

UNTOUCHABLE

An Indian Life History

James M. Freeman

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JAMES M. FREEMAN

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Untouchable

AN INDIAN LIFE HISTORY

James M. Freeman

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First printed in 1979

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No words can adequately convey my debt of gratitude to Harihar Mallia and Muli: this book is the testimony to their contribution. The name "Muli" is a pseudonym, as are all personal names (except Hari's and mine) and many place names used in the narrative. Muli often refers to people by their title, such as Teacher, Doctor Babu, and Sister-in-law. I have followed Muli's usage for certain persons, but to provide variety I have used fictitious proper names for others, such as Dash Babu and Tafulla.

The photos, all taken by the author, depict Bauri and village life styles, but are not of persons in the book. Portions of Chapter 18 first appeared in my book *Scarcity and Opportunity in an Indian Village*, and are reprinted here with the kind permission of the Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company.

J.M.F.

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Note on Transliteration

Throughout this book, I use several diacritical marks for transliterating the Oriya language. For example:

Length of vowels:	a	(short)	versus	aa	(long)
Double vowels:	a-a	(short)	versus	aa-aa	(long)
Retroflex consonants:	ḍ	(retroflex)	versus	d	(dental)
Aspiration:	th	(aspirated)	versus	t	(nonaspirated)
	ch	(aspirated)	versus	c	(nonaspirated)

Oriya has three “s” sounds that are distinguished in writing but have become virtually indistinguishable in the speech of people like Muli, who is the subject of this book. To retain the flavor of Muli’s speech, I have not distinguished his “s” sounds, or those found in a few footnotes where I give examples of Bauri-caste as well as feminine pronunciations. For proper names such as Shiva and Sankar, which I have not italicized, I have arbitrarily spelled them either with an “sh” or an “s.” Caste names such as Oilpresser and Goldsmith are capitalized.

In this book, Oriya words foreign to English are italicized and presented with diacritical marks. I translate these words the first time they are used in each chapter; they are also included in the Glossary-Index. Certain words from Indian languages are now found in Webster’s New Third International Dictionary or are otherwise widely used in English. I use neither italics nor diacritical marks for such words, although they also appear in the Glossary-Index; they include *anna*, *babu*, *betel*, *dhoti*, *guru*, *lungi*, *paise*, *rupee*, *sari*, and *tiffin*.



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Part One

*Muli: An Indian
Untouchable*



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1. Introducing Muli

During my last visit to India, I came to know an Indian untouchable named Muli well enough to have him confide the story of his life to me. The first time I saw him, he was sitting in the dusty road in front of one of the small thatched roof tea shops in the village, with his glass and saucer placed conspicuously beside him—a silent signal to the shopkeeper that an untouchable wants to buy some tea. Muli was a gaunt forty-year-old with betel-blackened teeth who wore his long hair swept back. His once handsome face was pain-lined, his cheeks were sunken, but his eyes were bold and piercing, not submissive.

Above Muli, sitting on benches in the shop, three men sipped tea, and I heard them gossiping about the marriage feast they had attended the night before. A ten-year-old boy dressed in shorts leisurely refilled their glasses while he studiously ignored the silent man outside. I stopped and watched. After several minutes the boy glanced at Muli; then, in language that deliberately and offensively signaled that he was addressing a social inferior, he called harshly, “*abe saḷaa bauri ṭokaa! tu ka-aṇa nebu?*”^{*} Muli pointed to his glass. From a proper distance, he dropped two coins into the boy’s outstretched palm. As the boy bounded up the steps of the shop, Muli poured the tea from his glass into the saucer, then blew on it and slurped it. Suddenly he stood up and shuffled off, crouching to show respect, so that as he passed by the men in the tea shop his right hand trailed in the dust.

Because I was impressed by the untouchable’s control, I asked the tea-stall boy if he knew the man’s name and address. The boy

^{*}The people of Muli’s caste resent these insults: *abe* [hey there], used to call untouchables; *saḷaa* [wife’s brother], connoting having sexual relations with one’s sister; *bauri*, in the context of this sentence a derogatory use of the name of Muli’s untouchable caste; *ṭokaa* [lad or boy], an insult when used to address an untouchable adult male; *tu* [you], the intimate personal pronoun used for children and inferiors; and *nebu* [will take], the verbal form used with the intimate pronoun; the word *ka-aṇa* [what] is not an insulting term.



1. Because he is an untouchable, Muli is prohibited from entering most village shops and tea stalls; sitting outside, he calls in his order and is served on the road.

spoke contemptuously, "His name is Muli. What do you want with him? He's dirty, like all his people. He lives over there." He pointed to a cluster of tiny mud and thatch huts set apart from the rest of the village—one of five such segregated wards for the people of Muli's caste.

Stigmatized from birth as spiritually defiling and therefore potential polluters of "clean" high-caste people, India's untouchables lived for centuries in segregated hamlets and villages. High castes denied them the use of public wells, as well as entry to schools, shops, and high-caste shrines, and forced them to perform the most despised and defiling jobs of their society: exhausting unskilled

physical labor, scavenging, cleaning latrines, and carrying off dead animals.

Untouchability is now officially “abolished” in India. Contemporary Indian laws, as well as the Constitution, prohibit discrimination against untouchables. But nearly 16 percent of India’s population, or about 100,000,000 people, are untouchables; and any gains in their situation have been sparse and uneven. Most of them, despite legislation, the expenditure of millions of rupees, and two and a half decades of federal and state efforts to improve their economic and social position, remain desperately poor, semiliterate or illiterate, and subject to brutal discrimination and economic exploitation, with no realistic prospects for economic or social gain.

Muli lives three miles from Bhubaneswar, the capital of the eastern coastal state of Orissa. In Bhubaneswar itself, as in other Indian cities, the different untouchable castes, of which the Bauris are one, experience no obvious public discrimination. But in Muli’s village, the old ways persist: although legally permitted to do so, untouchables enter neither shops nor village temples because they fear high-caste reprisals.

The memory of Muli’s humiliation stayed with me. I recalled similar incidents in my own country, and I wondered if the responses of untouchables to discrimination paralleled those of minorities in other countries. Was Muli indifferent to the insults he bore in silence? I hardly thought so; but I wondered how an ordinary untouchable like Muli survived economically, socially, and psychologically as a member of a despised group at the bottom of society. What were his joys, aspirations, and triumphs, as well as his humiliations? What would provoke someone like him to question the treatment he received from upper-caste people, to fight back?

