



**JOURNEY OF STREET CHILDREN FROM INNOCENCE
TO DEPRAVITY IN MEHER PESTONJI'S
'SADAK CHAAP'**

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ABSTRACT

Menka Shivdasani in her article on Sadak Chaap 'A Book about street children' makes an important observation: 'If there is one thing that newcomers to Mumbai find most disturbing until they get used to living in this city it is the sight of half-naked, unwashed children on the streets. You meet them everywhere-thrusting their hands through your car windows, plucking at your shirt to get attention, sometimes even spitting on your face if your refuse to part with some alms. These children are not merely victims of their own poverty and a wealthy society..., sometimes they are victims of their own beggar communities of parents who see the little ones simply as one more pair of hands to beg with, of gang leaders who break the children's bones just so that they can evoke more sympathy and thus more money from passersby.'" The miseries of these street children do not end here. The foreigners and tourists in Bombay abuse them. Such street kids who fall prey to foreign paedophiles and are pushed down to the level of beasts, have received much attention from Mumbai based activist and writer Meher Pestonje. Her novel 'Sadak Chaap' is a touching account of the miserable state of street children in Bombay. This present study undertakes to deal analytically with the journey of such poor kids inescapably caught in the trap of neglect and abuse.

Meher Pestonji made her first shimmer in the realm of fictional writing with her 'Mixed Marriages and Other Parsee Stories' in 1999. This collection of short stories won applause for its deep insight into Parsi life and for frank portrayal of social issues. She has to her credit two plays 'Piano for Sale' and 'Feeding Crows' and two novels, 'Parvez' and 'Sadak Chaap'. Here the book of concern is Sadak Chaap, a novel published by Penguin Books.

Sadak Chaap, a touching and telling account of street children in Bombay exhibits Pestonji's sincere and voluntary work with them (street children) and for them which has resulted in the wide popularity of this novel. Widely translated this novel champions the cause of a huge population of street children not in Bombay alone but all over India, inescapably caught in the trap of neglect and abuse. The novel has its origin in the stories that came to her from the lips of children and people. Harsh and bitter realities of the lot of these children who bear the tag 'Sadak Chaap', problems and issues inextricably attached to them have all been taken a serious and minute note of by this Bombay-based sensitive activist Meher Pestonji.

The poetic lines given before the story actually begins may be taken as an epigraph. They touchingly sum up the inevitable fate of the children who 'try to create cross-currents':

After you're born
you cannot fit back
into Mother's womb



You have no choice
but to bump, bruise bleed,
and still crawl on and on
One day you stand
then walk
then run
Now when you fall
break a bone

These lines draw an accurate portrait of such a street child Rahul who for the reason described by the novelist can not afford to live with his widowed mother, has no choice, runs away, crawls and in the process gains in confidence, stands on his own, walks and runs with the help of whatever wisdom and experiences he gains while living an open and unsheltered existence on the streets of Bombay. The strands Pestonji has woven dexterously with realism and utmost human sympathy are: struggle for existence, belongingness, drugs, adoption of abandoned children, paedophilia vulnerability, loneliness, sense of isolation, a hidden desire for human company and other such grave concerns. These issues have an adverse effect on their life and cast their gloomy shadow over the innocent victims of fate who otherwise could grow into noble human beings. These children have their own innate goodness and nobility but exposed to brutal circumstances cannot maintain that. The novelist regards poverty as the root cause of all their misery. These unfortunate children are deprived of everything. They are forbidden to taste the fruits of love, health, education and childhood. Whatever their circumstances be, they are strong willed to take life in their strides. Their ways may be dirty and untidy, but their strong instinct to survive is highly commendable.

The present paper undertakes to study the life journey of one of such street children tied to the cycle of unguided life. Driven by his petty desires, he finds himself fallen in the whirlpool of crime, sex abuse and the consequent fatal disease and loneliness. 'Sadak Chaap' by Meher Pestonji is a fictionalised touching heart-breaking and towards the close a blood-curdling account of a ten year old child Rahul managing to live his life on rag-picking, pick-pocketing and petty thievery. He had developed a skill.

'He could run fast, faster than any other station boy. Speed was his greatest asset'. One day he finds a newspaper parcel containing an abandoned baby on the railways station. The child has red blisters on her legs. Rahul rushes to Aparna, the caretaker of Sharan, a shelter for street children. She admits the child to a hospital for treatment.

Rahul develops an attachment for the child, names her Kazol and appoints himself as the father of the child. This responsibility is obviously beyond his years and for sometime we are left with a feeling that a big change is going to usher in the life of Rahul. This self-appointed father gets so much to arrange and do for this innocent little child fighting bravely the cruelty of this world. The slightest progress in the condition of the child brings a big consolation to this otherwise emotionally sequestered father. Though himself quite young and small, he, like an affectionate and caring father wants to shower all fatherly affection which after his father's death he did never receive, on this child. There are moments that lead us to gentle smile, moments that arrest our emotions and we feel touched.

The tale of Rahul goes deep into the innermost recesses of our heart perhaps for the reasons that we know full well that while it is a fictional rendering of Rahul's life, it is firmly grounded in the truth of bitter realities of these wretched lives. This information, Mehar Pestonji, the author of this novel, drew from the stories she heard over the years from the victims themselves and from those who worked for them and with them. The novelist herself has referred to the point that as a Mumbai based activist she worked with many NGOs, campaigned the case of children and wrote articles about the right of street children. She was seriously concerned with the case of Anchorage Shelter in Bombay run by a British who



in the name of shelter exploited sexually the children of this so-called shelter. Moreover, she was well acquainted with Soni Tarpur Vala, the script writer of the film 'Salaam Bombay' released in 1988. She got to know the main character who would frequently come to her and share with her the bitter experiences of harsh realities of life on the streets of the glamorous metropolitan city Bombay. All this information gathered thus stood with the novelist while giving a final shape to the novel.

