

The Sickle



The Sickie

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 juggernaut

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All the characters in this narrative are fictional.



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It must have been just after midnight when Terna woke up. You couldn't call it waking up exactly though; she remained lying with her eyes closed, and tried to trace the sounds outside. Terna's body gave way in fatigue as soon as she lowered herself on the sheet stretched across the floor of their shanty in the toli – what the harvesters called their slum – and yet slumber was so light here that to roll from wakefulness into sleep and then swim up from sleep to wakefulness was as simple as stepping out of the room and into the yard.

Six years had passed since Terna had started coming to this area, at first with her husband immediately after her marriage, and then with the children too. There had been one good monsoon in between; that year they had stayed back in their village. But once drought struck the region where they lived, it tended to continue for years on end. Dushkal, they called it. With no water in the fields they farmed and no work in the village, they had no choice but to go elsewhere to make a living. The sugarcane fields and sugar mills of Satara were eight hours

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away by truck or tractor from Latur district in Marathwada. The mills were called sakhar factories locally, sakhar being a corruption of sharkara or sugar in Marathi. In winter, not even the polythene sheets extracted from the lining of the sugar sacks and strung up to cover the open doorway could prevent the occupants of the shanties from trembling uncontrollably in the cold. And in summer, when not even a whisper of a breeze entered, staying inside was like being weighed down by a rock.

Which was how Terna was feeling now. Even a light layer of sleep could keep the anguish in check for a while . . . but now it was early April, and a cuckoo was splitting the night with its cries. There were hardly any trees on the field, and of the few there, most were bare, having been struck by lightning. Some mango and neem trees stood near the centre, which was where the cuckoo must have taken shelter amidst their boughs. Night had brought some relief to the meadows, and the hills tried to find some comfort too after sunset by launching the heat trapped inside them on air currents. The crests of the Sahayadri range were scattered near and far, some nestling close to the horizon, others rearing their heads unexpectedly behind villages. Mornings came before the rocks could turn cool, the heat beginning to spread as soon as the sun popped up and raised the temperature of the ground.

The April days were scorching, though the heat was not unbearable after midnight. Terna knew that going outdoors would afford her body a smidgen of relief, but she had no intention of doing that. Here in the toli there was no fixed time

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for rest, so whenever they got a break, man or woman, they threw themselves on the sheets laid out on the floor to stretch their backs. The work was endless, which meant the breaks weren't scheduled. Harvesting of the closely packed sugarcane plants went on round the clock. The stalk had to be separated from the base and then the tip sliced off with a sickle. Two men stood by to load the harvested sugarcane on the tractors which waited on the path between the fields till the cane was piled high, after which the load would be transported to the sugar mills. A long line of tractors stood outside the mill gates, with more joining them constantly. There was nothing but sugarcane fields all around. A standard payment to the security guards made it possible to jump the queue. By the time the tractors made their way back it was time for the workers to start harvesting again. The vehicles could return any time, at three in the morning or at seven, and the workers in the fields took turns to go back to their shanties to rest their bones.

There was little sound anywhere on earth now besides the cries of nocturnal birds and the repentance of cuckoos. A dog might have just walked over a pile of sugarcane leaves, making a rustling sound. A cowbell rang out. But it wasn't any of these that had woken Terna up; it was a different reason, it was the fear that always raced across the minds of young women at night here in these shanties like a jagged flash of lightning. Even with your eyes closed you could tell if someone was staring at you. Her eyes weren't sticky with sleep, but still they smarted when she opened them. Involuntarily, out of habit,

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Terna felt the space next to her with her hand to check that both the children were still sleeping, squeezed up against her. She had lain them down on rags placed on a thick sheet. They were fast asleep, their arms and legs thrown across one another. Terna drew her other hand to her breast; she could sleep in loose clothes at home, but not here in the shanty, where there could be a call to go to work at any point. In the fields their feet were encased in canvas shoes for protection from pebbles, bricks and shards of glass. They wore thick, full-sleeved button-up shirts along with pyjamas, over which they put on a pair of loose trousers. It was entirely possible to have your body scratched by thorny weeds or the rough ridges of the sugarcane. Terna didn't take off her work clothes even after dinner, which meant gasping in the sultry heat inside the airless hut. Still she didn't undo a single button, and not just because it might mean taking longer to respond when the call to work came. These clothes were her armour for self-defence too. No one could take them off just by tugging at them; the tight buttons couldn't be undone quickly, giving her enough time to pinch the children and wake them up.

