

Mukesh Malviya, translated by Nina Bhatt

Fungsu



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Set in a tiny village school near Betul, in the Satpura hills of Madhya Pradesh, this story grows out of the jungles of central India, from a region predominantly inhabited by the Gond Adivasi tribe. It narrates the rescue of a palm tree from flood waters by a group of students and offers a window into the life of plants in rural India and their relationships with its inhabitants.

The anecdote, related by a school teacher, straddles the space between writing about ecology, language and teaching, with few pretensions to theories of education or conservation, but with a lightness of touch and a subtle sense of humour that allows one to enjoy it like a fable, or just a tall tale. The piece was first published in Hindi in Sandarbh Magazine¹, a bi-monthly periodical for teachers; accompanying illustrations are by the translator.



The story is an old one. In those days I used to be in *Pawarjhand*.² Very far from the city, and surrounded by forests, is this tiny hamlet. In the village, on the banks of a river, was my school. Not far from the school there is a big hill. The name of the hill is *Bhavargadh*.³ The villagers bestow special names on all things they are associated with. The river was called *Zirna*,⁴ the jungle *Gundi*⁵ and *Daglabad*,⁶ but the school was named only *school*. Through the school window, *Bhavargadh* appeared to be the fantastic vision of a hill, a picture on the wall. In the rainy season at the very centre of this hill, a white line would begin to be visible. This of course was only *Zirna* from next door, the river.

1 <http://www.sandarbh.eklavya.in/>

2 A village in Shahpur Tehsil in Betul District of M.P., India (*Pawar-jhanda*/power-pole, perhaps the name derives from a thermal power station in the vicinity).

3 The name could be interpreted as eddy/circular fort, *bhavar-gadh*, or as *bhavar-ghar*, the bee's home.

4 River named after a 'stream', 'spring', or 'small brook'

5 After the wild berry tree *Cordia gharaf* (*Gundi*, which perhaps derives from Gond, the name of the tribe, Gond/Gondi).

6 This could be interpreted as the jungle being named after 'the cloaked banyan-dagla-bad'.

The children knew that *Zirna* had her home in the mountain, but I only became aware of the fact when I first sighted the white line, soon after the rains. All the children who came to my school would have climbed the hill several times before they reached school-age. They would be well versed with the trails of *Gundi* and *Daglabad*, and *Zirna*, for they as good as grew up with them. When I attempted to impart bookish and alien bits of information, within the confines of a classroom, to these restless young kids, their attention very soon strayed to *Gundi*, *Daglabad*, *Bhavarghad* and *Zirna*. Gradually, under the influence of the young ones I too got wise.

Now, in school, some days we'd count the trees on *Bhavargadh*, give them new names, or we'd talk about the crabs of *Zirna*. Somedays, stories would descend the hills, while on others a new sport would break out from the jungle. Fantasies would flow very far out indeed, with the currents of the river.

You don't believe all this, do you? Come now, there's this tale, the one that was drifting along on the river *Zirna*, the one that the children of my school fished out and towed in, to school; listen to this one.

It so happened, that once when *Zirna* was flooded, we all stood there, engrossed in watching the river in spate or in 'poohr'.⁷ In *Pawarjhanda* a river-flood or *baadh* is known as a 'poore'. In that 'poore' we noticed a *taad/chhind*⁸ palm that was being swept along. A very tall tree it was too. Near our school, on the riverbank, are two mango trees. It was between these trees that the *Chhind* tree found itself wedged. We all converged at this *Chhind* tree.

At one end of the palm was a great knot of gnarled roots, at the other end, not a single branch or leaf could be seen. All around the spherical trunk were indentations formed by the shedding of branches. The whole tree was incredibly attractive to look at. In the evening, though I left for home, some of the children continued to try to befriend the tree.

Next day when I arrived at school, I saw that the children stood near the *Chhind* tree, crowding around it. As they wished to bring the *Chhind* tree into the school, all of us together tried to give it a shove, to shift it, drag it, pull it along. With all our improvisations we only

7 The word 'poohr' or 'pur' refers to a river in spate or to flood waters; it possibly originates from the word 'poorey' or 'full to capacity'.

8 Toddy palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) / date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*).

