

Children at Play

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This was the third time, and it happened just like the other two.

They brought the bulldozer, as usual, but this time it stayed back. The police had been brought in on two flatbed trucks and first, they came running and screaming and uselessly flailing their sticks around. That "attack" terrorized the women and children more so than the men. And even more so than the women and children, the dogs, pigs, chickens, goats and parrots fled for their lives. To say the least, it was a great tumult, and that tumult only intensified the confusion. So instead of putting up a fight against the campaign to raze their settlement, this time the men, having learned from experience, ran to save and gather up their most necessary belongings.

After the police, men came with sledgehammers and long crow bars with which they calmly began to tear down the little shacks that had been built there. To finish the job took little effort.

The shacks in this settlement were even worse than the average. Instead of roofs, frayed, rotted out ropes bound old sackcloth and pieces of polythene to a

framework of bamboo and warped wood, and to keep these roofs, made with much effort and intelligence, from being blown away in the wind a great many stones and pieces of brick were placed on top. The walls were the most difficult job, and it usually took a long time to finish them because bricks had to be stolen from far away and only a few could be carried each time.

Such a dwelling was not capable of providing for the family's major needs. Inside, one had to crawl or bend over a great deal, and all such a shack could provide for was sleeping space and some shelter from the hot sun and the monsoon rains. So that water wouldn't flow in from outside they raised the dirt floor to the height of a short platform. Despite the existence of a makeshift roof, it was impossible to keep the rain out. Between the shacks was left just enough space so that one person or one pig could pass, and it was usually ankle-deep in mud.

To raze such a settlement to the ground did not require much effort on the part of the city's workers. One strike of the crowbar to the "roof" left the entire dwelling naked. Then the man with a sledgehammer gave the remaining short walls a few choice hits, and a home that had slowly grown up over a year to a year and a half was reduced to a pile of rubble.

The city workers finished their job in about an hour and a half, and when they started to leave, the women began raining curses on their heads. Some of them even threw pieces of brick at the police. Despite their screaming and weeping, however, they immediately started rummaging through the rubble. Many things were such that, despite being dented, could be saved and used — small, dirty black pots, for example, metal or plastic cans, and canisters.

Netram Kumhar's wife wept particularly bitterly because not only her home but almost all her pots and pans had also been smashed and ruined.

Along the street some people had set up little wooden stalls in which they ran their businesses. One was for selling paan and biris, another was for repairing motor scooters, another for selling vegetables. One was a small factory where they repaired umbrellas and suitcases. There was a cobbler and a barber. There was even a small spot for a "mechanic" who specialized in lighting decorations.

After those ninety minutes the scene there completely changed. The area previously filled with shacks and stalls was now a large open space in which broken bricks, stones, bamboo and rags were scattered around like disabled chariots, dead horses and soldiers left on the field of battle. Suddenly, every living creature there seemed that much taller.

The children, who had run away screaming after the initial shouts of the police, watched this entire procedure from a spot under the palm trees. When the police and the city workers left, they returned. Their response was an imitation of what their parents did, only more so. If their parents were weeping, they began weeping. Some imitated their mothers and calmed their anger by throwing stones in the air in the general direction of the police. This activity did not last long.

Mirci, the youngest son of Nandu Barhañ, shouted, "Abé, oh Paramué, your ball! I found your ball, bé!"

"Where?" Paramu was stunned. He had been looking for that very thing in the nearby rubble.

It was a splendid, heavy cricket ball Paramu had brought about a year and a

half ago. He hadn't purchased it, he had brought it from a park in the Government Officers Colony. For a number of days the TV and radio had been broadcasting a cricket match, so almost every boy everywhere wanted to become a cricket player. While some played with a cheap plastic ball and bat and constructed their wicket out of a pile of bricks, others bought the official equipment endorsed by their heroes, including gloves and bright pads too heavy for their size. Those boys must have known all the finer elements of the game because they even had referees and managers. Paramu and boys like him stood around and watched those other boys play in their park. Whenever the ball went outside the park, one of the boys standing and watching would carefully pick it up and return it. Once, when the ball came toward Paramu, he tried to catch it like an accomplished player, but it was too high. He caught a glimpse of it when it hit the ground, but he could not locate the ball. The boys playing also tried to find it, but no one did. So they gave up and used another ball. Even though Paramu continued watching the game, he kept thinking about that lost ball — it had to be somewhere.

All on their own, his eyes kept looking for it. Finally, he spotted it. It had gone between two piles of bricks stacked up in front of a house being built. Paramu immediately turned his eyes away from there.

