

two  
and a  
half  
rivers

ANIRUDH KALA



NIYOGI  
BOOKS

Published by

**NIYOGI BOOKS**

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Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,  
New Delhi-110 020, INDIA  
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Website: [www.niyogibooksindia.com](http://www.niyogibooksindia.com)

Text © Anirudh Kala

Editor: Arunima Ghosh  
Design: Shashi Bhushan Prasad  
Cover design: Misha Oberoi

ISBN: 978-93-91125-20-2  
Publication: 2021

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Printed at Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
those four hundred and eighty farmers  
and farm workers, who have so far died  
while protesting, on the borders of Delhi,  
against the new farm laws.*

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## *Advance Praise*

‘How do you tell of the tragedy of a state, ravaged by political tensions and a religious war? Anirudh Kala offers us three unforgettable characters, a depressive doctor, and a young Dalit couple who are struggling with an oppression that is centuries old and completely indifferent to the promises of Guru Nanak. Punjab has found its Graham Greene and its Bohumil Hrabal.’

Jerry Pinto,

Author of *Em and the Big Hoom*

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‘Keenly observed, wryly written, *Two and a Half Rivers* lays bare the schisms of Punjab in this masterly tale by Anirudh Kala.’

Manreet Sodhi Someshwar,

Author of *Radiance of A Thousand Suns*

•

‘A feisty exploration of the militancy years of Punjab. With rare sensitivity, courage and sagacity Kala explores the many dimensions of the complex violence of those dark decades.’

Amandeep Sandhu,

Author of *Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines*

## One

She was sixteen when I saw her for the first time, lying unconscious on the examination table in my small clinic, one summer night. Once again, what had woken up her dorm mates in the girls' hostel was the sound of her trying to force open the door, which was merely bolted from inside. They could hear the sound even in their sleep, despite the loud desert cooler, because she was persistent. Her eyes were open and face, blank of any expression. The girls were used to her sleepwalking every few nights and they escorted her gently back to her bed, where, as always, she murmured something about a dancing hall, before lying down obediently. But what followed that night frightened them, because they had never seen that before. Her face turned to one side like that of a broken rag doll and her body had gone into a spasm. Fists could not be opened even with force, and her arms and legs thrashed, shaking the bed, after which her body became limp, and her breathing, loud and laboured. Lights came on in the whole block and panic spread when the girl could not be woken up. The warden and three other students had brought her to me in a ramshackle car. Not because I was

the best doctor around, but because I was the only doctor for miles. Everyone knew that I lived above my clinic, which was on the same side of the river as the school, just 5 km downstream. Their regular doctor, who came for two hours every afternoon, lived in the city on the other side of the river. And the nearest bridge across the river was 8 km away.

She lay there still, a dark frail girl, with her long hair open, in a blue salwar, probably part of her school uniform and a white 'chemise'. Blood had dried at one corner of her mouth from her having bitten her tongue during the seizure.

It was obvious that she had an epileptic fit. I did what needed to be done, which was giving an injection to prevent another attack, cleaning the congealed blood inside her mouth and turning her on her side. Her breathing became easy. By the time she woke up, it was morning and, apart from the perplexity about her surroundings and slurred speech as a result of the sedation and the tongue bite, she was fine. I explained to the warden about her condition as best as I could. That it was the normal electric impulses in the brain going haywire for a few seconds. Like a short circuit, I said. The warden was well-informed herself, having seen many young students—teenagers—have seizures, that being the age at which epilepsy often started. I wrote out a prescription and suggested some tests since the girl looked anaemic, although that had nothing to do with epilepsy.

She came again, on a cycle, three days later, to show me the test reports, with a maid from the hostel sitting behind her on the carrier. It was mid-morning, but the

road already glistened in the heat and it was difficult to look at the expanse of sand on the riverbank because of the glare. I gave them some water and scolded her for having cycled 5 km with a pillion rider in the blazing heat, a mere couple of days after a seizure. I added some iron tablets to the prescription and gave her the standard advice given to kids with epilepsy. 'Do not miss the medicines. If you forget a dose, take it whenever you remember. Do not stay up late, do not swim till you have not had a fit for at least six months and, then too, under supervision. Do not watch TV for more than an hour a day and avoid all flickering lights.' I tried to make it sound light-hearted. But I was also firm. I had been told, I was good with children.