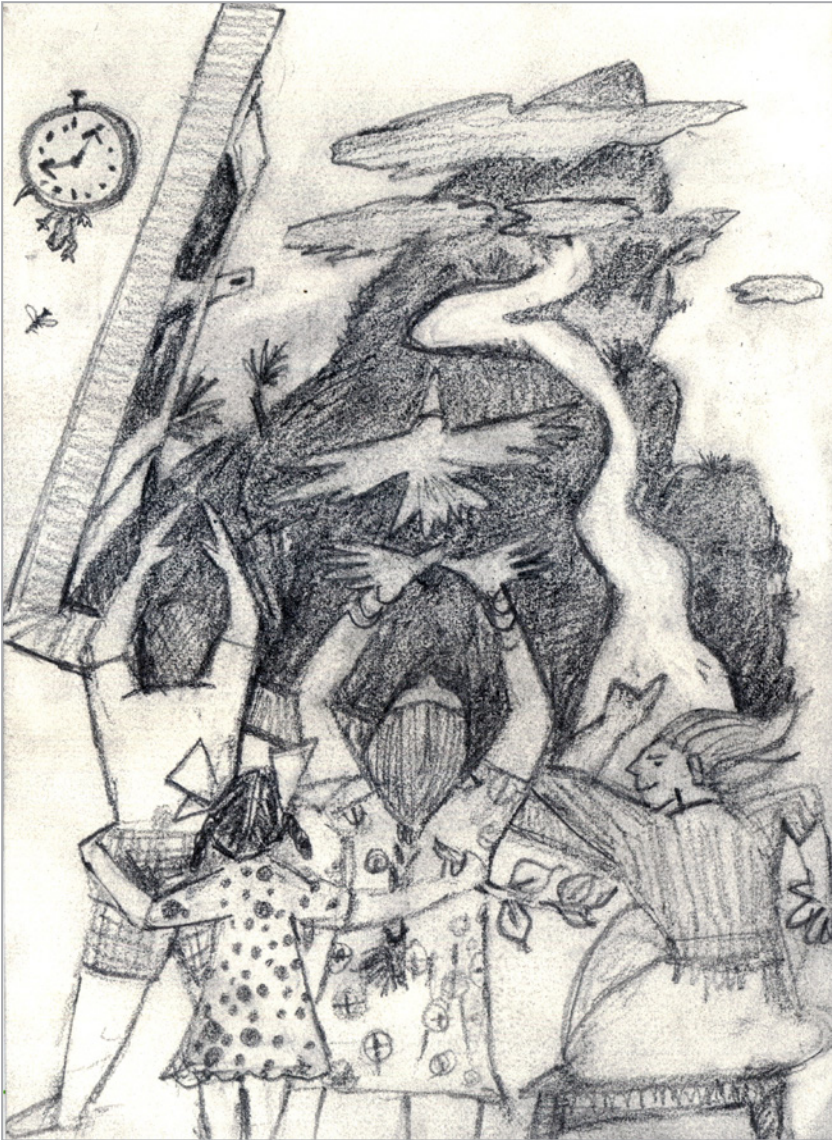


FIGURE 1

Bhavargarh appeared to be the fantastic vision of a hill, a picture on the wall. Nina Bhatt



FIGURE 2

Some of the children continued to try to befriend the tree. Nina Bhatt

contrived to bring it to the periphery of the school. The *chhind* tree was now part of our school property. As you know, the village folk would bestow unique names on the things related to them, so it was that the kids came to address this tree, too, by different names. Some would call it *Chhindu* [of the chhind palm]; and *Jabru* [‘the strong one’], *Kaaru* [‘the black / dark one’], *Ghasita* [‘the one who was towed’], *Atka-bhatka* [‘the stuck / the strayed one’] *Katila* [‘the rootless / cut / severed one’], etcetera were all nicknames for the tree.

But one day a girl gave it a new name, *Fungsu*. Her frock had sustained a tear after being caught in its deep *fangson* [indents / bracts]. From then on, everyone began to call *Fungsu* by that name. Reclining *Fungsu* now became the school’s identity. A few days later it struck one of the kids that *Fungsu* must be made to stand upright. Who knows how, but it seems that all along all the other kids had nurtured the very same idea too. When I got wind of this, I suggested a spot where *Fungsu* could be made to stand.

