

VIJAY TENDULKAR

Gouri R.

‘Sir, I interviewed you two years ago for my newspaper. We are thinking of publishing the interview now. Can you help me update it?’

Journalists have to be brazen.

But only a strong sense of the ridiculous could make a ‘star’ writer respond to such a request with a ‘Come along!’, and even write to that journalist later to say: ‘Thanks for sending me a copy of the published interview. I couldn’t make out what I had said from what you had written. But I liked your letter which came with it.’

If you know Vijay Tendulkar through his plays you expect the man to be fierce and ruthless. Listen to him on subjects ranging from theatre to terrorism and you will see that he can be biting and caustic. Add to this a purposeful stride, a piercing glance, a penchant for controversies—and what do you get?

The Marathi writer has been continually criticized for exaggerating ‘the spiritual bankruptcy of the degenerate socio-cultural milieu in which we live’. He is accused of promoting a defeatist apathy, and of titillating the viewer with neo-realistic projections of squalor, violence, crime and perversions—on stage, cinema and television. But he has also been acclaimed as one of India’s best living playwrights.

Starting as an apprentice in a bookshop, Tendulkar graduated to reading proofs and heading a printing press. He managed public relations in a business house and worked as assistant editor for three Marathi dailies—*Navbharat*, *Maratha* and *Loksatta*. The newspaper office sharpened his writing skills by providing exposure to contemporary happenings. The rise of a communal organization and its unleashing of terror upon hapless communities became a landmark in Indian theatre as *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1973). For its blend of history, politics and fable, Tendulkar crafted a unique structure of folk forms. The *Indian Express* expose of slave trade in village India became *Kamala* (1982). A single sentence from a news report about a mob killing a young man sank deep and surfaced on a new wave as the trend-setting film *Nishant* (1975).

From the beginning Tendulkar examined the components of violence with clinical ardour. ‘The individual becomes fascinating in moments of strong self-assertion,’ he explains. ‘A violent man reacts strongly to the situation. He doesn’t care what happens afterwards. Whether he is right or wrong is another matter.’

While he claims that he has written several plays ‘as non-violent as Gandhi himself, he adds under his breath, ‘But no one reads them.’ Mickey Mouse is his metaphor for the human struggle for existence.’ In this battle one mouse kills another. Many mice gang up and ruthlessly destroy each other. I see this as a sort of blind justice.’

Tendulkar has matched a remarkable range of themes with forms equally varied and innovative. He is a master of the spoken word. From whisper to roar, from clamour to silence, he makes words explode into discoveries for the listener. He electrifies viewers with the physical and mental torture human beings inflict upon each other in individual relationships, in group interactions, in the brutalities practised by the state. The treatment

is urgent, insistent and chilling, as in *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (1968), *Gidhade* (1971), *Kanyadaan* (1983) (stage plays) and *Manthan* (1977), *Aakrosh* (1980), *Ardh Satya* (1983) and *Akriet* (1981) (screenplays). His study of the nation-builder Vallabhbhai Patel in *Sardar* (1994) has uncovered an area of modern history for debate and reevaluation.

‘Does sadism exist only in the police officer and the state machine?’ Tendulkar asks you. ‘I know many people, outwardly decent, who enjoy torturing their wives. So, when I deal with what you call perversion, I am drawing your attention to something near you, which you either don’t recognize, or don’t want to see.’

In recent re-readings I was surprised to sense that Tendulkar’s leitmotif is not horror (as I had thought all along), but compassion—an objective compassion for both victim and victimizer. After all, as the playwright sees it, the oppressor of today is the victim of tomorrow, while the victim of today waits for his chance to turn predator. In this endless see-saw of exploitation, suffering arouses savagery. It does not ennoble man.

In Tendulkar’s world there is no calm after the storm, only weariness and disillusionment. The playwright would nod his head wisely and say it is the experience effacing truth, of accepting reality. And since that reality is elusive and ever changing, he has to continue writing in order to keep finding it afresh.