Her brow clouded several times during the conversation, but would clear after a moment. In a manner more thorough than most adults, she asked me questions about her condition and the limitations it might cause to her routine. I assured her that once her body got adjusted to the medicines, those would be very few. Usually, parents asked me these questions. I wanted to know if the warden had informed her family and how they had taken it. She told me, without a hint of self-pity, that she had no family; her mother had died when she was young and her father died last year of lung cancer. 'From smoking too many beedis,' she added with the nonchalance adolescents often put on as a front. She was a pretty girl: thin, dark, and tall, with sharp features and large expressive eyes, the sort which looked kajal-lined even when they are not. Over the next couple of weeks, I noticed that

she would talk in a spirited manner when telling me stories about her friends in the hostel and the games they played. But when it came to her father's cancer and his death in the government hospital, her face would be impassive and her speech, deadpan, as though she was reading the weather. The obligatory body movements were all there, but the voice was empty of any emotion. Bheem, a boy from her village, who was with her in the primary and middle school, was her only connection to the village now. He came to her school to meet her and to give her the rent money from the one-room dwelling in the village, which she inherited after her father died. With this sum, she paid for her tuition and the hostel fees—an amount not too high, as it was a government school. Why she did not join the high school near her village and save the hostel money, I asked. Her answer, 'This is the nearest government school which has a dance teacher', was as unusual as the 16-year-old herself: alone, independent, house owner of sorts, with a steady boyfriend. The last bit of information she gave me on her fourth or fifth visit, when she had come alone on her cycle.

I was out buying vegetables, and upon my return, found her upstairs in my kitchen looking for drinking water.

'Medicines make me thirsty. The hand pump downstairs is not working,' she explained.

## *Two*

It was an abrupt and a heavy shower. More like a cloud burst. The 50-year-old worn out roof of the government middle school started leaking like a sieve when sheets of water hit it. The kuccha floor of one of the two classrooms was soon awash with puddles. The other classroom was under this one, on the ground floor, where six- and seven-year-olds repeated multiplication tables after the teacher, in a sing-song fashion. Since the school had just one teacher, the younger children were being monitored by the class captain, a child selected more for heft than intelligence.

Shamsie moved her frayed mat nearer to the wall, as did the other children, and craned her head above Bheem's, which blocked her view now, of the three different maps of the state drawn on the blackboard. The racket of the rain on the roof, the singing of nines into sevens downstairs, the honking and screeching of buses on the road, and the shouting by hawkers just below the window formed a confounding medley of sounds. It was a poorly funded village school, located right on a busy highway. Over the years, the road had widened and the school had shrunk. The playground was long gone,

and now, the buses stopped outside the classrooms; the conductors hailing passengers competed with the chanting of multiplication tables. The teacher, Batta, was a gruff and cynical man. The government has no money to fund the school or anything else for that matter, he explained. God knows what they do with the money. Of course, the students did not understand.

Right now, Harbans Lal Batta was struggling to be heard. He was telling them about how Punjab had shrunk in size over the decades. Shamsie did not catch most of it because of the ruckus, and thanks to Bheem's stupid head, she could barely see the maps. Suddenly, the drip of water from the ceiling became a flow and the teacher was forced to call off the school for the day.

There goes the dal and bread, thought Shamsie. A watery dal and a slice of bread was the grandly termed 'mid-day meal' in government records. Shamsie had only tea for breakfast and was hungry. She glanced enviously at the *pinni* (a Punjabi sweet made of flour and almonds) that Harpreet, the fairest girl in their class, had taken out of her brass tiffin, which she was now sharing with her younger brother. Shamsie rolled the mat, collected her slate and chalks, and pushed these into her bag. Nobody could leave right then, because of the torrent, and Bheem could not go home for another hour in any case. He would spend this time cleaning the teacher's living quarters next to the school and doing laundry for his family, which included the laundry of the teacher's son who was sitting two rows

away on a *pukka* patch of the floor. Teachers sometimes made Dalit students do all their household chores. Without payment of course. This was an old tradition. Shamsie, being a girl, was exempted. This had nothing to do with any sensitivity to her gender. It was a precaution, to avoid a scandal like the one that had occurred during the tenure of the previous teacher.

Bheem and Shamsie were the only Dalit students in the school. The others were from a different world, children of landowning Jats, except two boys and a girl from a large family of Banias that owned the grocery shop in the village and a ration depot in the bazaar. All the other Dalit children of the village worked with their parents. The men worked as farm labourers called 'seerins' in fields they did not own, mostly for a pittance. The women cleaned the homes of the Jats and the Banias. The boys grazed cattle belonging to Jats and the girls ran after the cattle the whole day to gather dung. They collected the dung in iron basins, which they carried on their heads. Later, they would shape it into large cakes and slap them on the outsides of their walls to dry, to be used as fuel in their homes.

Not just Jats, even Dalits made no bones about the utter foolhardiness of Bheem and Shamsie's parents in trying to rise above their caste by sending their children to school. What did they expect them to become? Deputy Commissioners? They asked.

The sprawling 'Vehra', which actually means a court yard, was a ghetto within the village where the Dalits lived.

From the Vehra, just these two children, among perhaps a hundred, walked out with school bags every morning.