The first time she came to these shanties after getting married, she had brought trouble on herself with her own carelessness. The shanty had no door, allowing easy entry to cats and dogs – and humans too. The animals came in search of food that hadn't been covered; the humans had a different quest. That was the only time Terna had made the mistake of going to bed in the same loose clothes as at home. An unexpected

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dust storm had blown across the land the previous evening, cooling the air. Her malik Datu was in the fields; he had told his new bride, go get some rest in the hut, I'll wake you up early in the morning. It was this desire for sleep that proved her undoing. She felt a man pressing down on her body, the stench of liquor making her choke. Terna thrashed about. No, it wasn't her husband, it was the mukadam, the sugar mill agent who had paid their salaries in advance and deposited them here in these shanties to harvest the crop. Not knowing the protocol of the toli, Terna had screamed, for which she was rewarded with a hefty slap on her delicate face. It drew blood from her bruised lips, while the man hissed at her, effortlessly ripping her thin cotton blouse and raising her petticoat above her waist. Don't make a noise, you cunt, or I'll slit your throat. It was a matter of minutes anyway; even the mukadam knew there was never much time inside the shanty. Her husband could come any time, men and women from nearby huts could barge in too. It wouldn't suit a man in the agent's position to be caught red-handed, even though there wasn't anyone hereabouts who had the guts to inform the police. Without his advance payments a labourer would have to starve for eight months. He had only stayed as long as it took him to slice like a sickle into Terna's luscious body with its fragrance of cane leaves and seven dormant layers of black soil. Tossing her clothes at her, he had straightened his own and left. Covering herself, she had begun to sob, her body heaving, but it wasn't the kind of crying that can split the night open. One look at his wife when Datu

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came home at sunrise, and everything was clear. He had neither consoled her nor wiped her tears away, but he hadn't beaten her up either. It was he who had asked her to get some rest in the hut, after all. Thankfully, their first child had already been conceived, and Datu knew of it too. The rains were plentiful that year, the child had brought luck. A son was followed by a daughter. Terna and her husband had spent the entire season in their village, but the next year onwards they had been forced to resume their work on the cane fields. Terna was experienced now. She never forgot to cover herself from head to toe when going to bed. Nor did she omit to have her children press up against her while they slept.

As soon as her daughter turned one, Terna had been forced to visit the district clinic to get rid of her childbearing vessel. Marathwada would never be rid of its difficult days. People connected to the government were spending money hand over fist to ensure the continuation of bad times. Rich people wanted high profits where their capital was invested, and the poor had no choice but to throng to the shanties for a livelihood. Sewing up the tubes was a makeshift arrangement, it didn't even work all the time, and there was the monthly problem of the flow. Here there were neither bathrooms nor toilets. Where were eight-months-pregnant women to go? But if you didn't have a uterus, you didn't have a problem either. It was Terna's husband who had told her to do it – threateningly, but without beating her. There will be many dogs to sniff around you here, whether you hate it or enjoy it is your choice. But if

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it gets you pregnant I'll kick you out of the house. All this was a long time ago. There was a continuous drought, three years in a row. They had resumed their visits to the sugarcane fields, and their troubles had risen too. But the dogs were no less hungry, so Terna had to be alert. Still lying on the sugarcane leaves she slept on, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness outside before getting up. She had smelt humans, the smell of raw tobacco and alcohol in the air. When she lifted her head, she could see the glowing tip of a beedi.

Not one, but two jackals. Bipedes. One of them was going to slink in while the other kept watch outside.

With her uterus ripped out of her, Terna was more courageous now. Deepening her voice, she shouted, who's there, who is it, is that a thief out there? With one hand she delivered a sharp pinch to her younger baby's arm, who cried out in pain in her sleep. The glow of the beedi and the shuffling footsteps retreated cautiously. Terna sat up; perspiration had begun to gather beneath her breasts. The men may not have left, they might be around nearby. Her baby was her shield now. With one more pinch on the baby's arm, Terna picked her up and went outside. Shriek, little girl, scream loudly, make a racket. The dozing bulls woke up abruptly at the cries. Their bells began to swing; suddenly awakened, they grunted in annoyance . . .