The next day a pit began to be dug. Within the span of three to four days, thirty to forty kids managed to dig a pit three to four feet deep. Now *Fungsu* had to be stood upright in the pit. Thanks to their friendship with *Fungsu*, it’s true the children could rock and roll the tree, but to heft him to his feet was certainly no child’s play. That was when the children summoned the elders from each home. Next day, along with the little ones, the adults too, turned up at school. The elders knew that if *Guruji* [teacher] was just as keen to raise *Fungsu* to his feet as the students were, then surely this had to do with some study plan.

The adults of this village possessed very many different skills. They first made the pit a little wider and deeper, then they pushed *Fungsu* and brought his lower end to the mouth of the cavity. To the top end of *Fungsu* they fixed a thick rope. One rope was tied to *Fungsu*’s midriff. Now both ropes were first flung over the thick branch of a mango tree nearby, then lowered to the ground. These ropes now began to be pulled by the adults. Some others, with the help of a stick manoeuvred the lower portion into place. For our part, the students and I, we were allotted no role, so we took up enthusiastic shouts:

Stronger now, *haiyya, haiyya* [rousing chorus],
 Look who’s standing, *Fungsu bhaiyya!* [brother]
 Stronger now, *haiyya, haiyya*,
 Look who’s standing, *Fungsu bhaiyya!*

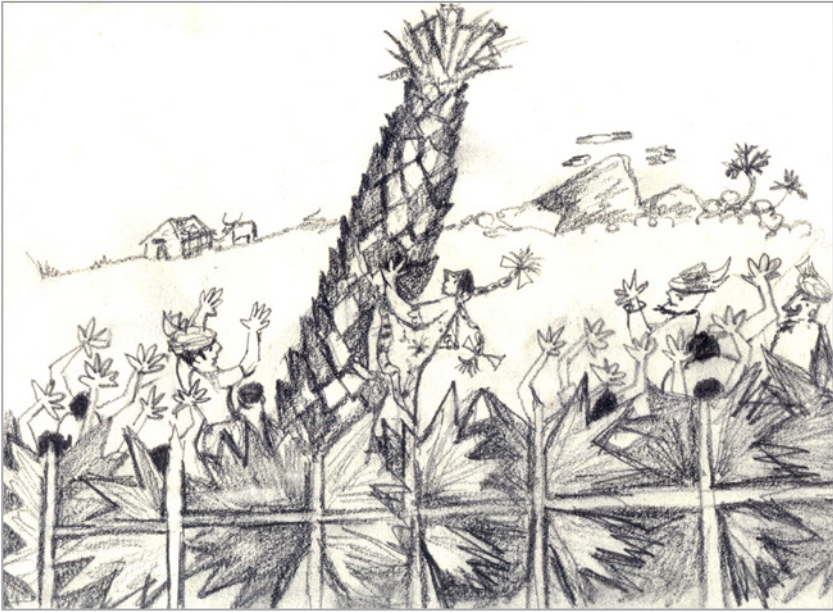


FIGURE 3

Steading her feet on Fungsu's footholds, that girl could be seen ascending. Nina Bhatt

And this is how Fungsu *bhaiyya* became entrenched in the school courtyard. While we all acknowledged that *Fungsu* stands *only* so that the children can now clamber up him, *who* should be the first to do this remained to be seen. It was settled that the girl whose frock had once been torn by Fungsu must go up first. The very next instant, steadying her feet on Fungsu's footholds, that girl could be seen ascending.

Mukesh Malviya taught for many years at Shashkiya Madhyamic Shala (Government Middle School), Pahavadi, Betul, M.P. At present he teaches at Gyanodaya Vidhyalaya, Hoshangabad. A short film on his novel teaching methods 'A Teacher's Journey' has been made by Ashok Rupner (supported by IUCAA and Tata Trust). It can be sourced from Eklavya Publishers, Bhopal. *Pawarjhanda* is a small village situated in the midst of a jungle. (<https://www.onefivenine.com/india/villages/Betul/Shahpur/Pawarjhanda>) The author happened to be the

only teacher, in the only government primary school of that village. He taught in *Pawarjhandā* for about ten years (between the mid-1990s and 2005). His own home was about ten kilometres away, and he would commute by bicycle to the school every day. The students were largely children of the Gond tribals. The story published in *Sandarbh* magazine carries pictures of the school. He says, 'We made full use of the freedom granted to us. I penned more than ten stories/essays about the students of this school. In time, they were published in about as many journals, all related to education and teaching.'

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