

1987

A Broken Pipe Dream

Manuel Fernandes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fernandes, Manuel, A Broken Pipe Dream, *Kunapipi*, 9(2), 1987.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss2/16>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

A Broken Pipe Dream

Abstract

The night they broke the water pipe, Safia lay on the mat in a stupor, barely conscious of her husband rushing out with an empty pitcher. Later on the authorities described the breakage as an act of gross sabotage. A local welfare organization protested this description with a statement to the press and tried to organize the slum dwellers for a morcha. But the will to unite was lost for they felt guilty; not over the broken pipe but because of an incident which went along with breaking it. Finally, the slum was bulldozed out of existence. What really happened in the Gandhi Nagar slum was this.

baseball cap on his head with one of his hands. 'You feel that?' he shouted. 'You feel that here?' I guess he was too excited to notice our stack of bricks.

'Feel what?' my father said. 'What do you mean? We didn't feel anything here.' He put one hand on my shoulder. 'Look around. You see anything here that's *changed*?'

MANUEL FERNANDES

A Broken Pipe Dream

The night they broke the water pipe, Safia lay on the mat in a stupor, barely conscious of her husband rushing out with an empty pitcher. Later on the authorities described the breakage as an act of gross sabotage. A local welfare organization protested this description with a statement to the press and tried to organize the slum dwellers for a *morcha*. But the will to unite was lost for they felt guilty; not over the broken pipe but because of an incident which went along with breaking it. Finally, the slum was bulldozed out of existence. What really happened in the Gandhi Nagar slum was this.

Ever since she had married the watchman Kamruddin, Safia would walk with the women of the neighbouring huts to a well about a kilometer away. When her daughter Razia was a baby, the number of trips to and from the well were more as one arm had to accommodate the infant. But as Razia grew up, the trips became fewer, not only because the mother's hand was freed, but also a small pot fitted snugly on the little girl's hip. Safia, like the others, further reduced her trips by doing her washing at the well. The slum dwellers used the well water for washing, bathing, drinking. Sometimes they fell ill but recovered. Sometimes they died. Kerosene was too precious to waste on boiling water.

Many times, particularly before the elections — municipal, legislative, parliament candidates would come and promise the slum dwellers a tap.

They voted for these candidates turn and turn about, discarding one because he had not given them a tap and electing another because they hoped he would.

Then, one day they were startled to see a pipe line being laid. The well water users watched the laying with awe and reverence until they found the line going past their slum. They followed it suspiciously and saw it enter a walled-in area about half a kilometer away. They jostled each other to reach the wall and peered anxiously over it. Yes. It stopped there. A tap was fitted and kept locked.

The shattered pipe dreamers looked at each other in impotent anger, then burst out:

‘It’s a shame...’

‘They promised us a tap...’

‘Yes. And now they lock it behind a wall...’

‘We must tell the corporator *saab*...’

‘It’s no use. We’ve gone to him many times...’

‘And nothing’s happened.’

‘This time’s different...’

‘Let’s try...’

‘I’ll tell my husband to go.’

‘He works all day. How’ll he get the time?’

‘Safia’s husband is free in the day-time.’

‘Yes, yes. Night watchmen have lot of time during the day.’

Safia hastily, eagerly broke in:

‘No, no. He won’t mind. I’ll tell him soon’s I reach home. He’ll go at once.’

‘That he will. He’s a good person.’

Safia sped home with her daughter, the others keeping pace. They waited outside the hut while Safia went in and woke Kamruddin. She said breathlessly:

‘The pipe line ends behind the wall.’

‘The wall?’

‘Yes, yes. That wall. There.’

She pointed the direction. Kamruddin started up.

‘Not where they’re going to construct a *bangla*?’

‘They’re going to construct a *bangla* there?’

‘Yes. I just heard last night. Ghanshyam *Saab*’s *bangla*.’

‘Ghanshyam *Saab*! The man who employs you!’

‘Yes, My *Malik*.’

‘But he like you. He’ll listen to you.’

‘Listen to me?’

‘Yes, yes. It’ll be better than going to that damn corporator.’ Safia was now eager, expectant. ‘You could ask him to let us use the tap. We’ll pay for the water. It would make life so much easier. No trudging to the well... No sickness.’

Kamruddin lit a *beedi* thoughtfully.

‘Yes. And *Saab* is kind to me. I don’t think he’ll refuse. I’ll go and talk to him at once.’

Safia ran out to tell the others. She didn’t have to, however, for the walls and doors of the hut could hold no secret and everything had been overheard. They were jubilant. They laughed and hugged each other and cheered Kamruddin as he left on his mission. Their chief problem would soon be solved. Even little Razia, not knowing reasons but wallowing in the importance her parents were being given, led the other children yelling and skipping and prancing over the rocks and ditches which lined the Gandhi Nagar slum. They were all happy, these simple folk.