It was as though the sun had risen in the darkness over the sugarcane harvesters' toli. The two men sped off along the path between two rows of shanties. Their motorcycle was parked quite far away, where the lane met the main road. Now

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the sound of the vehicle being started could be heard; Terna realized her technique had worked this time. A young man named Magan Rathore was lying on a charpai close by; the men could afford this luxury in the oppressive heat inside the shanties. Waking up at the commotion, he could see Terna standing in the dark with her daughter in her arms. Coming up to her, he asked, what is it, bahini, who were those people?

Thieves, answered Terna tremulously. They were standing just outside my door, smoking.

They didn't get in though? Magan was relieved. Are the bulls safe?

These were fine Khillar bulls, strong and healthy, their enormous curved wings coloured orange. Cattle thieves had their own gangs or munds, and they were on the prowl in harvest season, when everything from bulls to carts was in short supply.

Magan knew the way things were hereabouts, he had realized it wasn't thieves. Those who roared in on their motorcycles were a different breed, plunderers. He knew only too well how many widows and women separated from their husbands had been the victims of the mukadam and his gang's regular sorties. Given the situation, they had no option but to submit. Magan said, I'll stay alert, go and sleep, bahini.

They won't come any more today. Not during the rest of the night at any rate.

Magan realized as much, and Terna knew it too.

Reassured, she undid her shirt buttons and loosened

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the drawstrings of her pants this time before lying down comfortably on her bed of cane leaves. And, in fact, she fell asleep too.

Every year they left their land. When the harvest was done and winter came, a long season stretched ahead without rain, without irrigation, without crops, with the next precipitation being a long way off. In a concerted effort to stave off the spectre of spending their days without food, Terna and Datu and others like them left the rain shadow of Marathwada in droves to clamber on to bullock carts or tractors or trucks bound for the fertile and fruitful land of western Maharashtra flowing with milk and sugar. Many of them went to neighbouring Karnataka too, but most moved to a different district within the state to harvest sugarcane. Local labourers wouldn't touch this work, for they weren't interested in such low wages. So it was Marathwada that provided the workers for the flourishing milk-and-sugar belt. Farmers sowed sugarcane to supply the hundreds of sugar mills scattered around in the area. The mills had to buy the entire crop, which meant procuring the workers for the harvest was not the cultivator's responsibility. The mills gave the contracts before the harvest season to local mukadams or middlemen, who in turn paid advance fees to lock in the labourers. The payment was made at a 'per sickle' rate, with husband and wife adding up to one koyta, the local word for the sickle or knife used to harvest the sugarcane. Those with their own bullock carts were hired to transport the sugarcane; owning a tractor was even better, it commanded a higher

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payment. Many came with nothing but their sickles, with the farmer providing the carts and the bulls to draw them. They set off from their villages after their own monsoon crops had been stored at home by the middle of November. They returned before the advent of the rains the following year, splitting their lives into two six-month periods – one in their own villages between the monsoon and winter seasons, and the other, from winter to the end of summer, in the shanties next to the sugarcane fields. It was a strange way to live. Sugarcane leaves were stretched across bamboo posts. The shanties were exposed to the sky, the sides gaping open like tents. The tolis on the unoccupied fields near the mills were like nomad camps. There were one or at most two taps for 300 or 400 shanties, the women spending hours filling water at these taps in the gaps between work. If the millowner in question were particularly compassionate, there might be a tall lamp post in the middle of the field – although, needless to add, its beams did not reach every corner of the toli.

