

**PEOPLE OF THE SUN**

**Meghna Pant**

Panchangam threw the coke can on the ground. There was a sound of crunch as the red can hit arid land. Its fizzy liquid trickled out. Sharda leaned forward and stuck her tongue out on it. Maybe she could get a drop? Quench her parched throat? But the brown bubbles had already sizzled away and she was left with her tongue on the ground, dusty and dry.

“If you sit, I’ll make you stand,” Panchangam said. “If you stand, I’ll make you walk. If you walk, I’ll make you run.”

He looked around at the gathering of villagers. They stared back at him blankly. The sun had burnt these villager’s faces to blend in with the land. Their eyes were buried under crow’s feet. Panchangam could see that their thoughts were dried out from feverishness. These men and women could no longer understand the things that were spoken.

Men who have forgotten the language of the tongue, have to be shown its meaning. Panchangam hurled a potato in the air. All eyes moved with it.

“Who wants this?” he asked, looking around at the villagers.

Sharda raised her hand before anyone else could.

Panchangam narrowed his eyes at her.

“You know what you have to do,” he said, in a sly slithering voice.

Sharda hesitated. She looked at her seven-month-old baby lying listless on the ground. He was running a fever, wilting away like everything around her. Her baby

would not live, either way. None of them did. The others before him had all been mirages, taken by this land before she could wean them off her milkless breasts. She hadn't given this one a name. Things that lived briefly and quickly, like clouds and grass and dragonflies, didn't need such identities.

With a sigh of resignation she picked up her nameless baby and held him out like an offering. She didn't look at the others but she could feel them stir, she could sense their eyes come to life, one by one, behind their lifeless sockets. Her hands shook but she didn't let them retreat. Panchangam's grim-faced companion took her child.

A sob escaped Sharda's lips, but there were no tears. A thick salty discharge clung to her face.

Panchangam placed the potato in her hand. Before she could caress it, stroke that food forming like an alien around her hand, she felt the coveting eye of every villager upon it. She knew the thoughts running through each mind. She remembered the sickle on the roof of her mud hut. She thrust the potato between the folds of her sari blouse, where it became a third breast, tucked away from evil eyes.

Seeing Sharda's willful submission and immediate reward, the others raised questions.

"Who will breast-feed our babies till their turn comes?" Kunti, the village gossip, asked Panchangam.

"There are ways. Milk from your empty breasts is not needed," Panchangam replied without hesitation.

Bablu, with the hollow legs, asked, "Who will cook them?"

“The elderly in your village are still good for something, aren’t they?”

Panchangam replied.

“Why are you doing this to us?” asked Mukhiya, their village chief, as thin as the stick he was holding.

“I am *not* doing anything to you,” Panchangam snarled. “You are doing this to yourself.” He paused to wipe the sweat gathered on his forehead. “For centuries we took from nature, and now nature is forcing us to take from each other. We deserve this for not respecting her.”

He lifted his white cotton t-shirt as if to let air in. There was none. The villagers saw a flash of his paunch. Lucky man, they thought. He must be intelligent and rich and cunning to have a paunch. Surely they could trust such a man?

Panchangam continued talking: “My method may be new and unheard of: a village sustaining itself when it has nothing to sustain. But, goddamnit, it will work! You will see a miracle! In a year’s time you will no longer know hunger or thirst, nor will you know the taste of sweat and blood. The world will know of how I saved all of you.”

The faces of the villagers still had no expression. Their eyes were as empty as their stomachs. Heat from the ground rose like a quivering ghost, separating men from reality.

Panchangam’s steely eyes suddenly looked weary. “I give you until tomorrow to decide,” he said, and walked away, towards his air-conditioned trailer van.

The fifty-seven village families looked at each other. Could they do what he asked them to?

Their Meghwadi village had seen many social workers come and go. They would come with purpose on their face and lecture the villagers about hope and change. They would scold them for cutting their trees, drying their wells, using pesticides in their crops, the vicious cycle they'd created in their quest to plough their land. "Look at you," they'd shout, their righteous chests heaving in indignation, "you have no jobs here, no schools, no hospitals, no crops, no water. This is what happens when you don't respect nature. You become ghosts in your ghost villages."

The next day the social workers would lift soil from the ground and drop it when their fingers scalded. They'd try to dig the earth and moan that it was too hard. They would lecture the villagers about new ways to grow crop; ways that these farmers had no means of procuring. Then they'd leave in their city cars saying that the villagers could not be saved, just like their land.

"Move to the city," they'd shout. "Roads have been built for you to get there!"

And the villagers left. By the hundreds. They left with burlap sacks on their backs, huts emptied, children inside their belly. They took the bus to dust-choked cities, driving up the prices of houses in Pune and Thane.

Panchangam was different. He had dug their earth and lifted their soil, and with a solemn shake of his scalded fingers, he promised to bring them rain.