I was aware that although many books, articles, and short stories depicted the life styles of India’s untouchables, only a handful of untouchables had been the subject of biographies. Fewer still had described their own life experiences in narrated autobiographies or “life histories.” Of the few available biographies and life histories, every one had been the story of extraordinary achievers—well-educated, economically successful persons, most of whom held high government and professional positions.* As far as I knew, at

*The best known autobiography of an untouchable is that by Hazari (1969), a remarkable document written in English by an educated man who converted to

that time not a single biography or life history had examined the life styles of the vast majority of India's untouchables, who like Muli had failed to improve their lot. In short, no one had bothered to find out about the life of an ordinary untouchable from the untouchable's point of view.

I determined that as part of my two-year anthropological study of Muli's village, I would collect the first detailed life history of an ordinary Indian untouchable, perhaps Muli's if he were willing. On a gusty March morning in 1971, Hari, my friend and research assistant, who was a native resident of Muli's village, led me along a stony path to the small clearing where Muli's house stood: a windowless, irregular hut of low red mud walls, with a roof of mouse-gray thatch bleached of its once golden color by wind, rain, and scorching sun. At the open well in the clearing, a woman was laboriously pulling up a bucket of water, while six girls sitting on the dusty road were throwing dice. Two men stepped from their houses with pickaxes on their shoulders. Most adults had already left for their daily work of dry season cultivation, stone quarrying, and road building. Except for quarrying and plowing, the women of the Bauri caste work alongside the men.

Muli sat on the narrow veranda of his house. Hari introduced me and then said, "Oh, Muli, we are doing a census of different wards of the village. Could you tell us about your household?"

Since he trusted Hari, Muli described his daily activities. He had lived all his life in his home village, working, like most people of his caste, as a landless unskilled agricultural laborer, earning one-twelfth of the paddy (threshed unmilled rice) he harvested for his landowning masters, unable to save any money, frequently without food when work was unavailable or when he was ill and unable to work. He pointed to his right foot, wrapped in a dirty cloth. He had sliced it with a pickaxe in the quarries. Since he had been unable to walk for a week, his wife had kept him and their son from starving by cutting and selling grass for cattle.

Muli then pointed. "See that house on the other side of the well? The man of that house has two wives. When his first was ill, he

Islam. Zelliot's fifty-page bibliography on untouchability (1972) adds only a few short biographies of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the most famous untouchable leader, and one of another prominent leader, Jagjivan Ram. Isaacs (1965[1974]) uses brief selections of life histories of untouchables. All the untouchables mentioned in this footnote are highly educated.

took up with her unmarried younger sister, got her pregnant, and had to marry her. His first wife cursed the new baby with magical spells, and it died. The younger daughter of the next house became a prostitute, so we threw her out of the ward. She wasn't as clever as her elder sister, whom we never caught, although we all knew what she did."

Muli was articulate, detailed, voluble. I asked him if he would tell me the story of his life. He looked puzzled, "What does 'the story of my life' mean?"

"Oh, about what you did when you were a child, the games you played, how you became married, the work you do, your friends, things like that."

"Sure, why not?"

A slender man in his middle twenties sat down next to us. Muli introduced us. He was Muli's youngest brother, Sarala, an automobile mechanic in the nearby city and the first man of his caste from the village ever to buy or own a bicycle.

I asked Sarala how he had become an automobile mechanic and how many other men of his caste held skilled jobs.

He said, "My brother-in-law Bharata, who lives two doors away, got me my job six years ago and trained me. We are the only two skilled workers from our caste. Everybody else does unskilled labor."

I said, "You have one hundred households of your caste in this village, over 450 people. Why do the rest of the men remain unskilled? Other castes, like the Cultivators, have recently become skilled masons, earning high wages in the city. Why have no Bauris become masons?"

Several Bauri men, including Bharata, had come over to listen before leaving for work. A short, middle-aged man named Bagha was the first to reply. "We Bauris do not try to learn because we can afford neither to go through the six-month training period without pay nor to buy the expensive tools. What will we eat while learning? Also, we need contacts who can find a teacher and place us in a job. Who among us has contacts?"

Sarala, Muli's brother, said, "No, skilled masonry is easy to learn. You see it on the job. Some people have natural skills. The clever person who wants to badly enough can learn masonry because unskilled laborers work side by side with the skilled."

Muli disagreed. "If we try to become skilled, we may not do a

good job. Then we would be dismissed and starve. I have no faith in our abilities. God has produced us to be like this. Why should we try more?"

I replied, "Yet God also made Bharata, who became an automobile mechanic, and he has improved himself, as has your brother."

Muli shrugged, "We are happy that they have progressed, but we are also happy doing unskilled labor."

I was puzzled. Was Muli telling me what he thought I wanted to hear or what he really believed? If he believed it, did his statement reflect simply a negative self-image, or actual experiences in which aspiring Bauris lost jobs when attempting skilled tasks? I planned to return to this topic when taking Muli's life history.

I also wondered what had enabled Bharata to take the chances that Muli had feared. Had he encountered failures, and if so, how had he coped with them? I asked Bharata how he had become a mechanic.

He replied, "I was born in the village of Jhinti, six miles from here. In 1956, after an argument with my father, I left for Calcutta. I went on my own. In Calcutta, I met some Brahmans from my home village. Because they knew I was interested in mechanical things, they got me a job washing cars. I watched how others repaired the cars and gradually learned how to do it. After two years I returned home, worked as a farm laborer for four years, then moved to this village. I met a temple priest who operated a diesel rice-milling machine. By standing around and watching I learned how to operate it, but because my wages were low, I soon sought work at the garages in the new city nearby. I worked at three garages. The first one failed after four months; the owner of the second one fired me when I ruined some expensive parts. I washed dishes for a year. Then in 1965 a third garage owner hired me, and I have worked there ever since, now earning 120 rupees [U.S. \$17] a month."

The men left for work, except for Muli, who remained sitting. He was still on the veranda when we left his ward.

After a few weeks, Hari and I finished the census. Then we began collecting life histories of high-caste villagers. Five months later, Muli suddenly appeared at my doorstep, unshaven, wearing a dirty loincloth. "My father just died," he said. "Would you take his photograph?" He knew I had taken such photos for other families.