VIEW FROM THE BALCONY

See that child over there? Yes, that little one on the second-floor balcony, standing on tiptoe, his wide eyes glued to the street below . . .

Down on the street the horse-drawn Victorias clip-clop sedately, making way for the cars which appear now and then. There are more pedestrians than vehicles. Their pace is slow, unhurried. A tram hoots in the distance.

The street hawkers are busy crying out their wares. The words don’t matter. It is the unique and special sounds they make which identify them individually. There’s the Chinaman shuffling by, his flat face hidden under the wide-brimmed hat. A huge bundle of cloth swells behind his bent back. It is tied to the pole that he rests on his shoulder.

There’s that beggar again, the local regular who comes every Sunday morning with a big clay pot on top of his round, bald head. Is the pot fixed to the head? It stays there though he doesn’t even touch it with his little finger. He makes it spin like a dizzy top, by moving his body in a certain rhythm as he snakes through the street, begging from shop to shop. The pot seems part of the man. The man seems an extension of the pot. They belong to each other. The beggar disappears where the street curves in the distance. He will not come for another week.

A shrill whistle—and a handcart rolls by. It is not an ordinary cart. It has two huge boards leaning on one another to make a triangle. On the boards a handsome man smiles roguishly at a pretty girl. A warrior god raises his sword to strike a demon. A woman with a child in her arms weeps endless tears. These posters advertise the film shows in the city theatres.

A man frolics and prances in front of the cart. His costume is crazily fanciful—like the joker in a pack of playing cards. He blows an ear-splitting bugle to make sure no one misses his passage down the street.

The newspaper man comes in the afternoon. He does not bring a bundle of papers on a cycle. Nor does he push the papers mechanically under each door. He ambles along, shouting a headline now and then. It is an arresting wheedle, impossible to ignore. Though he announces the arrival of a copy fresh from the press, his headline never varies. Everyday it is the same phrase, same tone, same tuneful glide:

'Jaapaan chya rajala dhekoon chawla—' A bug bites the emperor of Japan.'

No, that's not all. There's a punch line to follow. A daily philosophy.

'Ch... aaa...wv...l... aa tarch...aaa.... ww ..,l... aa' —'Let it bite, so what?'

I have travelled a long way from that balcony and that age. I have watched many shows since then. But I have perhaps never experienced quite the same thrill in later life.

Yes, I was that little boy, spellbound by those street scenes of Bombay long ago. But what a different Bombay! It is very difficult now to imagine what the city looked like in the 1930s. Bombay was just a small town then, not the sprawling metropolis we know today. South Bombay was more or less all of it. There was hardly anything beyond Dadar.

Common to both the old Bombay and the new Bombay are the communal riots. I remember the violent outbreaks very clearly. Twice from my balcony I saw incidents of stabbing. They did not frighten me. I was too young to know death and suffering. I was excited by the spectacle.

I was born and brought up right in the heart of town, in Kandevasi, a small lane in Girgaon. A lower middle-class community crowded its tenements. The men were mostly shopkeepers and clerks.

Ours was a typical *chawl*. It had apartments of one room, kitchen and balcony, and common toilets. Privacy was unknown.

My brother Raghunath and sister Leela were many years older than me. Two sisters born after them died in infancy. I was a sickly child. I had a persistent cough and asthmatic wheezing. This made my parents over-protective. I was special and precious to them. They were afraid of losing me if they were not careful. Two younger brothers were born much later. But I remained the favourite.

For a long time my mother dressed me like a girl. She made me wear frocks and a *bindi* on my forehead. People must have laughed but it didn't bother me then. I was my mother's pet, known as a 'mother's child'. And this close relationship became stronger through the years until she passed away.

A painful early memory is of being force-fed all the time. My mother would pinch my nose to make me open my mouth. Quickly she would push some food in. I was never hungry. So I resisted. Sometimes I threw up. This must have been a big problem for my parents. The doctor said I was undernourished. But how could they make me eat properly with me throwing tantrums at the sight of food?