He did not bring it with him then. He waited until night fell, and when all the Colony's boys were busy watching TV, he went back, picked it up out of its hiding place and brought it to the settlement.

Throughout the entire settlement no one had ever seen such a splendid and costly cricket ball. For a long time they all inspected it thoroughly. They had seen

and played with many balls before this. Fujjay had even made a ball with a wad of paper, wrapping it with rags and twine. From the many nearby Colonies they had encountered many toys — dolls, metal cars, and balls. Some hollow rubber balls had holes in them, but they had still looked like they were good. Such balls they immediately tore to pieces so that they wouldn't be fooled again.

The ball they got this time, however, was amazing. They looked at it and touched it over and over again. Gagan got so excited he wanted to throw it up in the air and watch it, making Paramu so angry he almost hit him.

That ball caused another problem – how could they play with it? To hit it with some old broken piece of wood or with a piece of bamboo would be disrespectful, so Paramu and his playmates befriended Mirci. Mirci was Nandu Barhai's youngest son, but instead of making cot legs with his father, he worked with the scooter mechanic Latif. Unlike the chisel and adze, he felt the wrench and the screwdriver had the aura of the English about them. And for the same reason he did not fraternize much with the settlement's other children. It was not difficult to get Mirci on side. His father made a very good bat for them, but he had used such a thin piece of wood that when it struck against a genuine cricket ball, it very quickly split down the middle. So, they used a piece of bamboo. Perhaps it was the fault of the bamboo or of the rubbish heap of shacks spread all around, but in no time the ball became lost. From a strong swing of the bat the ball flew off who knows where. Looking for it, Paramu and his playmates climbed on the roofs of many shacks and suffered the curses of their neighbors for ruining them. Paramu kept up his search for many days. With even more intensity his

playmates searched for it. No one found it, however, for it was not to be found.

Mirci stood holding that very ball, discolored from the sun and rain. Paramu looked, sprang over to him and took the ball in his hand – that was it. He wiped it on his clothes to clean it off, but the color wouldn't change. No matter, he had his ball back.

Anantram Caurasiya's paan and cigarette stall was old and broken-down to begin with. The city's demolition crew had totally flattened it. Paramu picked up one of its wooden slats and weighed it in his hand — it would do. They could use it for quite a while.

With more enthusiasm than necessary Paramu began gathering his other friends. Getting that rare ball back filled everyone with a fresh excitement, and in no time they forgot about the city's demolition of their settlement. They left behind their crying and grieving families and the rubble's confusion and gathered at a spot behind the settlement right next to the canal, where the dhobi laid out his clothes to dry. Because of the day's tumult the dhobi wasn't there. This was the best spot for playing cricket they had ever found.

They were setting up the pitch for playing when a high scream filled the air, as if someone were trying to slaughter a pig. It did not stop. The mother of the man who ran the paan and biri stall came out wailing, beating her chest and loudly cursing the city's demolition team. Incited by her, other women started screaming all over again.

The cricket game was held up for a while because every boy felt that his mother, too, was one of the screaming women.

Then suddenly shouting and filling the air with obscene curses, Majid pushed Chote. Ever since a young boy, Chote had a large, distended belly. He staggered from the push and fell down. So he, too, babbled out equally dirty words.

The status of the ball gave Paramu a certain prestige, so taking the role of an elder he yelled out his own curses and said to Majid, “What’s with you, bé? Why did you push him down?”

The rest of the boys did not back up Paramu. In fact, they themselves mumbled some criticism of Chote. Paramu was shocked. In a fit of anger he looked them all in the eyes and shouted, “What’s the problem?”

In response Majid spewed forth an even more choice list of curses.

The problem was indeed serious.

Yesterday, and totally unintentionally, Majid had created a new game. Far from the settlement, in the back, where the clearing ended, was a small grove of palm trees. A contractor was then engaged in extracting the toddy. Majid’s father was a very accomplished toddy tapper. In fact, he was very experienced at climbing up into high and challenging places generally. Three times he had taken down electric transformers, and he had cut electric wires many times. Once when he took down a transformer he was even arrested — a story he loved to tell.

When his father went to tap toddy, Majid would always go with him. A number of children his age would follow after. They would all get some freshly tapped toddy, slightly foul-smelling yet very sweet. Then for the rest of the morning they would play around the large contractor’s shed. Yesterday, too, they were there. Joining their shouts with the foul odor of the toddy gathered inside

and with the buzzing of the huge flies, they chased and ran away from each other.

When they became bored with that pointless game, they went down to the canal that flowed behind the small grove of palm trees. With much effort they would sometimes be able to catch a small fish. When the second fish, however, proved impossible to catch, then the first one, having already died, they would dash to the ground.