For landless labourers with no bullock carts of their own, potable water and electric light were luxuries in most of the tolis which had sprung up near the sugarcane fields, and, sometimes, on the grounds of the mills. Darkness descended on the tolis after sunset, which was when the cooking began on fires lit with dry leaves. The fuel and the shanties were both made of those leaves, and though the women knew everything could burn down to ashes if the fire spread, still they sliced their vegetables at twilight without a care in the world. Back

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home in the village they would cook twice a day, but here they had to make do at night and the next afternoon with whatever they cooked in the evening. For the women had no time to cook twice a day; like the men, they too had to go to the fields at daybreak to harvest the sugarcane, grabbing a bite around one in the afternoon right where they laboured through the day. Jowar bhakris and vegetables made the day before, with pickles. And then back to work. The women returned before darkness fell, for they had to fetch water and the kindling, feed the bulls, clean the children. So this was the time they spent in their shanties – not for rest, though, but to work some more. Nor could they sleep after the meal and doing the dishes; they had to go back to the fields to continue the harvesting, sometimes taking a lift on the tractors or bullock carts returning empty after transporting the harvested sugarcane to the mills. It was a unique kind of labour, whose cycle had no real room for what would qualify as the legal definition of a break. All of them were prepaid labourers who had accepted payment for the entire season already, which meant they were compelled to work as long as they drew breath. The only gap came when the vehicles stacked with sugarcane trundled off to the mills, though not everyone could stop working even then, but at least they could take turns. While the women stretched their legs in the shanties, the men toiled in the fields. Then one set would go off to eat, and another to rest.

Humans were 'sickles' here, they had no names but numbers. Families were the units for counting sickles, husband and wife

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adding up to one. If an adult child, brother or brother-in-law was present, the number went up.

A sickle is released only after enough sugarcane has been harvested to recover the advance payment. Had the labourers here been thought of as humans, it wouldn't have been possible to make them work twenty to twenty-two hours a day.

Not everyone who worked here was a landless labourer though. Many of them owned land – two, five, even ten acres. But these were arithmetical numbers only, holding no significance in Marathwada, a region without rain or irrigation. Land that neither received rain for the kharif crop nor irrigation for the rabi crop was inevitably left bare, which didn't help the owner at all. He still had to shut down his household and leave Marathwada with his wife and children. When the drought continued for successive years, it became difficult to feed not just themselves, but also the cattle. In any case, it was difficult to survive all year on a single crop, and then if the lack of rains made even this one crop impossible, all that was left for the farmer was starvation.

The peculiar geographic location of Marathwada keeps it eternally anxious and distressed; delayed monsoon, scanty rains, drought, adversity – these are the variations on its fate. Maharashtra is an immense state to begin with, stretching from the Arabian Sea on the west to central India in the east, and then from Madhya Pradesh in the north to Karnataka in the south. The Marathwada region is deep in the interior of the state, and the monsoon grows weaker and almost non-existent

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by the time it arrives here. The south-west monsoon winds that originate in the Bay of Bengal dispense rain across the country as they journey towards the hinterland, retaining their moisture up to central India, including the area of Vidarbha in Maharashtra, which does get some rain, being adjacent to Madhya Pradesh. But the south-west monsoon does not make it as far as the next province to the west, which is Marathwada. And then again, the south-west monsoon winds that originate in the Arabian Sea bring rain to the Goa and Konkan coasts but are blocked by the Western Ghats and bounce off towards Pune and Satara districts, both of them lands of milk and sugar. These rains, too, dry up before making it to Marathwada, their density dropping rapidly over the fifty miles that separate Satara from Beed. Right next to an area with 250 centimetres of annual rainfall lies one where the rain ranges between fifty centimetres and 135 centimetres annually.

The bulk of the massive rainfall over the Sahayadri mountain range flows out to the sea. And because the Deccan Plateau stands at an altitude, underground water has to be drawn up to the surface, making extraction much more expensive. To these two unproductive elements of nature are added the enormous influence of the contractors and the gigantic conspiracy to extract government money and drown it in big dams. Small and medium farmers know all of this, but what are they to do in their efforts to farm in a land with no rains or irrigation? All they can do is gaze at the cloudless skies in Parbhani and Beed and Latur and Nanded districts and curse their luck.

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It isn't as though the geographical location of Marathwada has changed. And yet, 150 or 200 years ago, before the time of the Nizam, the land here yielded two crops a year in most places. Marathwada gets more rain than Rajasthan, and yet the very method of cultivation here has remained flawed. The farmer is only concerned with drawing out the underground water, but no one is interested in recharging the earth with water. The peasant cares only for his own benefits, he couldn't be bothered with how much groundwater is being depleted. Groundwater levels have plummeted in this region, and the green cover has shrunk too. One-third of the land used to be covered by vegetation, but reckless deforestation has reduced this to a mere 5 per cent.