I remember two doctors attending on me, old and white haired. Both had long, drooping moustaches. When they bent down to examine me, those moustaches became a

terrible temptation. I simply had to pull them! It must have hurt, but luckily for me, the doctors took it in their stride,

My poor health was responsible for my being rather luxuriously carried to school by our family servant. In school no one forced me to study. I came from a family slightly better off than those of my schoolmates. I looked different, I was better groomed, I even carried story books which my teachers borrowed from me! Those teachers were partial to me; they left me alone and let me pass every examination. At home, too, there were no pressures to study.

I was very happy in the municipal school. It had small, dingy rooms and awful toilets, at times without water. But I made many friends. There was no playground in that school. We had to push our desks into a corner for our physical training period inside the class. There was a dusty back lane for games. While at home we managed to play under the staircase. At nine I was put into a more expensive high school. It had a difficult name—Chikitsaka Samooha—and I had a difficult time there. I could not feel at home with those well-to-do children. I was miserable in the big, clean, newly whitewashed building.

My father Dhondopant Tendulkar, was head clerk at a British publishing firm called Longmans, Green and Company (now Orient Longman). His parents had lost many children and when my father was born, they thought they would trick the gods by calling him 'Dhonda' which means stone. With a name like that surely the gods would think he was not worth taking away, and would let him live on earth with his parents.

Father was an enthusiastic writer, director and actor of amateur plays in my mother tongue, Marathi. He was invited to join a professional theatre company but refused because in those days a career in the theatre was not considered respectable. Even for rehearsals father's group had to make do with what they could get, sometimes a room without electricity.

From the time I was four years old, I was taken to those rehearsals. They were a kind of magic show for me. That's where I saw living persons change into characters. At that time women's roles were played by men. Imagine my amazement when I saw some of the actors suddenly changing their voice and movements to become women. They didn't wear saris, but in some mysterious way their pants and shirts stopped identifying them as men. I often fell asleep in the middle of those rehearsals. I suppose father carried me home. All I knew was that I woke up in my bed the next morning.

Except for what my father staged, I never saw any theatre. In fact, at that time, there wasn't much to see in professional theatre.

Raghunath, my brother, used to act too, and, like father, he was interested in literature. Writers often came home, so I grew up in a kind of literary atmosphere.

Father had very enthusiastically published a few books by his writer friends. Since he had no bookshop, he could not sell them. They lay in dusty piles on a wooden stand at home. Those books became my play-things.

When I became a little older, I found novels and short stories of leading writers at home. Even before I understood what I read, I became a voracious reader of good books. Much of it puzzled me, but somehow I never asked for explanations.

I was six years old when I wrote something that was not part of my studies or homework. I wrote essays and stories which I showed my father. He loved me and so he probably liked my work. But neither then, nor later in life when I became an established writer, did he ever praise me to my face. It was against his policy to do such a thing.

Little fairs used to be held frequently in Bombay. They still are, but if I go to a fair now, it seems small and silly. When I was a child, a fair was a fairyland, enormous, endless. There were magic shows and fabulous freaks—a cow with six legs, a man with two heads, a woman with four arms, and the ultimate thrill of the headless man. My father always took me to the fair on certain festival days, though never once did he include mother or the other children on these trips.

Like most boys I wanted to become an engine driver. But when father took me to the circus, I wanted to become an acrobat. I loved the circus. Every time I went, it was as wonderful as the first time. What a gigantic tent! It could have held the entire world! I also got to see the roadside acrobats called *dombaris*. *They* belonged to a special community which made its living by street shows. I dreamed of joining them and going from place to place, astonishing bigger and bigger crowds by my daredevil acts.

In those days there was no real communication between parents and children. My parents took care of me, nursed me when I fell ill, gave me everything I asked for. But I don't remember sitting and talking to them comfortably. That happened much later, when I became an adult.

On Sunday mornings father took me to a large bookshop owned by his publisher friend. While the grown-ups chatted, I wandered among the shelves and picked up all the books I wanted. Even in those days Marathi had a good collection of children's books. Father bought them all for me and would often tell me stories from them.