Rain hadn't come to Meghwadi village--which lay in the rain shadow of India--in five years. The villagers tried everything. Their irrigation system didn't work. Nor did those confounding GM seeds. Their crops failed and new ones didn't grow. Their wells dried up. God also turned his back on them as their prayers went unanswered, even after they had sold Kunti's nose ring--the last piece of jewelry in the village--to

sacrifice a goat. They took loans. They went into debt. They starved. They were thirsty. Some killed themselves, taking a sickle to the throat, others simply died. One among them died every day. The last word on each mouth was water. So they called each dead villager a “raindrop” believing this would reincarnate the villager as a raindrop, as water.

For is not a dying man’s last wish his next life’s first fulfillment?

But even after a few hundred deaths they didn’t get a single raindrop.

Nothing grew in the village except babies: drought-resistant and famine-resistant.

So when Panchangam had come to their village last week and made a bold proposal, the villagers weren’t shocked. Death was more common here than life. But--still--they were human.

Now, they looked at one another. They looked at what lay beneath Sharda’s blouse. They wet their tongues in anticipation of the taste of solid food.

But--

“We cannot do this to our children and elders. This is sick. Panchangam is sick. No matter how hungry we are, no matter how thirsty we get, we will continue to respect our elders and protect our children,” said Mukhiya. “We will not become weak like Sharda.”

They trudged back to their mud huts, weary women carrying babies in their arms, sons walking behind the heavy footsteps of their fathers, feet sizzling on hot ground.

That night, as Kunti nibbled on a stalk of hay and Bablu drank hot tree sap for dinner, the smell of roasted potato reached the villager’s nostrils. They became mad with

hunger. They ran to Sharda's hut and gathered around it. But that conniving woman had blocked the entrance with an iron sheet, which had dropped from a passing truck two days ago. They banged on the sheet with angry fists and three men finally managed to pull it down. They entered her hut. She looked at them, her mouth stuffed with the potato and her eyes terrified. What were they going to do her, these hungry savage beasts? Bablu saw the sickle she was sitting on. He threw her aside, surprised by his own strength, and picked it up. He raised the sickle to her neck.

Sharda spat the potato from her mouth to the ground.

"Take it, take it," she said.

They fell on their knees, and ate.

The next morning they lined up outside the temple on the hill. Panchangam divided them into two groups. One group had forty-eight villagers, including the older and sturdier children. The second group was larger, with seventy-two babies, twenty-one young children, as well as forty-nine of the infirmed or old.

"Good," Panchangam said loudly. He patted his paunch. "Good."

He told the villagers that they should feel honoured that he had picked their village, and no other, as a model for the other Indian villages. The villagers remained unmoving and expressionless but they felt proud for pleasing a man of such foresight and wisdom.

He ordered the first group to get to work, digging trenches along the hillside with their ploughs. They were building a self-sustaining agricultural system devised by Panchangam. It would take them months to build it and till then they needed food to

sustain their project. But where could one get food in a village where nothing grew but babies?

Panchangam marched the old and the babies to Mukhiya's bamboo hut, the largest in the village, twelve by nineteen feet. He made them sit in the cattle barn, which was lined with industrial-size saws and blades. His two companions came in carrying a large inferno.

Panchangam spoke softly to his two companions, "Place it here. The east wind will take the smell away from the huts and hill."

They placed the inferno next to the cattle barn. Inside the inferno were huge sacks of coal and matches. The children looked at each other and wept.

Late evening, the young and able--tired from a full day's work--gathered around a large pot of stew placed outside the Mukhiya's hut.

Their skin, crisped to carmine brown, reflected the big burn of the fire.

Panchangam's assistants handed them small bowls onto which servings, the size of a fist each, had been served.

Sharda let out a sob, "Is my baby in ..."

She looked at the stew as if she couldn't eat it.

But the other villagers had no such qualms. They looked at the food as if it was god himself who had appeared before them. They were going to eat! After years they'd go to bed with their bellies full.

Their hands shivered in excitement and they had to stop themselves so the bowl wouldn't slip out. But they couldn't eat. Not until their saviour Panchangam told them

they could eat. They waited, even though the smell of the stew was driving them to near madness.

Panchangam stepped out of his trailer and addressed the group, "Good work today. The ridges will be ready in no time. After that you will not have to depend on the monsoons." The villagers smiled at one another. "You have ten minutes to eat and then you will go and sleep, come back fresh for tomorrow's work."

He went back to his trailer where they could see him eat tandoori chicken with hot basmati rice.

They quickly scattered in and around Mukhiya's hut.

Sharda sat down under a tree. She brought the bowl to her lips. Her tongue got burnt, but she kept chewing with the hunger of a wild starving beast. Something hard got stuck between her teeth. She yanked it out of her mouth. It was a bone, like that of a baby's little finger.

She tossed it aside and said, "Raindrop."