I grabbed my camera and we ran to his house. Muli and his



2. Bauri funeral. The corpse is seated on a chair.

brothers propped their father's frail, still warm body on an arm-chair and posed beside him; the women of the house wailed. I took several photographs; then some men of the ward placed the body on a hastily constructed bamboo and cloth stretcher, carried it at a fast walk to the cremation grounds, and placed it on the caste-segregated stones reserved for the cremation of untouchables. Muli, the eldest son, lit the funeral pyre.

Two weeks later, Hari and I returned to Muli's house and gave him the photos of his father. Muli was pale, haggard, and thin. "Something is wrong with me," he said. "I went to my uncle's house to work for a week. I became ill there." Although nearly mid-



3. Bauri cremation on the caste-segregated stones allotted to untouchables.

day, Muli had not eaten since the previous night; his house contained no food.

He was dizzy and unable to walk. We carried him by bicycle to the town hospital. "It's his lungs," the doctor said to me. Medical care is free, but medicines are not; lacking money for food, let alone medicine, most people of Muli's caste do not go to the hospital for treatment. I bought Muli the medicine he needed plus oranges, eggplants, and rice. In gratitude, he offered to tell us whatever he could remember about his life. But harvesting would soon begin. Realizing that Muli could hardly afford to spend days at my house discussing his life without remuneration, I offered him meals, mon-

ey for marketing, and as much paddy as he would have earned had he labored in the fields.

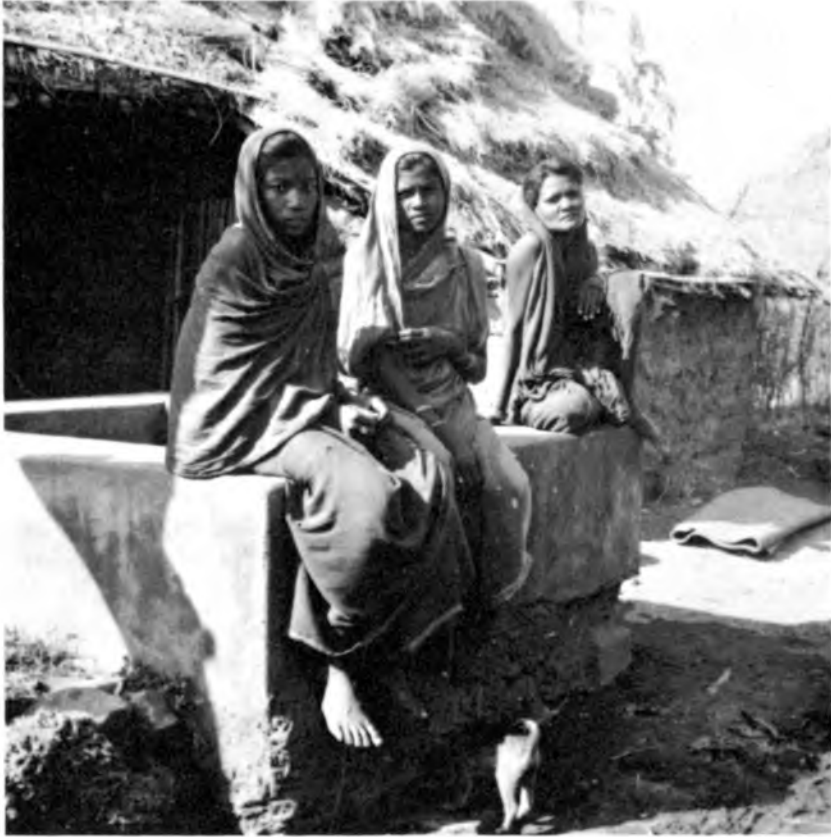
Little did I realize what he would offer in return. Muli, a masterful storyteller, narrated his life history to me in his native language, Oriya, during a series of almost daily interviews for six months. His account, which Hari and I translated into English from my notes, comes to some 350,000 words.

Muli's life history is one of thirteen I collected that describe from different perspectives the rapidly urbanizing village in which he lives.* Many Westerners have written about India's problems of modernization, urbanization, poverty, population growth, and political stability, usually from Western points of view or from those of high-level Indian administrators and politicians. Few studies of change probe deeply to reveal what ordinary Indians think about their transition to modernity. Surveys and questionnaires without supporting data often provide little more than biased, shallow responses. When investigators ask about change, they receive answers that focus on change. To be polite, Indian villagers often provide answers that they think the investigator wants to hear. Their replies usually bear little relation to the way they live their lives or view the world.†

Many excellent biographies and autobiographies describe the lives of extraordinary, urbanized, highly educated high-caste Indians involved with change, but their views and concerns differ significantly from those of ordinary Indians (Karve and McDonald 1963; Erikson 1969; Chaudhuri 1968; Tandon 1968). When not prodded to answer leading questions by technological missionaries and elites who want to change them, ordinary Indians provide distinctly different views of the problems they consider vital, shattering many stereotypes about the joint family, women's roles, attitudes toward the elderly, religious life styles, sexual mores, and caste rules and rankings, as

*Five more life histories will appear in a volume I am now preparing entitled *Five Indian Lives*. These persons, all from one high caste, are: an emigrant to Calcutta who became a criminal terrorist gang leader; a female shopkeeper and ritualist; an irreverent temple priest and old-style leader; a new leader and student revolutionist; and a self-taught drama writer and painter.

†This has been shown convincingly by Mamdani (1972) in his critical evaluation of the Khanna Project, a population control study in western India; his devastating critique shows how an investigator's implicit values and assumptions can predetermine and invalidate his conclusions.



4. Women of a Bauri ward sitting at a well.

well as strategies of adaptation to poverty, new opportunities, and urbanization.

A detailed life history like Muli's provides a way to reach behind the surface answers outsiders often receive, grasping from the insider's perspective what he really values and how he interprets his experiences. Muli does not necessarily represent a typical untouchable or villager, for he makes his own distinctive choices and adaptations; others of his caste choose differently. What Muli shares with the other men of his caste is a limited range of choices of life styles determined by a common physical, economic, and social environment.

Clyde Kluckhohn once rightly observed that an adequate life history study requires not only a comprehensive narrative of a person's life, but also treatment of three other topics: the conditions and ways in which the researcher obtains the life history, including an evaluation of trustworthiness of the data; how the subject's life history integrates with known information about his group; and interpretations of the life history based on a coherent and nonparochial conceptual scheme (Kluckhohn 1945:91). In Chapter 2 I discuss how I collected Muli's life history, and in Chapter 3 I summarize available information on his caste and community. In Chapter 30, I interpret Muli's story using David Mandelbaum's scheme (1973) for the analysis of life histories.

