune got two wallops from the ever-ready baton. Anyone not perfectly in line was walloped too. There was no end to this walloping. Who to complain to? Warder to jailer they were all in cahoots. Keshu glared balefully at one warder. For his pains, he was struck harshly across the face. Such colossal nerve of the man! But all Keshu could do was stand impotently, fists tightly clenched.

“Eyes down,” yelled the monster. “Eyes down, I say.”

Keshu did not comply. Thwack! Another smack landed on his face with force enough to stagger him. This time he stood eyes downcast. It was being very painfully drilled into his head that he had to be a mild cow. Not the slightest challenge was going to be tolerated or overlooked. These were truly the gods of the jail!

Per a strike settlement made a few months before, Barrie had agreed to keep political prisoners away from the *kolu*, the oil mill. Nevertheless, Barrie put Keshu to work on it. Keshu had read much of this *kolu*. They all, including Savarkar, had been yoked to it—just like bullocks! Now it was his turn. What his guru had been made to do he could certainly do himself—and *without a murmur*, he told himself sternly. Carrying a fifty pound bag of coconuts on his back, bucket in hand, he climbed to the top story of block 6. The first thing he encountered as he entered the workshop was a brawny fist thrust at his nose, squashing it.

“You will do as I say and obey my every word!” commanded the warder. “We need thirty pounds of coconut oil by the end of the day.”

There was no arguing with that fist.

Keshu started his grind. The rod to be turned came at a height somewhere below his waist. Bending at an awkward angle he gripped it and pushed with all his might. Round and round he went yoked to the mill, muscles rippling powerfully, sweat rolling off his body. The warder began adding more and more coconut to the central container. Even with his strength,

it was hard going. How did the weaker men fare? But there was no room for idle thoughts. In ten minutes his throat was parched.

“Water, water!” he gasped.

He was given some with the warning that he could have only two cups all day. Keshu had no time to gape at this inhuman injunction. He had a quota to finish. His limbs felt paralyzed, but on and on he went. The lunch hour was the barest interval, just long enough to gulp the food down before going back to the mill. A cup of milk was served to the workers of the oil mill. Keshu got the merest whiff of his milk before the warder took the cup out of his hand and swigged it down his own throat. But at the end of the day, Keshu had his quota ready. Some poor soul was crying, for he was not so lucky. The warder was berating him and giving him a dose from the business end of the baton.

“See you, you sniveling rat. Now poor Barriesaab¹⁴ will have to give up his after-dinner leisure and supervise while you make up your quota. Trouble, that’s what you are!”

Well, that was one way of looking at it. Poor Barriesaab, indeed! There he would sit on his special carved chair—so like a wooden throne—gloating delightedly over the spectacle of a miserable scrap of humanity, broken in body and spirit, being spurred on by the vicious baton to turn the impossible kolu.

That evening at the reservoir his guardian was again hovering around him with a protective arm. Keshu was really uncomfortable. But perhaps it was better to tolerate this man who meant him well than to be exposed to all others who had evil eyes? Sarfaraz told him some funny anecdotes. Keshu even laughed; it was so long since he had done so. But when the time came to go back to the cell, he was relieved. There was something very disturbing about this—but just *what*?

Keshu was exhausted. Tomorrow was another hard day’s work. Laying down his aching bones on the plank, he slept. In

¹⁴ Saab, sahib, saheb: sir.

the pitch dark of the night his eyes shot open. There was that crying again; this time, not so muffled. What . . . ? Was that a bang? What could his neighbor be doing? Then he heard the plank fall, followed by a loud grunt—no more crying, only a muffled choking. In that second, Keshu leaped up and rushed to his door.

“Warder!” he shouted. “Warder!”

“What is it, you blasted troublemaker?” came a tired, angry voice. “Two days here and you have made so much fuss already.”

“Warder, my neighbor has hung himself, I think. Hurry! Hurry! Save him.”

That got the warder’s attention. Keshu could hear some action going on near the gomati. There followed the clatter of footsteps leading to his neighbor’s cell. But they were too late. The poor man had died. Keshu had not been able to save his life. How shattering! It was that easy to snuff out a life.

The next morning, over the tasteless kanji, his neighbor Bhaskar had information.

“Babu,¹⁵ that man was here for killing his wife, you know. All this work, work, work, and the beating when one has no strength for it . . . ! How much can the spirit take? He was so worried about his children too. He couldn’t take it anymore, I suppose”—*just how many lives were crushed out here?*—“there is another Bengalibabu, Ullaskar Dutt. He is in big trouble too.”

“Ullaskar Dutt! But he was one of the leaders in the Alipore bombing!”