Then Kamruddin returned.

What happened between Kamruddin and Ghanshyam *Saab* was this.

The watchman had deferentially entered his employer’s office and was surprised at the spontaneous greeting of the secretary.

‘Kamruddin *mia!* You’re like the devil! Just think of you and you come. We didn’t even know where you stayed. I was just thinking, how to get this message to you... and here you are.’

‘Message?’

‘Yes. Ghanshyam *Saab* wants to see you.’

‘To see me?’

‘Stop repeating like that. But why did you come now? Your duty is only at ten P.M.’

‘I came because...’

‘Never mind, never mind. It’s good you’re here.’

The secretary spoke into the intercom. Then, ‘Go in Kamruddin.’

The watchman entered the *Malik*’s room perplexed. He was greeted heartily:

‘Come in, come in, Kamruddin *mia*. I’m glad you got the message because I want you to start your new duty tonight.’

‘New duty?’ asked the bewildered watchman, blinking his eyes.

‘Yes. I have some property not far from here where I will be constructing a bungalow. The water connection has just been given. The plot is well protected by a wall which goes all round it. A high wall.’ Ghanshyam *Saab* leaned forward, his expression turning harsh. ‘But I wouldn’t put it past those hooligans to make a hole in that wall. Those hooligans from the slum close by. I can never trust these *badmash* slum

dwellers. They will be out to steal my building materials. Even my water. So I want someone to guard it. Someone trustworthy. I could only think of you.'

The *Malik* then leaned back and added with a benevolent smile, 'I'm also giving you a raise in wages. One rupee more a day!'

The property owner saw an expression of open-mouthed disbelief on the watchman's face and he nodded gently to affirm his generosity. He never saw the sunken hope in the servant's eyes, the utter defeat in the stooping shoulders as they left the room.

The slum folk had a sense of foreboding when Kamruddin returned and only fled past their hails to shut himself up in his hut. Wide-eyed with surmise; they glued their ears to the coddung walls and to the cracks in the wooden plank door. Kamruddin knew that they were witness to what he was telling his wife, but he did not care, so long as he didn't have to face them in the telling.

After that, when the neighbours passed Kamruddin they always found something more interesting in the slimy ditches which bordered the rubble paths. The women sped to the well when they saw Safia coming. They occupied all the washing stones there, leaving Safia to stand long by the well holding her dirty clothes. The innocent children gave voice to the silent reproach of their parents. They echoed what they heard at home. They chased little Razia away chanting,

'Traitor's daughter, traitor's daughter.'

'Your *baba*'s a Pakistani spy.'

'Shoo! Shoo!'

'Don't come near us.'

'We'll drown you in a ditch.'

Once a small boy yelled, 'Your mummy's Ghanshyam *Saab*'s whore!'

The boy didn't know what the word meant. Neither did the nine-year-old Razia. She thought and thought about it and finally asked her mother as they washed at the well. Safia burst out crying, saying through the tears, 'Don't tell *baba* this.'

Razia understood it was something wicked, wicked. She ran from the well, found the boy and beat him up. His mother heard him crying and chased Razia, yelling after her, 'Whore's daughter! Stop!'

Razia ran straight into her mother almost knocking down the aluminium pitcher balanced on her head. The knocking down was completed by the boy's mother. She attacked Safia with venom, pulling her hair and kicking the pitcher into a ditch all the while shouting at the bewildered woman. Safia didn't even know why she was being attacked although she was sure it had something to do with the water pipe. She

fought back while the two children cried. The incoherent shouts of the woman finally made sense. Safia understood what Razia had done. She also understood through this voluble woman the extent to which the slum folk despised her family. The neighbours came and separated the two. Their resentment against the Kamruddin family was not yet strong enough to countenance a physical attack. Of course, they showed their preference when they merely pushed Safia aside while solicitously taking the other away. They saw Kamruddin coming out of his hut, his sleep. They spat and turned their backs. The watchman saw his wife and daughter sobbing and the aluminium pitcher in the ditch, water still trickling out of its dented mouth.

After that day the family's isolation was complete. Safia went to the well only when she knew the others had finished. Kamruddin slunk to the bungalow site after dark and returned home before dawn. The little girl Razia was restricted to the hut though she never really understood what had turned all their friends against them. Then two weeks later the little boy died.

No, he didn't die of the bruises Razia had inflicted. They were minor and had healed in a couple of days. He died of cholera.

