

A photograph of a slum with a red color overlay. The image shows a dense cluster of small, makeshift buildings with flat roofs, situated on a hillside. The overall tone is somber and gritty, reflecting the theme of the book.

**PRADEEP  
SHRIVASTAVA**

# SACRIFICE

**THE ROAD TO  
OBSCURITY**





## **Notion Press**

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# 1

“Do you think they’ll be able to evacuate every house in our colony within two weeks?”

“Yes, the government machinery is on their side. That is why it is in our best interests to move out as soon as we can.”

“So you think Vasant’s meeting the builder will make no difference at all?”

“I told you yesterday; this is Shandilya builder we are talking about. He is not going to be intimidated by someone like Vasant.”

With this, Narayan Keer started walking towards the door, closely followed by his wife, Meena.

Stepping outside, Narayan stood at his usual spot, and Meena, as usual, stayed just inside the door, watching her husband. It was a house with whitewashed walls, a single metal door and a kitchen window alongside.

With his back to the house, Narayan looked up and scanned the sky as was his habit. His grandmother had told him when he was a child that the sky was God’s slate, and he still strongly believed it. If He ever wanted to communicate something to us, this would be the perfect medium for doing so.

Scanning the morning sky, Narayan noticed a patch of grey cloud directly overhead. He narrowed his eyes slightly

and studied the patch for a second or so, but untrained in the art of predicting the future by studying the sky, he did not know what to make of it. He turned his attention to the sun. The intensity of the sun's rays was somewhat dull in winters in Jabalpur, especially in December. However, it seemed to Narayan as if the pale sunlight reflected his dampened spirits.

Disappointed, he turned and walked towards his bicycle, leaning against the house between the kitchen window and the rust-colour painted metal main door which also happened to be the only door in his house.

He checked the air pressure in both tyres, unlocked the bicycle and kicked up the stand. He looked at his wife who stood at the door in her pink rubber slippers, a midnight-blue floral-printed georgette sari and a plain seal-brown, thick cotton shawl. The shawl was draped around the head, leaving visible only her black eyes, forehead, a little of her jet-black oiled hair parted at the centre and adorned with vermilion. In her right hand was an oil-stained dark grey cloth bag, made from Narayan's old uniform, just big enough to hold his four-tier steel lunchbox.

Narayan took the bag from his wife and hung it on the bicycle's handle, feeling the comforting warmth of the hot lunch inside.

"Why don't you wear that new cardigan I knitted for you?" Meena asked pointing at the fraying elbows of his sweater.

"I'm saving it for the next winter," Narayan responded. He idly wondered if this year, 1996, would be a normal winter.

"And tell Vasant not to do anything silly," he added.

"Okay," his wife said half-heartedly. She knew that it was next to impossible to dissuade Vasant, Narayan's cousin, from doing something he had made up his mind to do. She also

hoped that Vasant, as the de facto leader of their little colony, would be able to persuade the builder to let them continue living in their homes.

While Meena looked down and hoped for a miracle to save them from being thrown out of their home, Narayan went about pulling on his half-sleeved, red woollen cardigan and on top of it the grey, full-sleeved woollen cardigan. He then pulled down his black woollen cap to cover his ears and wrapped his black woollen muffler around his clean-shaven face in such a way as to cover his nose and mouth. He straightened his black woollen gloves and made sure that his shoes were properly tied. Eventually, satisfied with the self-appraisal, he cleared his throat, mainly to get his wife's attention, and began walking his bicycle along the narrow mud path beaten by human feet that led to the main road. The uneven ground was covered with patchy grass and lined by houses on both the sides, with asbestos or tiled rooftops. His wife remained at their door, watching him slowly make his way towards the main road.

At six feet four inches tall and with an athletic build, Narayan was the tallest and strongest person in the colony. So, it was no surprise that he was quickly hired by the local liquefied petroleum gas, LPG to All, agency as a delivery man. He did the delivery on his bicycle, two cylinders at a time.

As he walked on the wavelike path, he caught the smell of tea from one house and breakfast from another, all signs of the day beginning in other households. This reassured him that he was not late for work nor had anything awful happened in the colony. Looking up, he noticed tendrils of smoke rising from several roofs. This settlement of lower-middle-class people was situated on the outskirts of the city. Many of the families here still depended on wood-burning for cooking. Some used kerosene stoves, and Narayan's family was one of the few that had an LPG cylinder.

His neighbours considered Narayan not just respectable but a bit uptight because he did not have any vices, unlike his cousin Vasant, the unofficial leader of the colony, who was a thuggish sort. The only exception to Narayan's blameless existence was that during *holi*, he partook of the locally brewed spirits until he was quite inebriated. His neighbours teasing about his drunken capers lasted all the way until *diwali* seven months later.