We had a fixed routine for Sunday evenings. Father took me to play on the sands at Chowpatty beach. A local train ran between Dadar and Colaba. Sands stretched on both sides of the route. And beyond, on the west, lay the sea. I would insist on travelling by that train, both up and down, from Charni Road to Colaba, not just once, but two or three times. I made such a fuss that father had to let me have my way. How thrilling it was to look through the window, my hair whipped by the breeze, my heart beating to the chug-chug of the wheels!

Summer vacation took us out of the city to Goa or to Port Ratnagiri. The family enjoyed a holiday while father returned to his work in Bombay. He came back to escort us home again. I have not been able to forget two experiences on those trips. One was a dreadful smell which suddenly hit us as we went out walking. We traced it to the rotting body of a cat in a ditch. I was hypnotized by it; I refused to move and had to be hauled away. I can still recall that stomach-churning stench.

At another time I was taken to the beach. Mother talked to her friends and I built sand-castles. Suddenly I felt the urge to rush to my mother. I ran and hugged her tight. But I dropped my hands at once as if I had been stung. It was not mother, but someone else. The woman laughed pleasantly, but somehow I have not forgotten that sense of shock and shame—the feel of another woman instead of my mother.

I don't think Raghunath and Leela were jealous of the attention I got, though Leela often complained that my parents treated her as if she was inferior to the boys.

Toys were sold in provision stores then. And toys which moved on springs were a novelty. I had quite a collection of them—a marching soldier, a walking dog, a sweeper who cleaned the floor with her broom ... you wound the key and they sprang into action. I remember a train, my first imported toy. It must have been very costly. But father bought it for me.

I spent much of my time on the balcony, alone or with other children. They envied me my toys. Sometimes I shared things, at other times I was possessive. We played many games, an all-time favourite being *bhatukli*, in which we pretended to run a household with father, mother and naughty children.

A visit to the haircutting saloon was something special. Normally, we would call the barber home and get it done under the staircase. In the saloon, along with film-stars, King George V and Queen Mary glared down from the walls. I glared back from my stool placed on top of a chair, my legs dangling in the air.

You can see that my father spent a lot of time with me. He pampered me and showered me with gifts. He took care of me when I was sick. He took me out and told me stories. I should have adored him as he deserved.

But strangely enough I didn't like him. Only when I grew up did my feelings change.

There was no reason for this indifference. Perhaps it began in very early childhood. I remember a scene vividly in which my mother holds me tight, protectively, behind closed doors. Father stands before her, in dim daylight, angry and menacing. My mother is afraid, she feels threatened. I can sense it. There is no sound-track to this chilling visual. Perhaps this wordless experience was at the root of the distance I felt between myself and my father.

My mother Susheela did not get beyond primary school, but she read, thought and developed a lot through life. She was a courageous woman who had to deal with an impractical, stubborn, honest-to-the roots husband.

It was my mother who told me that father had been a hot-tempered man, a strict disciplinarian. That is how Raghunath and Leela knew him. They were afraid of him. But all that changed when I was born. He became soft and gentle, docile and caring. Why did he change? My mother said it was because I was born under an auspicious star!

In his last years father suffered terribly in body and mind. I was not a child then, so I understood his miseries. The family was in bad shape. There was little money. My elder brother had quarrelled with father and left home. My sister had to work to support the family. She had to stay single because father refused to do what middle-class men did to get their daughters married—he refused to make her a show-piece and pay a dowry. My mother blamed him for these failures.

At the office people looked out for jobs where they could get bribes. They sat at the counter and asked for 'extra fee' for quick work. This was called the 'side income'. That is how they built houses, got daughters married and sons established. To an idealist like my father, poverty meant honesty and self-respect. He was a pious man; he performed elaborate pujas everyday, and read books on spiritual matters. Dhondopant Tendulkar was proud to be poor. But despite his ideals, he failed to win the love of his family members until it was too late.