Revolutionaries in Bengal were harassing the British with their bomb-throwing schemes. The British had captured and punished several revolutionaries in the Alipore Bomb Case. Many were here in the Cellular Jail.

“Yes. He is very unwell right now and punished with standing handcuffs.”

¹⁵ Gentleman.

Just then the warder swooped down upon them. Both were whacked for talking. This day passed by much like the day before. Keshu was impatient for the dinner hour, desperate to learn more from Bhaskar. But this evening he was not placed next to him. Talking was strictly forbidden for the political prisoners. Swift action was taken to separate him from Bhaskar.

At the reservoir he tried to pump Sarfaraz, who only laughed everything off.

“Why do you worry your brain? Leave others to their fate. You make sure of your comfort; I’ll help you with that.”

How very selfish and repulsive! But what can one expect from criminals, after all? Keshu had to retire to his cell frustrated. Thoughts of the dead Bimal Ganguly and poor Ullaskar Dutt preyed on his mind, haunting his soul in the eerie darkness. There was so much misery here. How many had died in his cell? The walls of this behemoth must be soaked with tears, the cells echoing with their groans and wails. Oh, what was that wailing? Another tormented soul lamenting his misfortune? No, no, it was only the wind. Hysteria was rising within him. With great effort he quashed it down. *This night, oh please God, he prayed fervently, let sleep be mine.*

But it was not to be. Blood-curdling howls shattered the peace of the night. Keshu rushed to his door again. *Was this how every night was going to be spent here? One poor soul after another caving in to the pressures of this atrocious life! What was happening? Oh, who was howling so? God, oh God, these cells . . . ! Why no light? Why were they built so that nothing was visible from them? What an absolute sense of isolation!* All night the silence was shattered by piercing, heartrending cries alternating with loud laughter and even some trills of birds and other animal sounds. *What is this?* Keshu wondered. *Has some poor soul lost his mind?* At this rate his own was going to shatter too! There was the cry again, “Ama . . . Ama!” Oh the poor, poor man, calling piteously for his mother so! The cries were pulling at Keshu’s heartstrings. The night passed yearning for his mother, aching for the unattainable.

The next morning, news that Ullaskar Dutt had become insane flew all over the jail. There was some talk of applying electric shock to him. Keshu was stunned. Electric shock! He shuddered in dread, his mind distraught by the memories of his own ordeal. Intermittently, horrible screams were resounding in the jail. The shocks being applied to poor Ullaskar! It was horrible, just horrible. Today he was not going to make his quota. He just could not push himself. The warder beat him with the baton.

“Move! Move, you big ox! Keep it turning!”

Keshu collapsed to the floor bawling like a baby. He was terribly ashamed of himself, but the racket would not stop. Even the warder was nonplussed. Then Sarfaraz was there. He lifted him up tenderly and himself finished the rest of Keshu’s quota. Keshu was ever so pathetically grateful.

At dinnertime, Sarfaraz surreptitiously brought a little present for Keshu, some fish that he had cooked himself, for he was allowed to prepare his own meals. Keshu loved fish—Gaud Saraswat Brahmins are fish eaters. He wolfed it down. But unfortunately, and with a little conniving by Sarfaraz, one of the Hindu inmates saw him.

Food for the Hindu convicts was cooked by Brahmins only. Hindu and Muslim seating arrangements were also kept strictly segregated, just to maintain the “purity”—paramount to the Hindus—of the Hindu convicts. Eating from a Muslim’s hand—*that* was an irredeemable blasphemy! *That* Hindu was a Hindu no more. The word of Keshu’s fall from grace swept swiftly around block 6; there was an uproar. The Hindu convicts refused to let Keshu sit down to eat with them. The warders at once came to investigate. Several voices babbled together.

“You cannot sit here now, you fool! Why did you do such a thing?” said one warder when at last the problem was understood.

“What did I do so wrong?”

“You broke the jail rule, for one thing. For another, you, a Hindu, ate from a Muslim’s hand. You are now an outcaste!”

Was there no end to the tragedies? How ridiculous to be cast away, no more a Hindu, on the authority of these convicts. Even *here* they clung to the inequities of Hindu society! Were they really going to take away the only thing that the British had allowed him to keep—his religion?

“All right then. What do you want me to do?” he said dejectedly.

He was seated with the Muslims for dinner. His night passed shivering with dread and breaking out in cold sweat, utterly wretched. The next day he was punished with standing handcuffs. So he stood, listless—strung up by his arms, hardly aware of the pain. Did he pass out or sleep? He neither knew nor cared. Dinnertime slipped by in a haze. Sarfaraz tried to cheer him up, but Keshu, wrapped up in a world of his own, could not be reached. After lockup he slouched apathetically on the plank. A vast emptiness had pervaded his soul. What next? Where to go from here?