Bheem was born six years after Comrade Ramchander's marriage, a much-anticipated product of his wife's third pregnancy, the earlier two having been still births. Ramchander worked as a leather tanner in Jalandhar, an hour away by bus. The city was the seat of a sprawling army cantonment. Since the army required shoes and belts in large numbers, a mammoth leather industry had spawned, which involved a range of business activities from skinning dead cattle to packaging shoes and belts. Ramchander worked late and was mostly away from home. Bheem's mother, a cleaner at a Jat house, returned from work only in the evening after her employers had eaten and she had washed the utensils. She was not allowed to cook for them. That was done by a widowed relative.

'Vehra' was a generic word and most villages had one. Its only function was to contain the low-caste dwellings effectively, so that there was no spill over into the rest of the village, which, in this case, was occupied by Jat Sikhs, a few Baniyas, and the eccentric, semi-literate Brahmin who did nothing more than draw squares and crosses on paper and give out prophecies to gullible women. He also sold them fake gems of red, blue, and pistachio colours to make their problems, like childlessness, abusiveness of mothers-in-law, and waywardness of husbands, go away. He also conducted weddings at the Bania households. The city Brahmins were more prosperous and slightly better at scriptures, because in

the cities, Hindus outnumbered Sikhs. There was more work for them there and the households were more discerning.

The Vehra itself was a squalid, overcrowded place. Mud and brick shanties, with cow dung cakes on the walls, surrounded a middle space traversed during the day by unclean children, hens, stray dogs, a drunk or two, and some adolescents trying to have a party out of a clump of cannabis leaves they had collected while grazing cattle. A strong smell of cow dung hung in the air day and night.

This Vehra stood to the west of the main village, so that the rays of the rising sun reached Jat homes directly, without being polluted by the Dalits. The dirty water drain ran from east to west, based on the same fuzzy logic. In the years that this part of the story is based, that tradition was still enforced rigidly.

The shower quickly became a drizzle. Nine-year-old Shamsie, satchel strapped to her back, walked in rubber flip flops to her father's workplace to collect the key to their house. She was a lanky, vivacious child, tall for her age, and dark-skinned like all Dalits. As the saying was, you could not have a dark Brahmin or a fair Dalit. Perched on a squat mound of earth half a mile away, the village could be seen even from her school. This was the reason it was called Ucca Pind, a village higher than the flat landscape surrounding it for miles.

Shamsie's father was a sweeper at the new museum which had opened the previous summer. A sweeper not of the halls, where the freshly-mounted statues, figurines, slabs,

and coins stood on display, but the sweeper of the toilets, outside the main block. The toilets catered to a staff of 10 and a trickle of visitors. Most visitors were motorists on long journeys, whose cars turned in from the highway for them to pee, stretch their limbs, drink a cup of tea, and have a quick dekko at the long-lost heritage, all in 20 minutes or so. Photography was prohibited inside the museum, but was allowed at the Buddhist stupa nearby, which had come up as a chance discovery, surprising even the archaeologists. Another came up later near the village. Most of the artefacts were from the prehistoric Harappan civilization, said to be three or four thousand years old. But the stupas were remains of Buddhist prayer centres of the more recent Kushana Empire. Occasionally, some foreigners came, who stayed in the city, but spent the day at the museum. Most were archaeology students and researchers, who had to get special permission from Chandigarh to take a certain number of pictures inside the museum.

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Three years ago, one early morning, the villagers had been taken aback to be the centre of a sudden attraction. Tents were being pegged over a large area outside the village. About a dozen men in hats and safari suits, brought in a long bus, were supervising the arrangements. The sarpanch was informed that the team of archaeologists that had come the previous summer was fairly convinced that the mound

on which the village stood as well as the fields around it had deep under them, the remains of a whole civilization from thousands of years ago. And the new team had now come to follow up on that. The 'dig' or 'khudai', as it came to be called, lasted two years. Fields around the village were temporarily taken over by the government through a special order and dug up in the following weeks. The farmers were compensated for the loss of crops. In addition to the permanent team, archaeologists from around the world took to dropping in frequently, once artefacts started to turn up. The white visitors in straw hats and dark glasses, going about the village followed by a gaggle of curious children, became a common sight.

The law did not permit the government to acquire houses, but lanes could be dug up and that made life difficult for the villagers. It was noisy and meddlesome. And it blocked the lanes. The smell of diesel needed to run the drilling machines and generators made things unbearable. But the villagers, happy with the attention, tried to cooperate...till the workers, perched high up on rigs, looked down into the courtyards and the women screamed bloody murder at being ogled in their own homes. The villagers blocked the *khudai* and threw everyone out. It was resumed only after a hurriedly constituted committee of village elders and members of the archaeology team met and gave a solemn promise that they would be mindful of women's privacy and that there will be a minimal disruption in the villagers' daily routines.