I must tell you about my brother Raghunath. It was he who brought the fiery spirit of nationalism into our house. Inspired by Gandhi, he got himself a *charkha*, wore only khadi and attended Congress meetings. He was blacklisted in college for his political activities. My mother had told me stories about Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. She had heard Tilak's rousing speeches at Ganesh festivals in Bombay. My brother made these leaders seem real, their goals urgent. My father had hoped Raghunath would excel in studies, but his brilliance gave way to erratic behaviour. Once he even tried committing suicide. Why? Because he was head-over-ears in love with an actress called Hansa Wadkar. Father could not deal with those problems. He decided to escape by putting a distance between himself and Raghunath. And so we moved to Kolhapur, leaving my elder brother in Bombay.

Raghunath loved me dearly. He bought me pastries and sweets, and a fountain pen which I cherished. It was rare for a child to get a pen.

I looked forward to his sudden appearances in school. He would pull me out of class and take me to see movies, mostly English movies. The earliest I saw were silent films. But they were not completely silent. An orchestra sat below the screen and played music right through the show. After that I saw the 'Talkies'—Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin.

But when we grew older our temperaments clashed. Communication stopped. Raghunath became an alcoholic and his family left him. He died on the road, a talented and good-hearted man who took a wrong turn and couldn't find his way back.

I had three uncles on my mother's side.

The eldest uncle always promised to bring me a white mouse on his next visit. I didn't care much for mice. But a white mouse! That was something worth having. And so, each time he came, I looked at him eagerly. He would pat himself all over as if he did have something for me—if only he could find it. Wait a minute .. Then I too would begin to search his pockets. Finally, I would burst out, 'Uncle, where is it?' He would smile and say, 'Next time, Papia, next time!' (Papia was my pet name then.) That next time never came. But I didn't lose my trust in him. I didn't get disappointed or angry. The white mouse was a dream which never became real. I kept believing it would until my uncle died. He was not married and lived alone. No one knew he was dead until neighbours, driven by the smell of rot, broke into his room and found him dead.

The second uncle lost his wits and jumped into a well. The third uncle spent his life in a mental asylum.

Perhaps because of my uncles I developed a liking for cranks and madmen. I loved one old man who often came to see us at home. He was father's friend and had once owned a bookshop. He was almost totally crazy. When he spoke there was no connection between one sentence and another, between one word and the next. This did not disturb me at all. In fact I felt very close to him, because he decided that I was to marry his daughter. He called me 'Javaibapoo'—an affectionate term for son-in law!

As I told you, our family shifted to Kolhapur. A remarkable feature of this journey was that our bus had to halt at Khopoli where we camped for the night. No bus or train could risk the ghats in the dark!

Kolhapur was an important princely state in Maharashtra, headed by a king. The previous ruler had been a social reformer in the Satya shodhak (seekers of truth) movement launched by Mahatma Phule. The state had its hierarchy of ministers and chief ministers. When the Maharaja drove by with an escort of cars, all traffic came to a halt. People got off their vehicles, joined the pedestrians, and went down on their knees. It was an Arabian Nights' fantasy.

And the palace elephants! They became a familiar sight but I never lost my awe of those massive creatures. The horses from the royal stable made a splendid show, too, as they cantered by at unexpected moments.

The Kolhapur race course was right behind our house. From the roof we had an excellent view of the races and the crowds. The royal princes came, the sardars in turbans and suits, or in ochre-coloured 'native' costumes. Sometimes swords slapped their sides as they walked, and shoes curled up at the toes. All this seemed straight out of the movies.

The grandest procession I have seen was the one to honour Lord Linlithgow, the visiting Viceroy. The whole army was there, as were elephants, horses and bands. Another unforgettable scene was the state elephant's corpse, dragged to the race course on an enormous, specially designed cart. The race course was also the scene of hard labour for the convicts. Once, when the Gandhian freedom fighter Madhavrao Bagal was among the prisoners, the crowds which lined the streets to watch him march by were as thick as when the Viceroy came to visit us.