2. Collecting

Muli's Life History

Muli began narrating his life history at my house in early November, 1971, and continued intermittently through April, 1972. When I first chose the house I would live in for the two years of my study of Muli's village, I anticipated both the need for privacy in interviews and ready accessibility to the village. Accordingly, I chose a house located in a secluded spot just outside the village limits. About midmorning, Muli would come to my house. After taking tea and breakfast, he would spend from two to five hours narrating episodes, with a break for lunch, which we provided. At first Hari, my assistant and translator, wrote down each sentence in Oriya while Muli spoke. Every few minutes, when Muli reached a stopping point, Hari and I worked out the English translation, which I wrote down. Then Muli would begin again.

I could follow ordinary spoken Oriya, as well as read high-school-level texts. Muli's use of Oriya, however, differed from the cultured, high-caste Oriya that I knew. He used conventional words in unconventional ways, Bauri dialect words, feminine expressions, proverbs, obscenities, and curses. I insisted from the first day that Muli and Hari explain in detail the meanings and uses of any words that were unfamiliar to me. At times we spent as much as one hour examining a single word, phrase, or concept. After Muli left, Hari and I re-read the Oriya and English narratives, looking for discrepancies, unclear passages, and topics that needed further development. Muli soon became restless during the periods when Hari and I were translating his narratives. To keep his interest, we let him narrate his story and we translated it after he had left.

I had originally planned to interfere as little as possible with Muli's narrative, letting him choose the topics so that he would reveal his ways of thinking rather than mine. But Muli said he did not know where to begin. I told him to start by describing his daily activities as a child and his relationship to his parents, relatives, and

friends. He narrated a brief and altogether inadequate sketch of his childhood, and then turned to elaborate descriptions of his life as a youth. At this point I again tried unsuccessfully to direct the interviews. Despite my numerous requests, Muli never again discussed his childhood, which held no interest for him. Similarly, he omitted describing his own wedding. When Hari and I reminded him of this, he dutifully catalogued a number of dry, lifeless rituals as if he were an outsider to the event. He gave no description of his wife during the ceremony except when we prompted him. He wished to forget the ceremony that had marked the beginning of his unhappy marriage.

Muli was clearly at his best, not when directed, but when allowed to develop his story in his own way. His spontaneously selected episodes are the liveliest and most poignant of his life history. Once he began such stories, he never ran out of words. Our problem was the reverse: he would narrate with repetitious detail how, when, and where each day in past years he had defecated, bathed, brushed his teeth, and eaten breakfast, and to whom he had spoken while performing these activities.* Complicated plots unfolded; stories developed within stories as Muli plodded literal-mindedly through chronological sequences of each day's events. I soon realized that, valuable as his descriptions of minutiae might be, at this pace Muli would require years, not months, to complete his narrative.

I told him to skip those events already described that remained unchanged day by day or those that were less important for his story. Puzzled, Muli said that he was unable to select what was important or to depart from narrating each detail, although he was willing to try. We worked for several days showing him what we considered important; he tried to follow our directions, but with little success. At this point, we told him simply to narrate his story, forgetting our

*Wallace Chafe told me he doubts that a person remembers over long periods information such as the food eaten at dinner or the details of complex anecdotes. Instead, Chafe argues—based on his present research on remembering, as well as on Bartlett's classic investigations (1932[1967])—that what Muli remembered was more a process of reconstruction than an exact recollection, that he imposed an organizational framework on details he had stored. (See Bartlett 1932:197–214; also Rosaldo 1976:121–151.) Norman notes, however, that some persons appear to have better memories than others, although he questions how much is true memory and how much is reconstruction. Experts in particular tasks, he notes, often can reconstruct complex events from very little information, in part because they can rule out implausible happenings (Norman 1969:138).

directions. To save time as Muli spoke, I told Hari what to write down and what to leave unwritten. I interrupted Muli's narratives only to ask him to clarify obscure points and inconsistencies, and to expand his descriptions of customs or rituals and their meanings.

As I had expected, Muli at first described events from the conventional viewpoints that he thought high-status people, nonuntouchables, would prefer to hear. He praised his Brahman employer, as well as other Brahmans of the village. I told Hari in English that I didn't believe Muli's statements. Hari, himself a man of high caste, nodded in agreement.

Looking worried, Muli, who understood no English, asked Hari, "What did James Babu [mister]* say?"

Hari replied in Oriya, "He wants you to tell us what is in your heart. You speak respectfully of Jadu, the Brahman who hired you to work as his farm servant, but throughout our village that man is renowned as a great miser who cheats his employees. Has he never cheated you? Tell us frankly."

Surprised but obviously delighted by this unexpected question, Muli smiled and described an episode in which he ridiculed Jadu in most unflattering terms. Later that harvest season, Muli narrated the unfolding drama that led to his great quarrel with his Brahman employer (see Chapters 28 and 29).

Muli hinted about topics such as prostitution that he said he thought Hari and I might find offensive. He was testing us, hoping that we would be interested. We assured him that he should tell us what he truly believed, as well as the true incidents of his life, and that we would be offended only if he failed to tell us the truth. Emboldened by these words, Muli began describing his life as a pimp, in which he supplied Bauri women to high-caste men. I found out later that he had hoped to draw us into his net as customers of his prostitutes.

As he became more comfortable in my presence, Muli revealed not only his life as a pimp, but also his attraction to transvestite men. Dropping his initial reserve and pretenses, he shifted into Bauri dialect and the feminine expressions of women and transvestites.

We had scheduled our interview sessions daily, but one week

*Babu [mister] is a term of respect used for people of moderate status. Most older Bauris call high-status people and employers *saa-aanta* [master], a term of higher respect than babu. Muli conspicuously avoids using the term "master" when he addresses high-status people.

after we began, Muli failed to show up. After waiting an hour, Hari and I walked to Muli's house. He limped out. I asked, "What happened to you?"

"It's my leg. Look, boils." He had a huge boil on his left leg. "I can't walk. I have to wait until the boil goes down. Then I'll continue my work with you."

I said, "Go to the hospital; otherwise the infection may spread."