Terna didn't consider it much of a problem that there was just the one tap in their toli. It wasn't as though they had much water in their village either. Potable water was supplied two days a week in a tanker. At the peak of summer there was water in the tap just twice a month. Survival depended on saving every drop, even shedding blood for half a mug of water. Bathing was possible once a fortnight; dust and leaves had to be used to wipe oneself clean after defecation. The waterless households were buried in a foul stench. After the harvest, it was a matter of returning to their dry and dusty villages under the sizzling sun, still in the grip of drought.

What actually surprised Terna was that the shanties had no such thing as a front yard. The path along which people walked ran past the edge of the covering of sugarcane leaves

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that they called a roof. It was still possible to survive for some time without adequate water . . . but to live like a human, to breathe deeply, privacy was essential.

They owned a small house in Chhindwari village in Latur district, outside the town that was the district headquarters. Just two rooms, one large, one small, but a house of bricks, nevertheless. And with a yard in front. The well was dry six months in the year, but still it was part of the yard, dug when Datu's grandfather was alive. When the rain-laden clouds of June eventually arrived here after discharging all their other responsibilities, the yard was finally moistened, and water collected in the well. The yard was fenced in with acacia branches. During the drought the creepers and plants all dried up, but still they planted new ones in the monsoon. There was some privacy there, the public road had not pounced on the personal space of the family.

Here in the toli the earthen stoves were lined up at a short distance behind the shanties. At dusk, after she had put her pan on it to cook, or while slicing the withered vegetables with a knife, Terna found her mind wandering. Was her aged mother-in-law taking care to secure the opening in the fence every night? It was a time of hunger, no rain. It wasn't a good idea to let creatures from the outside wander in. They had a couple of large black dogs of their own, as banjaris did, and three cats too. They did not quarrel among themselves, playing together, flopping down with their legs on one another. Her grandfather had made the trellis of bamboo and iron himself;

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and when the skies opened up they wound seeds of gourd and pumpkin around its bars. When the creepers dried up during the drought, the moonlight slipped through the grid and splashed on the yard.

Terna could at least lie down at ease on the khatia in the yard in loose clothes during the months of the drought that she spent in the village, whether there was a drop of water or not. Going to bed every night inside the shanty, buttoned up to the neck and dying of the perspiration running down the body meant giving up eventually.

The banjaris are scattered across Marathwada in Maharashtra and some parts of Andhra Pradesh. They were forest nomads initially, after which they had become traders, loading their bullock carts with rice, salt and pulses and selling them in distant lands, going all the way to the coastal areas, even to Surat. But their way of trading received a setback after the British set up railway lines. They were identified as being inclined to crime during the British era. After Independence they had been declared a 'denotified tribe' – but liberty was still far away. The government act damning them has been abolished, but still the banjaris are always the first to be suspected when petty crimes take place and are picked up by the local police. The torture in lockup, the molestation and humiliation of their women, have all become routine for them.

The banjaris consider themselves Hindus, their goddesses being Bhavani of Tuljapur and Khandoba of Jejuri. Their practices are like those of the Marathas; even the system

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of purdah for women has been adopted the same way that Maratha society did. There's a huge festive gathering of banjaris on Vijaya Dashami at Bhagwangad in Beed district – this is their most sacred pilgrimage spot, Bhagwan Baba and Bhimsingh Baba being the spiritual leaders of the banjaris.

Almost every one of the eight or nine lakh people who go to western Maharashtra to harvest sugarcane is from the liberated tribe of banjaris. Because they lived a nomadic or semi-nomadic life even a hundred years ago, and since they live in the area with the lowest rainfall and irrigation in the state, their plight in the sugarcane toils does not particularly move the urban culturati. Their past determines the nature of their daily lives – the indifference of society ensures that their situation is acceptable. Applying the rights of Maratha Hindu conservatism, banjari society expects complete submission from its women, consigning them to a life behind the veil, getting girls married in their teens, using the pretext of an insecure future for the unborn girl child to queue up at clinics to have the sex of their foetuses determined, and, finally, if the child on its way is not a male, having it aborted. Their rootless and marginal existence in the past and the calumny of criminal propensity they carry have attracted them to the shelter of mainstream culture, where the woman is both the bearer of family honour and a commodity at the same time.