Suddenly, two silent shadows were at his door and one slipped in. There was no mistaking that colossal form.

“Sarfaraz! Why are you here? Did you bribe the warder?”

Sarfaraz shut the door, not replying immediately. The air crackled with a queer kind of excitement. Keshu felt a tingle chase up his spine. *This cannot be a good thing*, he thought, *but Sarfaraz is my friend; he won't hurt me, will he?*

“Sarfaraz!” he called sharply, jumping up. “Is that you?”

There was fear in Keshu’s voice.

“It is me, Pulakeshiraj; it is me.” Sarfaraz came right up to him. His lips close to Keshu’s ears, his beard scratching his skin, he whispered, “Alone at last, chikne, alone at last!”

“What do you mean? I want you to leave at once!” Keshu stepped back, trying to put a distance between them.

“Why all this outrage, chikne? You liked me well enough before!”

Quick as lightning, Sarfaraz grabbed Keshu, turned him around, and smashed him right up against the wall, hitting his head hard against it. Keshu was knocked out for a moment;

that was all Sarfaraz needed to cuff Keshu to the wall. He had come prepared. Keshu recovered to find himself suspended by his arms with Sarfaraz's body plastered to his back from hip to shoulder. It was—*disgusting!*

“Get away, you monster! Get away . . . hmmm . . . mmmph!”

A huge hand clamped on his mouth, and then the monster swiftly bound his mouth with a piece of cloth. *Is that his loin cloth?* Keshu gagged on the thought. Desperate, he tried shaking him off in a frenzy of movements. But the man was as strong as an ox. Fear was now oozing out of every pore. *What is he going to do to me? Rape? Do men rape men? How? Why?* wailed his outraged brain silently.

But Sarfaraz had all the advantage. He was in a high state of arousal, exhaling in heavy panting breaths.

“So beautiful”—his tongue was licking at Keshu's face, and his teeth were biting his ear—“so beautiful you are!”

Tears of helpless rage poured down Keshu's cheeks. He struggled frantically, again and again, but in vain.

“So tall and muscular,” the awful voice wheezed on. “Such as you has never come here before.”

How could he ever have thought him a friend?

Sarfaraz was fondling Keshu's arms, and grinding his hips against Keshu's. The monster's engorged penis was thrusting suggestively at his buttocks. Waves of revulsion were chasing up and down Keshu's body, and still he stood helpless as Sarfaraz slobbered over him. Then the fiend moved lower, his hands raising Keshu's shirt, kneading the flesh while his mouth was ravaging his back.

“Aah . . . aah!” he grunted in great satisfaction, lost in his depraved desire.

Through the fog of this ultimate treachery, Keshu realized that help would come only if he shouted for it. Vigorously he rubbed his cheek against his raised hand, trying desperately to dislodge the filthy cloth. He whimpered and cried but worked assiduously at it, all the same. It was coming loose. *Come on, come on . . . come on*, he urged it silently. At last it was off!

His yell for help was cut off at the onset. With one swift movement Sarfaraz had pulled Keshu's shorts down and thrust his body away from the wall. Keshu's arms were stretched excruciatingly.

"Uh . . . uh," he cried out in pain.

And then the monster was between him and the wall, his mouth attached to Keshu's penis. He sucked and sucked in great enjoyment, eyes closed, lost in his sick world. And Keshu screamed. *How* he screamed! This outrage passed all bounds. He howled as if the fires of hell were roasting him—wild with rage and disgust at this unmitigated violation.

Three or four warders were there within minutes of Keshu's first scream. One quickly swiped the baton on Sarfaraz's head, hitting him over and over until he was knocked unconscious; another unlocked Keshu's cuffs.

Keshu pulled up his shorts, flung the gag cloth off, and dived to the plank in his cell. He picked it up and held it like a shield before him. He trusted no one—not even his rescuers. Was it not a warder who had let Sarfaraz in? He was still shrieking; he would *never* stop! The warders tried rushing him. Keshu swung the plank wildly, but overpower him they did. More of them came up, and between them they dragged the resisting, howling Keshu to the hospital. The doctor was already there. One look at Keshu's state and he asked, "What happened to him?"

"He was molested by Sarfaraz."

The doctor shook his head regretfully. Sedative, that's what he needed! Keshu, so viciously stripped of every last vestige of childlike innocence, distrustfully fought them tooth and nail; but at last the dose was administered. Keshu welcomed the oblivion.