His face showed fear. "No! No! They'll cut the boil. It will hurt! I can't stand the pain!"

"The pain will be a lot worse if you don't get it treated," I said.

Hari said soothingly, "They won't hurt you, but just give you medicine. Then you'll be all right."

A Bauri *baistaamba* [hereditary religious leader] standing nearby overheard our conversation. "Don't go to the hospital," he said to Muli. "I've got the cure for you, *gulucii* [creeper] leaves. This medicine is good and it costs a lot less than going to the hospital. Heat the leaves and put them on your boils along with mustard oil. Leave them on your leg for three hours. The boils then will burst; if they don't, repeat the cure."

Muli asked, "How long before the leg is better?"

The *baistaamba* replied, "Within two days definitely."

"And if it is not?" asked Muli.

"Then I'll eat those eggs in your cold box [refrigerator]," joked the *baistaamba*. Bauris have no money to buy eggs, let alone refrigerators.

We all laughed. Muli looked unconvinced. Hari and I dragged Muli to the hospital.

The doctor grabbed hold of his leg, squeezed, and asked, "How does that feel?"

"Ooah! It hurts. Stop, stop, oh please stop!" cried Muli.

"How long have you had these?" asked the doctor.

"Six days."

The doctor shook his head. "It must be cut. Why didn't you come here immediately when you got them? Treatment will be much harder on you now."

Muli was silent, his face drawn with pain and fear. Why should he come to the hospital when he had no money for medicines? Who would have treated him, an untouchable, had not James Babu and Hari Babu personally brought him?

An orderly told Muli to lie on a table. Suddenly he grabbed

Muli's leg and sliced the main boil with a flame-heated knife. Muli screamed piteously. The orderly squeezed the boil. Muli arched upward; his screams rose; pus oozed. Muli limped out and collapsed forlornly on a bench. The medical compounder, who prepared injections, jabbed Muli's arm with a needle of medicine. Muli winced. I paid for the medicine.

For five days, Hari and I took Muli to the hospital for treatments and medicine. When the boils cleared, Muli resumed narrating his story. A few days later, he had dysentery; after that, a deep cough, then a gashed hand from harvesting paddy—a continuous line of minor ailments and injuries that interrupted our interviews. At first I was annoyed with these delays, but soon I realized that his low resistance to disease, weak stamina, fear of pain and injury, and injury-proneness accounted in great measure for his willingness to narrate his life history: instead of starving while recuperating from his injuries, he earned money by sitting and talking at my house. Furthermore, I realized that his weakness and ill health accounted in part for his becoming a pimp rather than a stone quarry worker.

The interviews with Muli proceeded unevenly. At first he was shy and avoided saying directly what he wanted. Instead, he would pout like Orissan women do, sitting silently, looking unhappy.

During one of his pouts I asked, "What's wrong, Muli?"

"Nothing."

"Come on now—you have a long face. Why?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'm quite all right." He lapsed into silence, occasionally looking up mournfully, otherwise looking down, motionless.

"If you don't tell us, how can we do anything about it?"

Looking up, he said without conviction, "I am not unhappy, Babu, but if I come here to tell you the story of my life, well, how will I eat?"

Hari replied, annoyed, "We already settled that. We'll pay you your daily wage and we'll pay a shopkeeper in the village to supply you with bread, milk, and snacks every day, just as you asked. The shopkeeper won't overcharge you since we are paying him. You told us you were happy with our agreement, so what's the problem?" Since Bauris have little money, they buy oil, spices, and rice in small quantities at much higher rates than do the wealthier villagers, who buy in larger quantities.

Muli replied, "Well, how am I to be paid?"

Hari reminded him of our agreement. "We'll pay you in paddy, which is what you asked for, since the daily wage in paddy is worth more than money wages. I bought you some paddy which I stored at my father's threshing floor. We'll give it to you when you finish your life history."

At that time, we did not realize that Muli would be narrating his story for six months; we later paid him in installments as he finished parts of it.

Muli looked frightened. He wanted more money but feared to ask us. He also wanted assurance that we would pay him. People had often cheated him when he had tried easy or short-cut schemes to acquire money or influence. He said, "But Babu, how do I know that I'll really get the paddy? Look how Jadu the miser has cheated me. If you don't give me that paddy after I work for you rather than harvesting in the fields, what will happen to me and my family? The paddy will feed us for three months. If I don't get it . . ."

I interrupted, "You'll have to trust us, Muli. Take it or leave it. If you prefer to work all day in the fields for a lower wage than I give you, then feel free to do so. I don't want to make you do something you don't want to do."

"Oh, no," he replied quickly. "I'll work for you, except on those days when I must work as a farm servant. On those days I must gather my crop."

I replied, "Yes, of course. We agreed on that several days ago. Between December and the end of January you may miss up to twenty days. On the days you are not in the fields, you work for us. Also, we'll give you money on market days. Right now, though, you should eat lunch."

Muli refused. I knew that this was pretense to show that he wasn't "greedy" for food, even though he wanted it. I said, "You *must* take it." Still he refused. I said, "Okay," and asked no more. His face became unhappy; he pouted. I filled a plate of curry and rice, handed it to him, and commanded, "Here, you eat this."

"Okay, if you order me to, but you start eating first."

I began eating in the customary way for villagers, using my right hand rather than utensils. I hoped this would make him feel more comfortable. With a twinkle in his eyes, he picked up a spoon and effortlessly worked his way through the vegetable curry and a huge mound of rice. Hari, also eating with his hand, asked Muli where he

had learned these new city ways. Grinning, Muli described how a gentleman from the city had taught him to use a spoon (see Chapter 14).

Muli's city friends were customers for his prostitutes; hoping still to attract Hari and me as customers, he told several stories about them. His stories became repetitious, and we told him to discuss other topics.

He asked softly, "Wouldn't you like to try one of these women?" He laughed shyly and covered his face with his shouldercloth.

I replied, "I have a wife; Hari has a wife; we don't need your women."

He peered out over the cloth. "Once you try them, you can never leave them."

"I've got pure gold at home," I replied, "so why should I look elsewhere?"

I had wondered what sort of untouchable would tell his story. I now realized with dismay that not only had I selected him, but he had selected me as a way to earn easy money and possibly involve me with his prostitutes. Clearly by his own account, he was a deviant in his culture, a weak, sickly man unable to do men's work, often living entirely on his wife's earnings, constantly embroiled in scandals, a self-confessed liar and scoundrel whose schemes often brought disaster not only to himself but to everybody associated with him.