Then there was Akkabai Saheb, the Maharaja's sister, who often rode into town on a horse-drawn buggy. She handled the reins herself with the coachman sitting by her side. She had some ailment—partial paralysis or Parkinson's disease, which made her tremble violently all the time. She looked quite wicked. Pandemonium broke loose if she came on market days. When the street hawkers sighted her, they grabbed their wares (mainly chicken and sheep) and ran in all directions. Some would try to hide in the houses, including ours. She picked up what she liked without paying for anything. This weekly panic was as good as a comic show.

You may not believe this. But on Saturday mornings when I walked to school, I met cheetahs on the way. They were the royal pets. Eyes covered, a piece of flesh held out in front to make them follow in a straight line, these cheetahs were exercised like dogs. But their muscles rippled and their black spots gleamed in the morning sun— you could smell their ferocity.

The Kolhapur school had a character of its own. It catered to a mixed bunch of kids—from the homes of lorry drivers, labourers, shopkeepers and office *babus*. In addition, flocks of children from the palace came in state cars. They were the favoured species, called 'sarkari' children. They got the best seats in class and top marks. Question papers were revealed to them for a fee.

Another peculiar practice was that the entire school had to stand up whenever an old student called Chandrakant dropped in. He was a famous actor of Marathi mythological films. His younger brother Suryakant was also to become a film star. He was then the dullest looking boy in my class. He sat in the last row and was left undisturbed by the teachers.

It was in Kolhapur that I first tasted the delights of a playground. I spent the evenings there playing cricket. Though I played a lot, at no time in my life was I good at any game.

I must admit that I was more innocent than boys of my age. I was teased unmercifully for it. We had four or five girls in the class. One boy had managed to get hold of a photograph of one of based in Kolhapur. It made Marathi films starring Master Vinayak and Baburao Pendharkar. The company's production manager was my brother's friend and our neighbour. He invited us to film shows. I was at the premier of *Tukaram*, which is rated a classic of its kind.

I was often allowed into the studios to watch the shooting. And what do you know; I can claim I was a child artist in two Marathi films! Yes, when a child was needed for a scene or two I found myself in front of the camera.

Our family next shifted to Pune. At thirteen I was put into a new school with an upper-caste Brahmin atmosphere. I might have gone through all the years of high school and ended up with a Matriculation Certificate. But in 1942, the Quit India Movement changed the lives of thousands of students all over the country. I was among those who answered Gandhi's call to boycott school. It was part of the campaign to end British rule in India. Even before taking that step I had enjoyed attending secret meetings and distributing seditious pamphlets. Sedition was a commonly used word then. It meant doing things against the British government. To me all this was pure adventure.

The underground leaders of the freedom movement addressed us at meetings which were held at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. I put the clock back by a couple of hours each night, so that my mother thought I was going out at 5 a.m. for my early morning jog. Before the family was up, I was back, in good time to put the clock right.

At one such meeting a sudden raid landed me at the police station. I was fourteen years old, a minor. Therefore father was called, given a severe warning and I was let off. That was when father told me curtly that I must never do such things again, as he had given his word to the police authorities to that effect. He was a god-fearing man. He probably feared the police more than the gods.

And so I returned to school. But I had fallen far behind in my studies. English had been my strong subject but even there I was in hot water. My English teacher baited me rather cruelly in the classroom. He would make me stand on the bench, or leave the class. After a point I could take it no more. I began to cut classes, at first half days, and then whole days. I was given money each month to pay the school fees. I spent it watching films. Sometimes I didn't follow all the dialogues in the English films. But I remembered every film shot by shot because, to kill school hours, I saw a film twice, or even thrice. And I developed a photographic memory!

I spent the rest of the time at the city library. No one disturbed me there, not even when I snatched forty winks on the comfortable armchair. In my wakeful hours at the library I read a lot. Later, when I became a journalist I was surprised at the amount of good reading I had put in!

My parents finally discovered what I had been doing. They did not beat me or scold me but it was the end of all communication between us. They grieved about my future.

