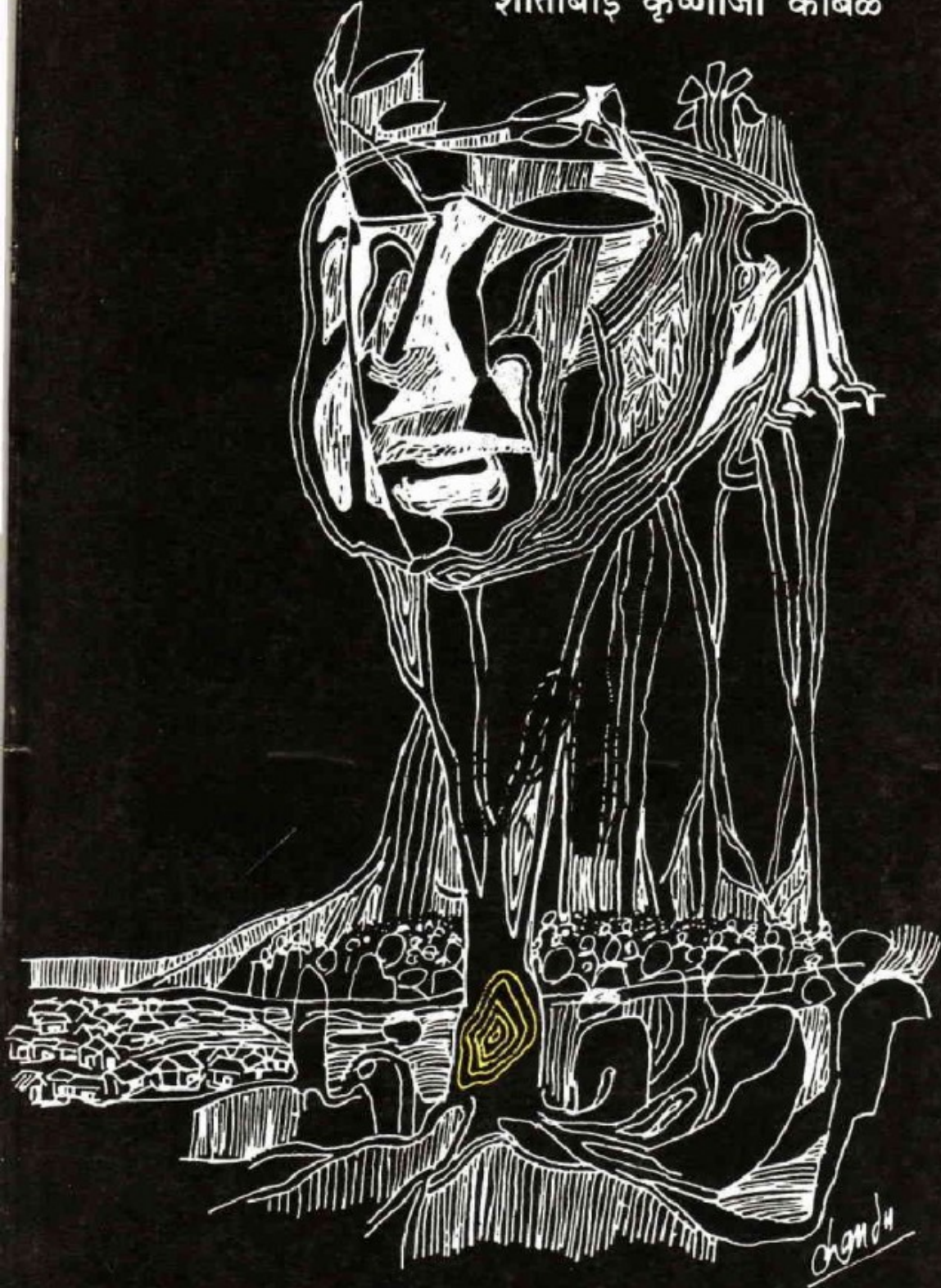


## **Naja goes to school - and doesn't.**

An excerpt from Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*, translated by Shanta Gokhale

# माज्या जल्माची चित्तरकथा

शांताबाई कृष्णाजी कांबळे



One day the headmaster called me. 'We want to give you a scholarship. Go home and bring your father.' I went home immediately. Appa was about to take the bull out to graze. I said to him, 'Appa, the headmaster has called you to school. Come quickly.' He said, 'Go, say I'll come tomorrow.'

'Appa, don't do that. I'm going to get money from the government.' As soon as I said this, he tied the bull to a peg. And he came with me straightaway. He said to the schoolmaster, 'Why have you called me?' The headmaster said, 'Sakharam, we want to give your girl Rs 3 a month for paper, ink and notebooks and so on.' 'Sir, this is a good thing you are doing.' So saying, Appa held out his thumb. The headmaster took his thumb impression on the paper. He said to Appa, 'Sakharam, don't keep the girl home. Send her to school every day.' And he said to me, 'Naja, you must study. If you fail, you won't get the money.'

So I worked with all my will. Appa said to Ai, 'The girl is now getting Rs 3 a month.' They were both happy. When I got the money I was happy, too.

I was to get the money till seventh class. I was then in the sixth class. Shaku, the Brahmin's daughter, was in my class. I liked that because in fifth class I had been the only girl. All the others were boys. One day Shaku didn't come to school. So the headmaster sent me to her house to fetch her. I went to Shaku's house. There were *rangolis* outside the door. Seeing me Shaku's Ai shouted, 'You daughter of a Mahar; stay there. You'll trample the *rangolis*.'

I stood there scared. I said to her, 'Shaku's Ai, send Shaku to school.' Shaku's Ai said to Shaku straightaway. 'Shaku, the Mahar's daughter is calling you. Go quickly to school.'

Shaku and I came to school but her mother's words were humming in my ears.

'You daughter of a Mahar! Stay there.'

When we came to school the headmaster said, 'Children, study hard, the exam is coming.' So we began to study hard.

[...]

Saheb said to the headmaster, 'Call the children to school.' The children were immediately called to school. All the children came because it was the annual exam. The exam began. Saheb gave us three sums to do on our slate. I could do two of them. Shaku couldn't do even one. She got them all wrong. Saheb asked all other questions orally. He finished examining the whole class. Two days later they told us who had passed and who had failed. I passed. Shaku failed. Now I would be alone again in the seventh class. I was feeling very sad. But what could I do?

'I've passed,' I told Ai and Appa. They were happy, Ai said to me, "I got three daughters one

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after the other; and then I delivered again. When the baby's voice was heard, your father asked granny -- "Granny, has she delivered?"

'Granny said, "Yes, Sakha."

"What is it?"

"A girl again"

'Appa said, "All bloody girls. Granny, hand over that girl. And give me the pick and the shovel. I'll go and bury her."

'Now that girl has passed the sixth and gone into the seventh.'

Appa heard this and began laughing.

"She's a good girl. Two sons came after her. She is a fortunate girl!"

He hugged me. Stroking my back he said. 'Study hard now in the seventh.'

'I'll study hard,' I told Appa.

I was now in the seventh.

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*Source: Poisoned Bread, Marathi Dalit Literature, Ed: Arjun Dangle.*



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The Marathi original of Shantabai's autobiography can be read [here](#).