This was hardly the sort of person I had planned to interview. I had expected to collect several life histories of high-caste and untouchable males and females representing different life styles and ages, and illustrating various adaptations to rapid urbanization. I had expected to find villagers who might speculate on the effects of change in their lives, who might describe their participation at some of the numerous local religious festivals and discuss religious values and beliefs. Muli went to festivals only to solicit customers (see Chapter 26).

I had hoped to collect the life history of a Bauri who would refute the stereotyped images that high castes had of them. A well-educated Brahman woman spoke for many of her caste when she assured me that "the Bauris are lazy and ignorant people. All my life we have hired them to work on my father's estate. They are unreliable. You never know when they will come to work. They never work hard. That's why they are so poor." I now realized that I had inadvertently selected a person who reinforced these very stereotypes. I told Hari

that I thought we should pay Muli what we had promised him but terminate the interviews and seek a normal working Bauri male or female.

Hari said, "You won't find anybody else at this time of year. All Bauris who can work are in the fields harvesting paddy. No one else can give you as much time as Muli does. Also, he speaks well, his stories are interesting, and he has given you a lot of information that you cannot get easily from other Bauris. I know that many things he says are true, and we can check the accuracy of any statements we doubt. I think you should keep interviewing him."

I accepted Hari's judgment. I had known him since 1962, when as a fifteen-year-old he had helped me collect census data during my first study of his village. Now, nine years later, he had offered his services again and I had hired him. I needed a translator-assistant, and no untouchables spoke English.

Hari, a robust athlete, was the college-educated, married son of a leader of a high-status landowning caste that hired and often exploited Bauri laborers. Hari himself was a popular youth leader who all his life had received deference from villagers of all castes. While I had expected that I could train him to work well among the people of his own caste, I was unsure if he could effectively interview untouchables, who understandably might resent high-caste persons. Other high-caste youths and men were totally unsuited to the task. Despite their frequent claims of having no caste prejudices, Hari's educated high-caste friends conspicuously avoided untouchable youths and never invited them to their social functions. Hari, by contrast, was the only high-caste villager who by his actions had demonstrated genuine friendship and concern for the untouchables of his community, speaking respectfully to them, eating with them, helping them organize a political group, establishing and running an adult night school for them, and interceding when high-caste landowners and shopkeepers cheated them. Although many untouchables nevertheless distrusted Hari, a few, like Muli, accepted him enough to crack jokes with him about high castes and to reveal their deep resentment of high-caste people.

I thought Hari had the potential to do the job I needed done. Accordingly, for several months I carefully trained him to conduct interviews among the people of his own caste, most of whom trusted him and readily confided in him in my presence. We conducted all

interviews jointly. He became sensitive to the kinds of questions I asked. He learned to translate literally, to self-consciously examine ways in which he might have selectively screened or omitted information. He learned to explain to the villagers carefully and in detail what we intended to do with the information we collected, and to inform me about those households from which he could not gather information.* By narrating his own life history to me, Hari learned how to collect the life histories of others.

Hari's most difficult adjustment had come when I told him that he would have to abandon his accustomed role as a leader because such a person often prompts people to give answers that they think will please an authority figure. He had at first enthusiastically tried to extract information from the people of his caste whether or not they were willing. "They are my neighbors," he said, "they *must* tell you the truth." Later, when Muli omitted details, Hari said: "We are paying him; he *must* tell what he knows." I insisted that Hari never order people to divulge information, but rather that he respect their right to offer or withhold it as they pleased. With practice he learned to do this, as well as to ask questions unexpected of persons in authority roles, such as his questioning of Muli's praise of Brahmins.

I came to rely on Hari's judgment. He could spot inconsistencies or errors in responses that escaped me. Using his detailed knowledge of the villagers and their life styles, he followed up leads about topics that I never knew existed. He became a skilled interviewer, and, most important, as a trusted insider he elicited information that an outsider working alone might never have received.

Muli's motivations in confiding to us were more complex than I had at first realized. He narrated his story not simply for money, but also to strike back at neighbors who disliked him and at his parents and brothers, who had thrown him out of the house. He used his life history to recall nostalgically his happy youth, which he contrasted with his unhappy life as a married man. He also took this opportunity to vent his resentment against high-caste men. "To keep their prestige, they avoid us in public, but in private they screw our women, 'hu hu,' panting like dogs." Finally, he wanted people to know what it means to live as a Bauri. "Who has ever cared about us? People should know how we live."

*One household unavailable to him was that of his father-in-law where Hari had to observe respect-avoidance relationships (discussed in Chapter 6); another was that of his father's cousin, who was feuding with Hari's household.



5. A higher-caste man whom Muli hopes to befriend.

Because Muli was dissatisfied with his lot, he dreamed of ways to break away from his starvation-poverty, from his position as a despised untouchable. Although he resented high-caste gentlemen for their double standard, he admired them for their wealth, easy jobs, fine clothes, and jewelry. He wanted to associate with and emulate them, to be *accepted* by them. He imagined that if he provided a service on which a high-caste man became dependent or by which he became compromised—such as supplying him with male or female prostitutes—he would become that man's friend. Prostitution temporarily brought men of wealth and social status to his door, but as customers, not friends. Acting out his hopeless fantasy of friendship, Muli refused to admit the true basis of his relationship with high-caste men and thus often entangled himself in difficulties he had never antici-

pated. On rare occasions, high-caste men befriended Muli, or at least were polite to him without wanting his women; they often became offended when they discovered that he had befriended them to make them customers.

For days Muli had been telling me that he wanted me to meet one of his customer-friends from the city, a low-grade civil servant (messenger) who had once given Muli a gold ring. Muli said, "He is my best friend of all. Every time I go to his house, he won't let me leave unless I eat a lot of tiffin [snacks]. You must meet him. I'll bring him here on Sunday, his day off, if that's all right with you."

I said, "I would like to meet your friend. Bring him next Sunday."

On the appointed day, neither Muli nor his friend appeared. I thought nothing more about it.

