

Dawn was breaking when Shahni reached the river bank, rosary in hand, a khaddar chaddar wrapped around her head and shoulders. A rosy glow was spreading over the entire length of the sky. She slipped out of her dress and then, placing it to one side, stepped into the river, chanting 'Shri...Rama, Shri...Rama.' After offering oblatinal water to the sun from her cupped hands, she splashed her drowsy eyes. That done, she clasped the river with her arms.

The Chinab was cold as usual, and the waves came gushing, embracing each other. Up there, snow was melting in the hills of Kashmir, and with turbulent waves wildly pounding the banks, cliff-edges were crashing down into the river. But somehow, today, the entire stretch of sand was unusually quiet.... Shahni put on her dress and looked. Not a single soul anywhere! And yet, there were countless footprints all along the river bank. She felt a bit uneasy.

Shahni senses something ominous in this morning's sweet stillness. She has been bathing here these last fifty years. A long stretch of time! She remembers the day when she had arrived on this bank decked out in bridal dress. But now ... her Shahji is no more, her well-educated son is no more, she is all by herself, is the lone occupant of Shahji's large haveli. But no... - why is she thinking of such things at this early hour? Hasn't her mind broken yet with worldly affairs? Shahni drew a deep breath, and repeating 'Shri Rama, Shri Rama' entered the millet fields on her way back home. Smoke was billowing out from inside the freshly swept and mopped courtyards. *Tann, tann* - sound the bullocks' neck-bells. And yet ... in spite of all this, today everything looks a little stuck somehow. No one has come yet to fetch water from the Jammiwala well. All the peasants here are her Shahji's tenants. Shahni raised her eyes. All these fields, stretching mile after mile, are her own. As her eyes took in the plentiful new crop, she was drenched with a feeling of attachment to her inheritance. All these blessings are Shahji's gifts to her. These lands stretching far and wide and the wells dug in them - they are all her own. And the lands are gold-mines, they yield three crops every year! Heading towards the well, Shahni shouted out, 'Shera, O Shera ... Huseina, O Huseina.'

## Sikka Badal Gaya<sup>1</sup>

Krishna Sobti

*Translated from the Original Hindi by Jaidev*

Shera recognizes Shahni's voice. How can he not? Following the death of his mother, Jaina, it was Shahni who had taken it upon herself to see to his upbringing. He hides his long-handled chopper under the hay-load and picks up his hookah: 'Ei Huseina, Huseina.' How Shahni's voice has shaken him! Just a moment ago, he had started contemplating how after breaking into the dark cell of the haveli he would be grabbing all those boxes of silver and gold ... - but then, she with her 'Shera, O Shera.' He seethed with rage. On whom to take it out? On Shahni? He yelled at his wife: 'Are you dead or what? ... May Allah send you death!'

Putting aside the kneading trough of clay, Huseina came out rushing: 'Coming, I'm coming. What is driving you mad at this early hour?'

By now Shahni had drawn closer. She had heard Shera's sharp words. She said lovingly: 'Huseina, this is not the time for a scene like this. Really, if he cannot help blowing up, at least you should keep your cool.'

'I should, indeed!' Huseina's voice throbbed with slighted pride. 'Shahni, son is son, after all. You haven't asked him why he has been showering such curses at dawn.' Shahni smiled and fondly caressing her back, said: 'Don't be silly. My son's wife is dearer to me than my son... I say, Shera ...

'Yes, Shahni.'

'It seems the Kulluwal men reached here in the night. Did they?' Shahni's voice was tense.

'No... No, Shahni...!' Shera spoke haltingly, sounding embarrassed. Ignoring his reply, Shahni continued gravely: 'Whatever has been going on is not something good at all. Shera, were Shahji alive today, he would probably have sorted out the matters. But ...' Shahni checked herself. Whatever is it that is going on? Her heart is in turmoil. It's ages since Shahji departed this life - but today, something is melting inside her, possibly it's a whole mass of memories.... In an attempt to check her tears, she looked towards Huseina and smiled faintly. All along, though, Shera has been wondering how Shahni can still be

talking like this. Let alone Shahji, no one can do anything in the present situation. What is going to take place will take place - and why should it not? Shahji's fortune was made from the interest he charged from my people. Thoughts of revenge brought red threads to his eyes; the chopper flashed across his mind. He threw an appraising look at Shahni - but no, no ... In recent times, he had done some thirty to forty people in. Yet... yet he couldn't stoop so low... Suddenly, displacing Shahni, the hands of Shahni floated in front of his eyes. He was back into those distant winter nights when having been chided by Shahji he would often lie down in some corner of the haveli. On such nights he would be roused by Shahni who, lantern in one hand, milk bowl in the other, would say in a voice thick with motherly emotion: 'Shera, O Shera, get up and drink this.' Shera looked towards Shahni's wrinkled face - a gentle smile had lit it up. He felt moved. She has done us no harm. Shahji is no longer alive, there is no way one can settle old scores with the dead! I have got to defend Shahni, I will. But then what about the decision we reached in the night? Why did I acquiesce in Firoz's plan? Everything will proceed according to plan... the booty will be shared.