The teasing did not really bother Narayan, but he worried what his wife might think about his annual *holi* performance. His usual tactic was to try to convince her that someone spiked his drink.

Meena was no fool, though. Having lived in a colony surrounded by dubious, even felonious characters, drunkards and wifebeaters, she could tell that her husband was a true gentleman. Leave alone beating, he had never even shouted at her or their children. As for his drunken antics during *holi*, she didn't really mind. She believed that the hard-working man deserved to forget all his worries, relax and enjoy life for at least one day in a year. She also knew that no matter how drunk Narayan was, he would never hurt anyone, physically or verbally, unlike some other men in the colony.



## 2

In a few moments, Narayan reached the main road. He hopped onto his bicycle and set off for the LPG agency, softly chanting the *Hanuman Chalisa*.

But after a kilometre or so, Narayan stopped at a culvert. He rested his bicycle on its stand and sat down on a low wall.

“Forgive me, God, for my mind is too troubled to take your name today,” he prayed. He was so anxious that he had faltered several times while reciting the familiar hymn under his breath.

“The entire year of 1996 had been good. Then in November we were rudely told to leave our houses. God! This is worse than the last time we lost our home,” he thought, filled with a sense of hopelessness and frustration. “And the worst part of it is that I cannot share my anxieties with anyone, least of all with my family. I have to be their rock.”

For the next few minutes, he sat there with his head bowed, trying to hold off despair. But the images of his family kept flashing across his mind, until a speeding truck passed him honking.

“Damn these truck drivers! Maybe it is best that our country remains underdeveloped,” he thought as he got up.

He hopped onto the bicycle and began pedalling again, determined to find a new home for his family soon.

Despite having lived a life of hardships, Narayan did not easily suffer stress. With a wry smile, he remembered the first time he had truly felt stress. He had been sixteen years old and about to get married. He was terrified that his wife would turn out to be like his older brother Govind's wife, Nirmala, who was a shrew and had made life a living hell for Narayan and his parents.

Luckily for him, Meena turned out to be a very good wife and daughter-in-law and brought good fortune to the family. Within a month of their marriage, Narayan had found a better-paying job at the Shanti Gas Agency, where he still worked 18 years later.

However, Meena's luck seemed to have worn off after that and here they were, on the verge of being evicted from their home.

"I shouldn't be so ungrateful," thought Narayan, "after all, Meena has given me three wonderful children."

Malti, the eldest, was sixteen and studying in the tenth standard. Narayan had already found a match for her and the marriage was scheduled to take place in about three months' time, after Malti's exams. Initially, Narayan had been reluctant to get Malti married off so early. He wanted to wait until the examination results were declared. But as Meena pointed out, their daughter seemed to have no interest in academics. So, getting her married off early was in everyone's best interest. Besides, Meena's marriage date had also been advanced and things had worked out well for her.

Despite this, Narayan observed that Meena constantly urged Malti to study hard for her exams.

Narayan also thought that Meena let their eldest get away with a lot because she saw herself in Malti. Malti had inherited Meena's dark skin and attractive looks as well as her mother's

short-sighted and somewhat gullible nature. From her father's side, she had acquired a robust constitution.

Narayan's son, Nilesh, was fourteen years old and studying in the eighth standard. He had also inherited his mother's features, which made him look rather effeminate. From his father, Nilesh had inherited a receding hairline and a retiring disposition, speaking only when spoken to or when needed.

Twelve-year-old Madhuri, studying in the sixth standard, was Narayan and Meena's youngest child. She resembled her father in looks, but not in temperament. For her age, she was quite a tall and dominating child. But to her credit, she was very hard-working and always willing to lend a hand when asked to.

Narayan and Meena had pinned their hopes for the family on Nilesh. He was the only child whom they intended to send to college, so he could secure a comfortable job and look after them in their old age. The couple had dreamt a million times of their son as an officer, dressed in a white shirt, grey pants and black shoes and sitting behind a desk.

As far as their daughters were concerned, Narayan and Meena would have loved to see them make something of their abilities. But they knew that in their community, it would be nearly impossible to find a boy to marry a well-qualified, working woman. So, they wavered between encouraging their girls to work towards financial independence and the more socially acceptable life of a housewife.



### 3

Meena was still at the door after seeing off Narayan.

“Silent love! Huh?” Malti said into her mother’s ear as she sneaked up on her and hugged her at the waist.

“Come on, get ready for school.” Meena said with a grin that showed in her twinkling eyes. She lowered her eyes with pride as much as guilt.

“I don’t want to go to school today,” Malti replied, still hugging her mother.

“Okay. But make sure that you study at home,” Meena told her, knowing even as she spoke that Malti would do no such thing.