One week later, as the shadows were lengthening in the yard, Muli suddenly appeared with a stocky man dressed in a fine white dhoti [loincloth], long *punjaabi* shirt [shirt worn over trousers or dhoti], and heavy sandals. His face was square, his jaw heavy, and his black hair was oiled. He had a dark-complexioned, clean-shaven face, and a wide smile that displayed white, even teeth. As he minced up to my doorstep, he held the lower folds of his dhoti to avoid the dust. He wore a wristwatch with a wide gold band, and gold rings on three fingers of each hand. Muli, walking a couple of steps behind his friend, was unshaven and wore only a faded lungi [long loincloth] and a soiled undershirt.

Muli introduced us. "This is Madhusudana Babu; this is James Babu." We greeted one another with palms together. I invited them both inside.

Madhusudana Babu appeared perfectly relaxed and at ease; Muli was nervous, disconcerted. Madhusudana Babu, speaking in polite and cultured Oriya, asked me about my research. I told him, and then asked about his work. He said, "I have a cigarette stall near the city market. That's where I met Muli. But I also work in a government office. My home village is a few miles north of the city."

My wife, Pat, served tea and sweets, but Muli refused to take any. Madhusudana Babu quickly ate his, poured tea in his saucer, cooled it, and sipped it. Muli took his sweets and put them on Madhusudana Babu's plate, then poured his untouched tea into his friend's cup. Madhusudana Babu ate some, and then gave the remaining tea and sweets to Muli, who now consumed them. The two men acted like a husband and the wife who serves him. Throughout the visit, Muli

served his friend. When they left, Muli, like a dutiful wife, trailed behind him.

Muli's effeminate behavior (by village standards) appeared in many of the episodes of his life history. He shelled peanuts for Madhusudana Babu as they walked down the road; he associated socially with transvestite men; he mixed and talked easily with women and they accepted him among them (unusual behavior unless with transvestite men); he described in great detail the venereal disease of a Brahman customer-friend, including his inspection of his friend's diseased penis; his sexual relations with women were few and usually occurred only when women initiated them; and he was indifferent to his wife—one week after their wedding, he left his bride to solicit men for his prostitutes.

The frustration of Muli's life was that he wanted his customers to treat him as their friend, rather than the pimp who supplied them with prostitutes. Outwardly he was proud, but inwardly he coveted the money from prostitution. He went to devious lengths to deny to himself that he was a pimp, even while he earned money from that work. Usually he refused to accept direct payment from a customer—"friend." The women gave him money, which he interpreted not as payment, but as a donation. Muli construed any attention from gentlemen as "friendship," although their sole aim was to sleep with his prostitutes. Muli's relationships with high-caste men never lasted. He was forty years old, and most of the women he knew intimately were of his age or older. He was unable to mix freely with the younger women of his caste without arousing suspicion. Wanting fresh young prostitutes, the men of the city soon lost interest in Muli.

Madhusudana Babu had been avoiding Muli. Hoping to impress him, Muli had introduced him to me; but since Muli had no new men or women to supply, Madhusudana Babu had turned to other pimps. Muli later said to me forlornly, "I don't know what to do; I don't know why he's no longer as friendly as before. What can I do to make him be my friend again? I'll hire a *guṇṇiāa* [exorcist-magician] to recite spells to bring him back to me." Muli refused to admit that he could renew the friendship only by supplying a new woman.

While he dreamed and his futile schemes failed, Kia, Muli's hard-working wife, supported their family by cutting grass and harvest-

ing paddy. Increasingly impatient with Muli's introspections, Kia often quarrelled with him and called him lazy.

One morning during the India-Pakistan war over Bangladesh, Muli related a war dream and his wife's typically irritated response to it.

"Last night, I had quite a dream. In it I was a young man at a time when I was very ill. To become cured, I went to a *kaalasi* [shaman] near Dhauli hill, about five miles away. The mother goddess entered the shaman's body and then she entered my body. Through this the shaman was curing me. Just at the moment that he called upon the goddess to cure me, two airplanes flew overhead toward the capital city. I heard the sound of bombs and bullets as the planes bombed the city. Suddenly our capital city was in flames.

"Just then the deity left my body. Out of fear I urinated. I knew that I was doing so, but I did not seem to mind. Suddenly I awoke. It was dawn. I was stark naked; I had thrown all my clothes off. I had indeed urinated all over everything. I was lying on my cot, an old door of wooden planks resting on a couple of quarry stones. My urine had seeped through my cotton quilt, through the cracks in the planks, and into some tins below. Ping! Ping! Drops of urine were hitting them. It was those sounds that I thought were bullets and bombs!

"I arose from the cot, put my palms together in a *namaskaar* [greeting], and faced the sun, muttering, 'Well, gods, what a dream you gave me last night!'

"Just then Kia, my wife, entered the room. She had arisen early and had been boiling rice for our noon meal. She does this before going out to cut paddy. When she saw me greeting the sun, she thought I had lost my mind. 'What are you doing there?' she asked.

"I told her the dream and what had happened to the bed. She listened, then stuck out her lower lip and said 'Pfut!', turned the palm of her hand out in a gesture of 'so what,' and walked impatiently out of the room."

On those days during the harvest that Muli worked in the fields, Hari and I accompanied him. Jadu the miser had hired Muli as a farm servant; Muli in turn was supposed to hire day laborers to help harvest the crop and then pay them one-twelfth of the paddy they cut. To keep all the earnings among his relatives, Muli selected his wife, son, mother, youngest brother, and brother's wife. Since he



6. Bauris harvesting paddy.

was the overseer for the day, Muli came to the field attired in a fine dhoti and fancy shirt, while the others came in their working clothes: old saris for the women, a short loincloth for the brother, and short pants for Gopala, Muli's seventeen-year-old schoolboy son. Muli sat on the raised bank of a paddy field and watched. The group was supposed to finish cutting the crop of that field in one day. Muli's wife cut a wide path; the others moved slowly, cutting narrow paths. Although she was working faster than they were, Kia's path was shorter because it was wider. Her son helped her a little, but most of the time he sat and watched, like his father.

Kia talked loudly to herself, making remarks that would embarrass others, "Yesterday I said that we should hire three or four

outsiders, but the head of our household said, 'Why get others when all of us in the family can do the work?' So I brought my family out here, but nobody is working hard. This plot of land is small; we should be able to cut it in one day. But the way they work, it will take them two days. Where will the wages come from to pay for two days? If you hire five people to work for two days on such a small piece of land, how much will they take as wages, and how much will remain for us?"

Her son, Gopala, sitting nearby, said irritably, "Why are you opening your big mouth, shouting falsely?"