How did Terna come to be named that way?

'See, I've put an entire river into your name,' the headmaster of the middle school had said, smiling. He used to teach history

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and geography. Terna's grandmother had named her Kalindi. The Manjira river flows out from the Balaghat range into the Godavari, and the Terna is its tributary. It provides water to my own district of Osmanabad, and to the AUSA and Nilanga subdivisions here in Latur . . . her teacher had written it all out in her notebook. She was a little girl at the time, she had barely started middle school. The teacher hadn't bothered to consult her father, and probably hadn't even considered checking with her mother. The little girl was quite delighted to be transformed from Kalindi to Terna, showing her friends and family what the teacher had written in her notebook.

She had never seen the Terna river; what she had seen here in Chhindwari village on the edge of Latur town was a water crisis. When three successive years of drought forced her and her husband to go to the tolis near the sugar mill in Satara district, she had felt as if she been married to a farmer from AUSA or Nilanga instead of to Datu. Her family have always had enough water for irrigation and wouldn't have to run away from their own home at the onset of winter out of fear of a terrifying emptiness in their fields. The village she lived in now had received plentiful rain the year her daughter was born. Barring that one time, they had been coming to the sugarcane harvest every single year. And now Terna had become as harsh and devoid of softness as a dried-up river herself. At twenty-six, she was still effectively in her youth, and yet she had had to have her uterus removed to extricate herself from the monthly agony. Datu may not have said it in as many words, but in his

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head he blamed Terna for going to sleep without protecting herself, which had given the mukadam the opportunity. Her eyes filled with tears at these thoughts as she prepared the evening meal. Her hands were busy, the cooking was under way, but her mind was somewhere else. What sin had they committed to have to live such a rootless life?

The drought had been going on for three years, with no water for humans or animals, for drinking or bathing. Latur might get a little more rain than the Beed district of Marathwada, but so what? All the water from the small dams and boring pumps is used by the sugarcane. With the crop on this side sucking up all the water, there's a desperate demand for it on the other side. And still the government cannot tell them, stop growing sugarcane, switch to millet and wheat instead. How can they – they have sold out to the sugar mills, after all.

The fact is, sugarcane has controlled the politics of Maharashtra ever since the rise of the cooperative sugar mills or sakhhar factories in the 1970s. The word 'cooperative' is pleasing to the ear; with the farmer supplying the sugarcane, he is a shareholder in the mill, according to the rules of cooperatives. So a cooperative is, in principle, different from a mill owned by individuals. But when the urge to control everything takes over, not even a smattering of principles remains in place. The cooperative sugar mills are the new addresses of those who want to control politicians. Their votes decide who the chairman of the cooperative – effectively the owner of the mill – will be. And the big farmers strengthen and support one another to maintain their stranglehold over the area.

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The chairman wields enormous powers. Since sugarcane farming is primarily an agricultural activity, the millowner is acknowledged more widely than even the local MLA. There are more than 300 sugar mills, and some 30 lakh farmers engaged in growing sugarcane on several thousand acres of land here. The farmers' opinion is by no means insignificant in the political arena. They are certainly aware that continuing to grow sugarcane during a major water crisis upsets the balance of agricultural production, that the cultivation of millet and peanut and sunflower is dropping, that water resources as well as food for humans and animals are being stretched, that the underground water levels are going down. The farmer knows all of this, and yet he won't entertain good advice. For sugarcane is the only crop in this country whose price doesn't fall. The sugarcane farmer will never lose money, for the sugar mills get subsidies to buy their crop at market prices. The prices of cotton or vegetables or pulses might fall, but the sugarcane farmer, who has the magic ring of price protection, never needs to worry.

Sucking out underground reserves of water for sugarcane farming, making obscene profits for sugar mills, supplying water in tankers, repairing dams, making off with the funds sanctioned for building new dams . . . several moneymaking rackets have sprung up around the conflict between drought and the availability of water.

Terna wouldn't have understood any of this on her own had she not listened to the village council meeting from the edges. No one had asked her to join in, but they hadn't told her