Father was an astrologer of sorts. I remember his face, wrinkled with worry, as he frowned over my horoscope for hours, and discussed my future with everybody. A

professional astrologer announced that at the most I could hope for a lowly post in the municipality, nothing more. Though he did not agree, father was badly shaken by this prediction.

I don't believe in gurus and swamis. But I think young people should have role models to inspire them. I had two such persons in Pune, both well-known names in Marathi literature.

Dinkar Balkrishna Mokashi was a radio mechanic. He was also a fine writer. But he did not put on airs. There was no cultivated image or pose, no difference between the man he was and the kind of writing he did. Anybody could walk into his shop and discuss his books with him.

Mokashi's lifestyle was Spartan. He made do with two sets of clothes. He and his wife shared a ladies' cycle and a ladies' umbrella between them! I had many chats with him under that umbrella, as we walked in the rain together. I don't write like him but he influenced me by his personality and the informality of his writing. And what did he think of me when I became a writer? Nothing, because he never read what other Marathi writers wrote! He read only English books, mostly serious non-fiction.

My other role model was Vishnu Vinayak Bokil, whose stories were often turned into successful films. He was my Marathi teacher in school. I read all his books. He was one of the first to write Marathi as it is spoken in everyday life. Until then, written Marathi had been very different. At times he wrote what others would not have written at all. He had a light-hearted, jovial and exuberant style which I adored. What struck me even more was that there was absolutely no difference between the way he wrote his stories, taught in class, or talked if we happened to meet him on the street.

On day one he told the class, 'Get up and go to the school board which lists the rank holders of each year.'

When we returned to our seats after this exercise Bokil asked us, 'Where are those top rankers now? Does anyone know?'

Letting our silence sink in, he continued, 'I always passed every class "standing on the footboard". Couldn't even manage to squeeze into the bus. But I am someone today. People know my name and my work. Pass exams because your parents pay the school fees. But don't think that marks mean everything. Look around you and develop yourselves in other directions.'

Bokil hardly taught lessons seriously. He talked and discussed many things with us. Like Mokashi he had a charming smile. It had a naughty glint as well.

The day before the final examinations, all the teachers put us through the torture of revision. When Bokil finally came in to take his class we threw our pens down and shouted we had had enough of lessons, we wouldn't study any more. The principal was then making his rounds.

'How dare you dictate to your teacher?' Bokil thundered at us. 'Open your books at once.' He grabbed the text book from a boy in front (Bokil never brought anything to class), and told the monitor to shut the doors, windows, even the top shutters. Then his voice changed completely. 'All right boys, tell me now, what shall we do?'

A film for adults only, based on Bokil's story, was playing in town. We begged him to tell us that story.

'Damn you, I'll be dismissed from school,' says he, and at once plunges into the story! The bell rings before he can finish. Bokil hears our beseeching cries. He goes out, talks to the teacher of our next class and returns. He shuts the door, finishes the story and sums up. 'Now forget the story. Revise at home and do your papers well tomorrow.'

Years later, I dedicated one of my books to Bokil and sent him a copy. He wrote back saying he felt honoured and rather surprised to be remembered after so many years. And then he added, 'Shall I tell you something? You write better than I do.'

I have preserved that letter.

At sixteen I had left school for good and was mooning around the house most of the time. Or wandering through the streets. I had no friends. Communication with my family, even with my mother, was non-existent.

At that point my writing acquired a conscious motivation. I had to communicate, I was desperate for dialogue. It could only be with myself. On paper I wrote poems, stories, even film-scripts. I knew they would never see the light of print, nor be seen by any eyes but my own.

That is when I had the maximum number of love affairs. All one-sided and imaginary, of course. Every girl I saw anywhere at all became my dream girl and I constantly fantasized meetings and talks with her!

Do you see that boy on the balcony? Lanky, brooding, slouching, a vacant look in his eyes?

The curtain falls on his childhood. Slowly and reluctantly, he is getting pushed to a different stage. He is lost in the joys and sorrows of a world that he spins out of nothing, in his own mind.

Let us leave him. His feelings are too deep now, his fancies too mixed up for words.

End