But the residents of Gandhi Nagar were poor, illiterate and superstitious. They saw in Razia's act a portent of the evil which followed. The little boy died; then another one; then a little girl. The well was once more taking its revenge on the people who plundered its water.

In their panic the slum dwellers changed their attitude against the Kamruddin family from resentment to hatred. A strong, vicious hatred. They mumbled, first to themselves and then out loud,

'They stole our water.'

'They brought bad luck.'

'The daughter's a devil. That's why the boy died.'

'That's why we're all dying.'

'A curse on them.'

When the curse came to Kamruddin's house, it struck Safia. It attacked her one evening and by night she had collapsed into a stupor. The hut was full of the sweet, fishy smell that the disease released.

Kamruddin paced up and down the small hut, his teeth clinging to his *beedi*. He felt this to be the culmination of all the mental torture he'd gone through during the last few weeks. He was bitter, bitter. Bitter against Ghanshyam *Saab* who had stolen their water. The watchman shared this idea with the others. Bitter against the *bangla* owner who had turned the slum folk against him, though the rich man did not know that Kamruddin was part of the slum. But what if he did? Maybe he'd have

taken the 'hooligan' off his employment altogether. The watchman was bitter against the slum folk who would not see that he was merely earning his livelihood. But was his livelihood more important than the people to whom he belonged? People like himself who lived in airless, leaking huts, walked through slush and slimy ditches, defecated behind rocks and *jungle* shrubs, worked through days and nights without respite, all their hopes pinned on gaining a water pipe? Shouldn't he have stood up for them when the *saab* called them hoodlums and scum? He was bitter with himself.

He heard his wife groan through her stupor. He saw his daughter sitting by the mat, her eyes wide with fear and uncertainty. Her mother was ill. What was her father going to do? The watchman looked at those eyes which appeared haunting in the lamp light. A hoarse voice came from the mat,

'Water... water...'

It was time for his duty. Tonight he would do his duty. That's what he would do. His duty.

He took the keys of the gate. The keys of the water tap. He groped for an empty pitcher and picked it up by its dented mouth. Ghanshyam *Saab* belonged to the morrow and at the moment the morrow was far away. He ran out of the hut shouting to his neighbours,

'Come out! Come out! I'm opening the tap. Water for everyone. Tap water!'

There was no response. He peeped into their doors. The huts were deserted except for the sick. He was frightened. Where had they all gone? Then he heard the noise. The hammering on metal. The shouts. He ran faster. They were all gathered near the pipe line. He ran to them. Someone spotted him. There were shouts:

'The watchman!'

'The traitor.'

'Finish him off.'

'We have no use for such people.'

They surrounded him. Someone pulled the pitcher from his hand and held it up.

'Look! He goes to guard the tap with a pitcher!'

'Oh! So you've been stealing water yourself!'

'And what about us...'

'Our children dying...'

'Sly dog...'

'Selfish bastard...'

'We're going to show you now...'

‘You and your *saab*.’

‘The thief...’

‘Break the pipe! Break the pipe!’

‘Yes. Let’s get on with the breaking.’

Kamruddin interjected horrified, ‘No, no! Stop. Listen to me. There’s no need.’

‘No need for you maybe.’

‘*Chamcha!*’

‘Deceiver!’

‘Beat him up. Beat him up!’

‘Yes! Yes!’

They beat him up. The hands, which when not working had only been joined in supplication for a better life, now formed fists. Their target was a watchman. The *saabs* were too remote. Here was something tangible. The blows came in fast and hard. Thud... thud... thud... thud. They had been deprived for too long, never really knowing who was their enemy. Now they had finally found him. It was this watchman. In the pipe they had found a common cause; now here was a common enemy to be united against.

‘Beat him, beat him!’

They did not remember the long years he was one of them. They did not know that his wife was as sick as any of theirs. They did not think he was a victim like themselves. Thud... thud... thud... The suppressed anger of years had found an outlet. If he hadn’t been a watchman — THE watchman — perhaps Kamruddin too would have been raising his fists. They beat him senseless.

Then they broke the pipe. The water gushed and gushed. They bathed, danced, splashed about to the crazy rhythm of the clanking and bumping of buckets and pitchers. They laughed and yelled like a people liberated. Tomorrow never crossed their minds. It was un-born and so for the moment non-existent. At last the municipal supply ceased and so did their carousal. They returned almost intoxicated, leaving behind a dead watchman to guard his broken pipe.

Later on the authorities described the breakage as an act of gross sabotage. A local welfare organization protested this description with a statement to the press and tried to organize the slum dwellers for a *morcha*. But the will to unite was lost for they felt guilty; not over the pipe, but because of the incident that went along with breaking it. Finally, the slum was bulldozed out of existence...