On blades of long grass growing in the canal small innocent damselflies would hover like tiny airplanes. Captured, they beat their wings ferociously.

Majid caught one. It beat its wings as fast as it could. Majid held it up to his face. “It’s a fan! The little bastard’s an electric fan! Automatic!”

He held it up near another boy’s face. He, too, felt the breeze. So each of the boys started playing with a damselfly fan.

Then Majid gathered the hair of scorpion grass growing nearby. When he pressed it together, it would stick. So when he put a lot of it together, he constructed a little container and put the damselfly inside it. “Look bé! It’s all set. When you get hot, you take your fan out of its cage and enjoy the breeze.”

So other boys made similar cages. Instead of damselflies, some of them put in other insects, a hairy, colored caterpillar, for instance, a butterfly, a dung beetle.

It was Jahur who had caught the dung beetle. All the children knew about the habits of that insect. It was a very disgusting and dirty insect. It would make a little marble out of human excrement, and with its back legs it would quickly roll it into its tunnel.

As soon as he saw it, Majid shouted, “Abé salé, the turd-bearer insect!”

“Listen, bé,” Tondu said, “let me tell you. This sala is the insects’ sweeper.”

“Which makes it even better,” said Lallu. “This sala will clean out the shit from the other cages!”

Then they started figuring out what occupation the other insects would have. Mirci immediately shouted, “My butterfly will dance — nautanki; she’ll perform nautanki — Farida in *Aurat ka pyar*. Vah!”

“Come on, then,” Majid suggested, “we need to catch an earthworm, too. He’ll bore a hole for a hand pipe.”

They captured all kinds of insects so that they could do the same kinds of work that were done in the settlement. With those insects in their little cages they felt they had set up an entire settlement very like their own. The problem now was finding a suitable place for it. For quite a distance behind the shacks the dhobi used the land for spreading out his clothes. Near the palm trees no place was free of the danger of being trampled on by the toddy tappers.

Between the palm grove and the place used by the dhobi was a broken-down tomb site, on a small hillock. Near it were two twisted mango trees. That was the place they chose for their settlement. And since it was usually empty, the boys tended to play there.

In the excitement of being able to play again with that rare ball, for a short time they had completely forgotten that only yesterday they had set up their own settlement there. Inadvertently, Chote had smashed some of the homes. One of them was the home of the renowned singer and dancer Farida.

When he understood what had happened, Paramu laughed and said, “Sala!

Farida! Isn't this amazing, too. The city came and tore down our settlement, and the sala Chotelal did the same to Majid's. Sala, big-bellied Chotoo, haramzada – this harami ruined the settlement – just look, a witch's bastard son — joined up with the city, did you?"

Chote blushed, smiled with embarrassment and took a few steps back. Majid and the other boys quickly investigated the smashed homes. The inhabitants of some were missing, some were dead. Some were dead even without having been crushed.

Paramu said, "Abé, it looks like even before this the settlement suffered an epidemic. Cholera I bet, cholera."

"Come on, today we'll build it all over again," said Majid as he threw out all the little homes, both the crushed and the uncrushed.

"Abé sala, Chote will just do the same thing again!"

So a totally new game was devised: The City's Wrecking Crew versus The Settlement of Shacks.

Tiny shacks were built with grass and pieces of palm leaves, and cigarette boxes and matchboxes became the center of commerce. This tiny settlement was fashioned with much skill. Some roofs were put together like proper thatch roofs. To make all these things it seemed as if the boys called on some hereditary experience. Pyare broke up some twigs, piled them up in the middle of the settlement and made a lumber yard, so Miraj gathered up long, stiff grasses and set up the bamboowala's market. In the dirt they found a lock's rusty staple, which became their hand pipe.

This settlement of shacks was now all ready to be torn down.

In a melodramatic tone Paramu announced, “Inhabitants of this settlement! Be prepared! In two minutes your homes will be reduced to nothing!”

“Wait! Wait!” interrupted Miraj. “Let little Big-Belly come! Salé, you’re the Big Merchant. Understand?”

Not only Chote, everyone understood. Some days ago they had seen many films. It was the wedding of Khem Singh’s daughter. To feed and entertain the groom’s party he had set up a tent in the open area behind the settlement. With a VCR he showed six films one right after the other. They were wonderful. For some days after the wedding the boys imitated many of the characters. They immediately understood that instead of the City, the Big Merchant would be much more interesting. It wasn’t necessary to explain the character’s lines or appearance. Chote immediately stepped forth and in a melodramatic voice announced, “Abé, oh settlement people!”