“Now go and wake up your brother and sister so they can get ready for school.”

Malti released her hold around her mother’s waist, went inside and woke up her siblings, and then snuggled back comfortably under the quilt.

Meena turned back into the house and went right towards the kitchen. As was her habit, she looked out of the window that let in the light and let out the smoke from the kitchen. In addition to the kitchen window and the door, the house had two small windows for ventilation. All the windows had been fitted with safety meshes.

Making herself comfortable on a low wooden stool in front of the single-burner gas stove, Meena adjusted her shawl to free her hands. The movement revealed her gold earrings, which were not entirely gold and the size of a drawing pin. The earrings looked like flowers, with an outer gold ring holding a large black and white pattern. Meena's only other visible jewellery was her *mangalsutra*, made of black and gold beads slightly larger than mustard seeds.

Then, she began preparing chapattis for her children's breakfast and lunch.

After making the chapattis, she would start preparations for lunch. Preparing a few things ahead of time meant that she would not have to work in a rush at lunchtime.

On a typical day, Meena barely managed to take a break for tea with all the cooking and household chores she had to attend to. However, now that Malti bunked school frequently, Meena had someone to help her with her chores. Not only would this prepare Malti for the responsibilities of married life, but it gave Meena a chance to spend more time with her eldest child. The other two often complained that they would like to skip school, too, but Meena was stricter with them.

In a few minutes, Nilesh and Madhuri reluctantly left their beds and wrapped themselves in shawls before going out of the house to answer nature's call.

Meena got up and looked out of the kitchen window. She kept an eye on her children as they relieved themselves near the garbage dump, with the unruly pigs rooting in the garbage.

Like most women in the colony, Meena feared for the safety of her children because of the pigs. The colony did have two latrines, but these were nonfunctional for most of the year. There had also been two rape attempts, luckily foiled, near the

garbage dump. Naturally, most women did not feel safe using the facility either early in the morning or late in the evening. To make things worse, the owner of the unruly pigs never bothered to lock them up because he was perpetually drunk.

Satisfied that her children were safe, Meena returned to her task of preparing chapattis. Her concern for her children's safety mainly arose from an incident that had occurred three years ago at almost the same spot. A boy had been defaecating at the garbage dump and the pigs had attacked him and gnawed at his private parts.

Shocked and enraged at the sight of the boy's injuries, his family picked up iron rods and ran at the pig owner. According to eyewitnesses, the owner ran faster than a scooter and came back only after two days.

The family explored which one of the pigs was responsible and managed to capture and kill it after a chase of over half an hour. Then they made a hearty meal of the pig. Some said that the boy could have been saved if the family had immediately taken him to the doctor rather than going after the pig and the pig owner. If the child's death was not tragic enough, the entire family died under mysterious circumstances the next day.

According to some residents of the colony, the family died because they had killed the wrong pig. Others said that the pig owner knew witchcraft and had cursed them. A few people blamed the family because they did not share the pig's meat with the rest of the colony. Yet others said the meat was probably not properly cooked and had resulted in food poisoning.

Anyway, because an entire family had died because of the pigs, the residents killed all the pigs and threw away the carcasses on the outskirts of the city, which was only a few hundred metres from the colony.

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When the pig owner returned, he admitted that the pigs were imported and promised everyone that he would only buy Indian pigs from then on and that they would be as docile as their country of birth. The slum dwellers agreed to this because the pigs were an easy way of getting rid of a lot of excreta.



# 4

As Narayan cycled to work, he was reminded of the fact that when he left for work, his wife remained at the door, quietly watching him walk away until he disappeared from sight. His neighbours and children often teased them about their 'silent love.' But he never waved to his wife or even looked back at her and smiled. When he got married, his parents had told him and his wife that a respectable couple should refrain from exhibiting their affection in public, since it was considered uncouth and vulgar. Narayan has seen Govind and Nirmala indulging in public displays of affection, which usually ended up with a bulge in his brother's trousers. It had convinced him that exercising self-discipline was the best policy.

Another reason Narayan did not want to follow his elder brother's footsteps was that he had thrown Meena, himself and his parents out of their own house on the day he received his first decent salary. Narayan also had two elder sisters, but they were already married by that time and so escaped the public humiliation.

Narayan's problems with Govind had begun years ago when he was still in his teens. At around the time Narayan married Meena and got a better-paying job, Govind had been fired from his job, and the rivalry began. Govind was not making any efforts to get a job. Their parents made things worse by comparing the brothers and nagging Govind to learn from Narayan.

Finally, fed up of the constant comparison and nagging, Govind and Nirmala responded by throwing Narayan, his parents and Meena out of the house.