'Come, Shahni, let me walk you home.'

Shahni rose to her feet.

Shahni walks along, lost in deep thought, and Shera follows with firm steps. He is very agitated and keeps looking suspiciously in all directions. The advice of his accomplices is echoing in his ears. But really, what can be the point of killing her?

'I say, Shahni...'

'Yes, Shera...'

Shera desperately feels he should warn her about the looming threat to her life, but words fail him.

'Shahni...'

Shahni raised her head skyward: smoke had spread all over. 'Shera...'

Shera knows where it is coming from. Jalalpur village was marked for the night, so it has been set on fire. Shahni is stunned: all her relatives live there.

They reached the haveli. Shahni stepped into the deodhi, the entrance gate, her mind utterly drained. Shera left but she took no notice. A feeble frame, a lonely being with no one around to support her! She remained lying for who knows how long. The day rose and then declined. The haveli deodhi lies open. Shahni is not able to get up. Her authority seems to be slipping out from her hold. The mistress of Shahji's haveli! Somehow, today she cannot find within herself any feeling left for it. She lies inert, like a stone. It was getting to be evening, and still she remained averse to the idea of getting up. Suddenly, though, Rasuli's voice broke through her apathy and she got up, startled.

'Shahni, Shahni, did you hear about trucks coming to carry people away?'

'What trucks...?' Shahni could not add another word. One hand held the other. Within no time, news had spread all through the village. Lah Bibi turned up and said in a quivering voice, 'Shahni, such a thing is unheard of, it has never happened before! What a catastrophe! What injustice!'

Shahni stood frozen, like a statue. Nawab Bibi's sadness was charged with emotion: 'Shahni, we never expected this.'

Should Shahni say she alone anticipated it. From outside the haveli were heard words being exchanged by the village patwari Begu and the jeildar. Shahni understood: The moment has arrived. She descended the steps, mechanically; but she could not bring herself to cross the deodhi. In a deep, very deep voice she said, 'Who's there? Which ones of our men are there?'

Who is not there today! Outside, the entire village is present, the crowd that at one time danced attendance on her, all her tenants whom she has always treated like her own people. But today, not one of them would stand by her, now she is all alone. What a crowd, with the Kulluwal jaats among them! She had anticipated this in the morning itself.

Difficult to say what inspired Begu, the patwari, and Ismail, the muezzin of the masjid, to walk up towards Shahni till they were within earshot. Begu could not summon the courage to look at her. Clearing his throat a bit, he said, 'Shahni, it was all Rabb's will!'

Shahni's legs shook, and she leaned against the wall for support.



Did Shahji leave her behind, for a day like this? At the sight of this depleted woman, Begu's mind starts churning with concern: How unbearable it must be for Shahni! But what can anyone do? Sikka badal gaya hai...

Shahni having to come out of her haveli with everyone watching - is not a small matter. The entire village is lined up from the deodhi down to the community assembly place which Shahji got built on the wedding of his son. It has now become a custom to discuss and debate all village matters at this meeting place. It was here only that the plan to loot the grand haveli was first mooted. Shahni has not been oblivious to what goes on in the village. Only she feigns ignorance. She has never borne malice towards anyone or done them any harm. However, what she does not realize is that power has changed hands, that sikka badal gaya hai...

It was getting late. Daud Khan, the man in charge of the police post, swaggered forth. But the instant he saw the inert-looking, sombre figure standing at the deodhi, he stopped dead. By God, it is the same Shahni whose husband used to set up river-side tents for his men, the same woman who had given his fiancée those ear-studs of gold as a face-unveiling gift. The other day when he came here in connection with the League business, he had been very insolent: 'Shahni, this masjid at Bhagowal has to come up, and you have got to cough up three hundred rupees.' With her characteristic simplicity she had produced the money. But today...?

'Shahni!' Daud Khan addressed her. He was thanedar, else the pain in his voice would have shown in his eyes too.

Shahni stood dazed and could not utter a word.

'Shahni!' He took a few more steps and soon stood close to the deodhi. 'It is getting late, Shahni.' Then he added in a whisper: 'Do take anything you want to carry with you. You have packed up some things, haven't you? I mean, all your gold and silver...'

Shahni's response was barely audible: 'Gold and silver!' After a short pause, however, she said, simply: 'My gold and silver! Children, all of that I leave to you. The only gold I cherish lies here in these lands.'

Daud Khan felt non-plussed: 'But Shahni, you will be all alone, you'd better take some things. At least take

the cash with you. One just can't be sure of anything in times like these...'