Suddenly, he broke off his line and ran off to the canal.

Watching him go, Paramu asked, “Abé, what’s gotten into him?”

Miraj said, “The Big Merchant sala has to take a crap.” Everyone laughed. By then Chote came running back, with a stick in his hand.

“What’s this?”

“Stick. It’s a stick. The Big Merchant has a stick in his hand.” Flourishing his stick proudly, Chote began again, “Aré settlement people! Haramzade! You have two minutes to abandon this place, or I’ll burn it to the ground — everyone will be shot to death.”

Finishing his lines, Chote slanted his mouth just like a film villain while he quickly moved his eyebrows up and down. Paramu and Miraj became his goondas. Mirci, Pyare, and Majid came forward, bent down on their knees, and with hands in beseeching mode said, “You are like a father and a mother to us, have mercy on us. Do not destroy our homes. We’ll be ruined, Malik, have mercy ...”

Chote struck them on their backs with his stick and shouted to his men, “What are you looking at? Get moving! Tear the settlement down, and if anyone stands in your way, run him over with the tractor!”

The boys did not know the difference between a tractor and a bulldozer. Paramu tied his cricket ball to the end of the drawstring of his pajamas, and making the appropriate noise, he drove his imaginary bulldozer toward the settlement. With his feet he pushed Pyare and Majid aside, for real. Their legs, however, got caught under the bulldozer, and they acted as if they were writhing in pain and dying. As the bulldozer came closer to the edge of the settlement Lallu jumped out in front of it. Hands on hips and legs wide apart like a film hero, he proclaimed his challenge: “You miserable dogs of the Big Merchant, if any of you are in love with death, let him stand before me!”

Paramu abandoned his bulldozer and said, “What’s this, abé? Out of the way, salé!”

Lallu shouted, “Wretched little Paramu! If you don’t stop, I’ll stick this tractor up your ass so far it’ll come halfway out your mouth!”

Majid, who had died, sat up and said, “Abé Lallu, why are you ruining the

game, salé?”

When he had built his shack, he had surreptitiously put a heavy stone inside it, so he was eager to see someone stumble on it and scream and curse in pain.

“Abé, you’re already dead, salé. Shut up. And all the rest of you, listen good. If any of you sets a foot on these shacks, I’ll break your leg.” Everybody knew Lallu was strong, the strongest of them all. He could twist off anyone’s arm or pick you up and smash you against the ground.

Pyare, too, sat up. Chote said to him, “Believe me, yar, the game was going along just fine.”

Lallu said, “Abé, you call this a game?”

Miraj said, “Haven’t you just seen? Forget what happens in the films. People working for the City came and destroyed all our homes. Did anyone stop them?”

“No, but I’m stopping it this time. If you’ve got the courage, come on!”

Chote still wasn’t totally convinced the game had changed. He commanded Miraj, “Superintendent saheb, arrest this brigand.”

Miraj changed his role from that of a goonda to a Superintendent of Police, but he did not try to arrest Lallu. Clenching his fists, Lallu said, “Well? Are you going to play the part of the despicable Superintendent?”

Nervous, Miraj backed away. “Someone else can play the superintendent, I’m your goonda.”

Everyone was upset that this obstacle had suddenly arisen in the middle of their game of the destruction of the shacks. Just then Lallu’s father came out of the large toddy contractor’s shed and yelled, “Abé, Lallu!”

“What?”

“Go find out where the hell Ruldoo the cartman is. Tell him the contractor saheb is waiting on him.” His father then disappeared inside again.

All the boys took a sigh of relief, and Lallu noticed because as he left he said, “Listen good. I’ll be right back. And if anyone even lays a hand on the shacks, he’ll hear about it from me.”

Everyone went white with fear.

For good measure Lallu barked out another threat as he left and ran toward the bridge.

The boys looked at the settlement. Its tiny thatched roofs and toy houses suddenly looked appealing. The lanes running between the small matchbox stores and the shacks seemed to look up at them and smile.

Paramu said, “Okay, forget it. Let’s decorate this thing even more.” The rest of the boys immediately agreed.

“How about this, bé,” Miraj said. “Here we’ll put a dais, in front of it we’ll spread out a carpet, and at night here’s where Hīrābāī will dance. Okay?”

“And we’ll need matches. They’ll be the gas lanterns. It’ll be *Aurat ka pyar*.”

With renewed enthusiasm they set to building the dais with stiff grass. Mirci, who had been silent throughout all this, sang:

No one gave you a license to kill

The people like this without guilt.