Narayan, who had just returned home after making some purchases for the dinner, saw his parents and wife collecting their possessions, which lay scattered on the ground in front of their house. His brother and sister-in-law stood in front of their house door and watched this with a smile on their faces. This angered Narayan and he was about to launch himself at his brother when he was stopped by Jairam Pardhi, his father's closest friend, first cousin and Vasant's father. Jairam and his family had been invited to dinner that evening. Narayan's mother usually packed some homemade snacks for the children to take back home. Jairam had lost his wife a couple of years ago and was struggling to raise his children single-handed.

When Narayan charged his brother again, screaming that he would kill him, his father and Jairam grabbed at his arms to stop him. However, the force of his movement threw them off. Realising that his father had fallen down, Narayan forgot the fight and helped him up.

Jairam got up without any help, but he felt an acute pain in his left hip. He used two shards of mirror lying nearby to try to find out the nature and extent of the damage. Observing the blood spots on his khaki pants, he concluded that two objects, probably nails, had pierced his body right through his pants. He put down the mirror and started feeling along the region in an effort to locate the precise spot of the injury. The exploration revealed that two nails had pierced through his pants and were lodged in an area dangerously close to his anus, stapling his brand-new cheetah-print French-cut underwear to his skin.

Without any hesitation, he pulled down his pants. Embarrassed at this shameless display, the rest of the family

turned away. Sensing the opportunity, Nirmala pulled her husband inside the house, shouted “Bastard!” at Jairam and slammed the front door with a bang. This brought Jairam back to his senses. He pulled up his pants and, mustering what dignity he could, began walking towards a secluded corner.

“Had it not been for you, I would have thrashed him black and blue!” Narayan told his father, while they waited for Jairam to return.

“You are talking about your brother?” Narayan’s father asked.

“Yes,” Narayan nodded his head.

“Anger is the weapon of the weak. And being my son, my only son, you have to take care of the family and carry forward the family name,” his father responded.

Narayan calmed down and understood the grave mistake he had been about to make. He realised that his actions would have not only brought shame to his family but also put his parents into discredit. It also dawned on him that he had now reached the age where he had to take the mantle of running the household upon his own shoulders.

Soon, Jairam emerged from the corner with a contented look on his face. He had managed to pull out both the nails, although he did not understand why his underwear had three holes. Anyway, he had made sure that there were no more nails in his undergarment. Also, to prevent any infection, he had put some soil over his wound because someone had once told him that the Indian soil is full of so many nutrients that it could cure anything.

Picking up their belongings that Govind and Nirmala had thrown out, Narayan and his family began discussing where

they could find shelter. Narayan's father was too proud to ask someone for a favour. Also, considering the way his own son had treated him, he was reluctant to ask favours of others who were not even family.

Jairam invited Narayan's father to stay with him. Although he was reluctant initially, Narayan's father agreed when Jairam requested him to stay at his house until the family found accommodation. Narayan's mother was very relieved when her husband agreed. She did not think it would be safe for the family, especially herself and Meena, to sleep in a public place.

Jairam lived at the other end of the city and it took them an hour by Tempo to get there.

On the way, they stopped to get Jairam's injuries treated. Jairam also worked at an ENT specialist's clinic as a cleaner. The doctor had been practicing in the locality for more than fifteen years and had become more of a general practitioner because of the absence of other doctors.

The doctor examined Jairam and administered an anti-tetanus injection and prescribed some medicines and ointments. The group continued on their way.

The rest of the journey was uneventful. They bought some fish as Jairam insisted on celebrating Narayan's success at his new job.

When they got home, Narayan's mother and Meena cooked dinner and they all ate together.

The next morning, Narayan and his family woke up to the reality of their situation. The problem was that they could not even file a case against Govind because their house was an illegal construction. It was only a matter of time when their present place of stay would be declared

an illegal settlement and become known as Jabran Nagar, literally, a forced colony.

Although these were not happy times for Narayan's family, things were not so bad either. Both father and son had jobs. Thanks to Jairam, they had a roof over their heads. They were more than welcome to stay at his home as long as they wanted to. Jairam lived at a home surrounded by 2.5 acres of land where he was a watchman. The owners had moved to Indore after selling all their property except this one.

As for Jairam, he was more than happy to have the Keers stay with him. Besides his enjoying the company of his friend, there was someone to look after his children. After his wife's death, he had had a tough time raising his son Vasant, who was six years younger than Narayan, and daughter, Baby. While Narayan's mother did her best for Jairam's children, she could not do much about Vasant, who had fallen into bad company and become a hoodlum. But Baby was lucky. Narayan's mother and Meena took her in hand, and she grew up into a fine woman.

Less than a year after moving, and only a few metres from Jairam's newly constructed home, Narayan's house was constructed and he moved in with his wife and parents.



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