'You said times?' Shahni laughed, her eyes wet with tears. 'Why do you think, Daud Khan, I will live for any better times than these?' Blending in her voice deep anguish and disdain Shahni had suddenly come out with these words.

Daud Khan stood speechless. Then, gathering his courage he tried again: 'Shahni please, you will certainly need ready money...'

'No, child,' Shahni retorted in choked voice. 'I do not place money above my home here. All haveli cash stays in the haveli itself.'

Shera had meanwhile come up to her. Having seen from a distance Daud Khan talking to Shahni, he had assumed the man was trying to coax something out of Shahni. 'It's getting late, Khan Sahib,' he said.

Shahni was astounded. Telling me it's getting late - in my own home! From somewhere inside her, a wave of revolt tore its way through

the haveli. This ancestral legacy which following the death of Shahji she had been guarding with such care had let her down today! She folded her hands; this was her last darshana, her final pranama. Never again shall her eyes be allowed to see the tall haveli. Inside, love struck her with the intensity of a tidal wave. Why didn't I take a patient walk through the house? Dejection builds inside her heart - but she can't look small before these people, she has got to behave with dignity now as before. That will do, that is all. She lowered her head. A few tears of the family's daughter-in-law fell in front of the deodhi. She walked away, the great haveli stayed put, it stood where it was. Daud Khan, Shera, the patwari, the jeildar, and the rest, including people big and small, young and old, men and women - all walked behind her.

The trucks had filled up already. Shahni was dragging herself. The villagers feel choked with emotion.

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the whirling tears. I am the mistress of this centuries old, noble haveli - and these fools? What are they but underlings, who lived all along on our generosity?... But no, no, not this. All right - it is getting late. Sure, it is getting late. Shahni's ears are ringing with the words - It is getting late. But no, certainly not, Shahni won't leave this ancestral mansion in tears; it will be with dignity she will step out of that deodhi at which one day she had stood dressed up like a queen. Steadying her wobbly legs, Shahni wiped the tears with her dupatta and came out of the deodhi. All elderly women present outside broke down. The woman who stood by them in seasons fair and foul is leaving her home today. Who could ever stand comparison with her! Allah had given her everything, but - but then times turned, things changed...

Covering her head with her dupatta, Shahni cast a last look at

Shera, the professional killer, is heart-broken. Daud Khan came forward and threw the truck door open. Shahni advanced. Ismail came rushing and pleaded in hoarse voice: 'Shahni, do say something. Blessings falling from your mouth must needs bear fruit.' Having made his request, he wiped his tears with the end of his safa. Shahni pushed back a sob and despite the choked throat said, 'May Rabb protect you, my children, may He send you joy...'

The small crowd of people burst into sobs. See, she has not a speck of malice in her heart. Only we... we have failed in our duty towards her. Shera charged forth and fell at her feet: 'Shahni, none of us could help, for the whole regime changed...' Shahni brought down her trembling hand on his head and said in jerky voice: 'Beloved child, may fortune always favour you.' Daud Khan gave a signal with his hand. After some of the old women had hugged

Shahni, the truck began moving.

Shahni's bond with her homeland was snapped. The haveli, its new sitting room, another, four-windowed, room on its roof, its large hallway - they flash in turn before Shahni's eyes. She cannot make out if it is the truck or she herself that has started moving. Her eyes are raining tears. Daud Khan directs a troubled glance at old Shahni. Where will she go now?

'Shahni, do not carry any ill-will. We would certainly have helped if only we could. These are incredible times. The regime has changed, sikka badal gaya hai...'

In the refugee camp that night, when Shahni lay down on the bare ground, a thought struck her tortured mind: 'The regime has changed... sikka... Anyway, how does it matter? It's all left behind...' The thought brought more tears to the eyes of the late Shahji's beloved Shahni.

All around, in villages encircled by lush green fields, the night was raining down blood.

Perhaps the regime was changing and - sikka badal raha tha.<sup>3</sup>

#### Translator's Notes

<sup>1</sup>The title of this story does not lend itself to a satisfactory translation. Literally, 'sikka' is coin or currency bearing the imprint of the ruling authority; change of sikka, therefore, signifies change of regime or power changing hands. Since 'sikka badal gaya hai', 'sikka badal gaya tha' and 'sikka badal raha tha', all tense variations of the title, also happen to be complete phrases in themselves, they have all been retained as such.

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to Krishna Sobti for clarifying the meaning of Shahni's thought. Literally, perhaps, it would be something like this: 'The regime has changed... but sikka, how could sikka change? It just so happened that I left it behind.' In any case, the words used in the original constitute a veritable *aporia* for this translator.

<sup>3</sup>'Sikka Badal Gaya' was first published in 1948. It is reprinted in *Badlon ke Ghore* (New Delhi: Rajkamal, 1980).

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