She shouted, "What, shouting falsely? I'll throw this sickle at your face so that half of it flies away!"

Muli became angry. "Why are you showing off your work? I don't know what work you do except for my prick work."

She replied, "What, you don't know what work I do? Sitting, sitting, speaking big things."

Muli stood up and shouted, "What are you saying? You horse-fucker! Characterless! Younger brother's wife [one who has sexual intercourse with her husband's younger brother]! Always wanting fucking! Adulteress! Will you bring their wage from your father's house? Why are you shouting like this? Shut up!"

She replied, "Why shut up? For this you are my husband?" Lapsing into Bauri dialect, she used a disrespectful term for "husband."[†]

Muli raised his fists to beat her. Hari pulled him away, saying, "Why are you scolding your wife? She is right in her way; she is justified."

Muli calmed down. "Yes, she's a very hard worker, and she earns a lot of money. She doesn't depend on my income. But her mouth is very sharp. Nobody can tolerate her language. She's expert in all

*The term *saali* [younger sister-in-law] usually refers to the wife's sister, but Muli used it to mean "younger brother's wife," the feminine equivalent of the male insult *saḷaa*.

[†]The Bauri dialect phrase is *etire ghaita* [for this you are my husband]. The word *etire* is Bauri dialect for *ethire*, while the word *ghaita* [husband] is disrespectful, whether used by men or women. A woman is expected to address her husband as *babu* [mister], *saa-aanta* [master], or with indirect references such as *gopala baapaa* [the father of Gopala]. A man in turn should not refer to his wife by name, but by nicknames or the name of her first child. Muli usually refers to his wife as "my wife," rarely by her name, Kia; but for the purpose of readability, I frequently use her name in the narrative.



7. Too old and weak to work standing, a Bauri grandmother harvests her landlord's paddy.

work. She has been ill for three days, so she is quite angry when my son and younger brother stand around like they have been doing. She can scold my son, but she must not scold my younger brother. He lives in a different household. She has no control over him. That's why she's angry, and that's why she criticized him indirectly."

In his stories, Muli prided himself on being clever and dishonest, an inveterate liar who thought up quick-witted ruses to escape from tight predicaments. Although he also described with ironic detachment how his devious schemes invariably backfired, I became skeptical of the reliability of the life history of a man who claimed to be a liar. Furthermore, some of Muli's stories, like his quarrel with Jadu the miser, sounded so out of character that I could not believe

them. Muli claimed that while standing before a tea shop full of patrons he had quarreled with and insulted his Brahman employer. To our knowledge, no Bauri from Muli's village had ever publicly insulted a Brahman.

Unknown to Muli, Hari and I quietly investigated his incident with Jadu, which had occurred during the period of his life history that Muli was presently narrating. Several eyewitnesses including Bauris, Brahmans, and even Jadu's own cousin not only confirmed Muli's description of the confrontation, but claimed that Jadu had truly provoked Muli by cheating him. Both the betel seller and the youth selling vegetables at the market confirmed incidents involving Jadu at the market.

Next we checked Muli's stories about his grandfather Dharma by questioning Muli's paternal uncle, a son of Dharma but no admirer of Muli. He confirmed all of Muli's stories but one. Another Bauri confirmed Muli's scandal involving his second wife, Tafulla. While collecting *paaṭuaa* [a form of song] texts, Hari and I asked several Bauris not about Muli, but about the history of the drama and singing troupes. These persons again confirmed several of Muli's stories of his grandfather Dharma, as well as some of the drama troupe incidents.

Muli's descriptions of Bauri rituals and other activities paralleled those I witnessed, and my own observations of Muli with his prostitutes, customers, transvestite friends, brothers, and wife matched his descriptions of his behavior with them. Whatever his motivations might have been, Muli narrated a life history that was accurate for the most part in its portrayal of Bauri life, including life styles that differed from his.

Muli saw himself as a deviant in his own culture; but far from claiming that all Bauris act and think as he did, he contrasted other life styles with his own without condemning or praising either. Of the thirteen life histories I collected, Muli's was the most pitilessly self-critical. He often described himself in unflattering terms but with neither remorse nor pride.

To be sure, in telling his story, Muli selectively omitted some topics and exaggerated others. Muli was a middle-aged failure with a bleak future. His youthful dreams had failed to materialize. No wonder, then, that he dwelt at length on his idyllic days as an unmarried youth, a time of hopes and dreams, the happiest days of his life.

While he avoided speaking about his childhood, he would sit for hours with his eyes closed, speaking in a low monotone, recalling those days of his youth when high-caste men came to his door, flattered him, and gave him gifts so that he would supply them with women.

Faced with perpetual poverty and frequent starvation, Muli quite understandably overstated the amounts of food and gifts of cloth that his family supplied, and the expenses they met, at feasts and ceremonies. Similarly, he stated that his family paid for the expensive "sin of the fly larvae pollution" ceremony, an unlikely expenditure for an impoverished family.*

To enhance his prestige, Muli exaggerated not only about feasts, but about the leadership activities and skills of his grandfather and his brothers. According to Muli, his grandfather learned wrestling from high-caste villagers, but in fact these persons never allowed the Bauris to practice with them. Muli also embellished the details of his many quarrels with his family and with other families. He claimed that his parents made no preparations for their son Sarala's fourth-night-after-the-wedding ceremony, which is hard to believe, as is his claim that he and his wife paid all the expenses of his brother's ceremony.

Aside from neglecting his childhood, Muli's greatest omission was his refusal to admit that he worked as a pimp for the women of his own ward. Despite much evidence to the contrary, he insisted that except for one woman named Koki, all the women came from other wards and villages, because to use women from his own ward would have been disgraceful. But he frequently associated with the prostitute women of his ward, one of whom, not knowing that I understood Oriya, asked him in my presence if I were a potential customer whom he could send to her. One of Muli's sisters earned money as a prostitute. In Muli's stories, Ananta Babu, Doctor Babu, and other wealthy high-caste customers unaccountably showed great interest in Muli's family, particularly his sisters, whom Muli probably drew into his prostitution business. No wonder Muli's parents constantly quarreled with him and finally threw him out of the house permanently. For months Muli insisted he could not un-

*A person infected with fly larvae is considered to be polluted and should undergo a purificatory ritual, but some persons refuse to perform the ritual because of its heavy expenses.