After the recovery, Kazol is discharged from the hospital and is to be shifted to Bal Kendra at Vashi, New Bombay. This revelation comes as a big shock to Rahul:

'Rahul's mind had gone numb. The baby who had become the fulcrum of his life was being taken away. He would only see her once a week.' (37)

Unable to control his pain, that night Rahul 'gave up both Sharan and bench. He returned to sleep on local trains that carried him to the last stop and back till he awoke. Like in the old days. Before, Vicky. Before Bablu. Before Kajol. When he was alone'. (38).

To be allowed to visit Kazol once a week provides a solace to the sad and afflicted heart of Rahul. His first visit to Bal Kendra with Aparna is a wonderful experience to him. On being greeted as 'the bright young man' by Sister Margaret, the Superintendent of Bal Kendra, Rahul feels elated and with a sense of pride describes the scene at the railway station.

Aparna gives Rahul the job of a 'bal-daktor' at Sharan. He has to go with Shekhar to the public hospital, to learn about procedures. Soon he comes to learn that 'being street dwellers as well as children was a double disadvantage even in a hospital. They were ignored (49)'. His role as a bal daktor facilitates his friendship with Chandni who is bitten by a dog. He takes her to the hospital where the attendant ignores them and asks to come the next day. He, with Chandni and her grandmother comes to Sharan where Shekhar gives her medical aid. Shocked by the inhuman attitude of the doctors toward the hurt and sick street children, Rahul resigns from his job at Sharan.

Rahul is taught cycling by Karim Bhai, the fruit-seller. He starts cycling to Bal kendra to meet Kajol. Salim teaches him how to pick a bicycle lock, to use any cycle and replace it. Once while picking the lock he is caught and handed over to a security guard who further hands him over to police of Vashi sector. On being beaten, Rahul mentions Sister Margaret. She takes him to Bal Kendra and asks him to become a good boy again. There he gets the job of assistant to Anthony, the gardener. Sister has her own plans for the future of Rahul which she reveals to him, you know I've bought you here because the station environment isn't good for you'.

She continues, 'We want to help you grow into a healthy young man who can hold his head high. You could work in an office, become a teacher, business man, engineer. But the first thing is to get you into a school.' (68)

Easeful life at Balkendra does not fascinate him. He misses his friends at Sharan, especially Vicky and his friend in-pranks, Bablu and the novelist sums up his life impressions there: 'Life at the Kendra was comfortable but boring, and boredom was a state Rahul had never known' (70)

At Kendra Rahul becomes friend with Gopi, whose left leg is deformed. When he asks Rahul, what is so special about Kajol, Rahul says, 'She's mine. I found her.' Gopi tells him that she is not going to live there for long. She will go like others. The revelation comes as a big blow and hurts his sense of belongingness. Kajol is the most delightful of all the babies at Bal Kendra. He begins to observe the visitors. When he comes to know that The Connelys are interested in adopting Kazol, he comes up with his own device to prevent them from doing so. He tells them that Kazol's leg wouldn't grow due to burn: 'Burnt leg stay small, whole life, you know, me?' Sister Margarate finds out that it is Rahul who put this doubt in the mind of the clients. She flies into fury, 'you ungrateful wretch! We're struggling to give you a future and you deprive an innocent child of one. How wicked can you get! (91-92)

Next day he is turned out of Balkendra and is left to live on the streets of Bombay, bearing the stamp



'Sadak Chaap'. He does not feel unhappy to leave Bal Kendra as without Kazol it has no attraction for him. He does not feel like returning to Sharan. He goes searching for Bablu and finds Bablu and Salim. Both advise him to come back to Sharan. Salim is now the 'Pradhan Mantri' at Sharan. So he refuses to act upon Bablu's advice. His job hunt starts. He wanders from restaurant to restaurant but meets the same response that they don't want another boy. He even thinks of starting a 'dhandha' with Bablu which is not welcomed by Bablu. In the course of this hunt Rahul happens to meet Dinesh and his group. All have the same tale of woes. He invites Rahul: 'Come with me. We're all Sadak Chaap. We live behind Radio Club.' And Meher Pestonji very minutely records rahul's feelings:

'Rahul felt miffed at being called 'Sadak Chhap'. He liked to believe he had left the stamp of street behind. But this boy who introduced himself as Dinesh, had identified him (105).

Dinesh comes forward with a suggestion, 'You can stay with us. We can teach you tourist business. Money comes, money goes, like tourists. All you need is some words of English, Arabic, French, Italian...' (107)

He further advises Rahul, 'If you want to learn, you have to hang around. Rahul immediately decides what to do as he doesn't want to become sadak chaap again. He acts upon Dinesh's advice. He spends his time in learning the tourist trade. He learns the language and the ways of this business and after a week he is ready to try his hands. Rahul begins as a commission agent. A foreigner who asks him the directions to the post office is much impressed with the English and self-confidence of Rahul: 'A young boy alone in the streets of Bombay speaking a foreign language. That's amazing.... My students don't even speak one language correctly (112-113). This school teacher from Cincinnati in America, continues, 'You're smarter than the kids I teach They couldn't survive in the street for a day, leave alone speak a foreign language' (113)

Rahul gets Rs. One hundred from this teacher. Then, he dupes Arabs as he has been told that they have too much money, little education and pay ten times more than the actual costs. He develops a liking for charas and ganja. He meets Bablu whom he tells about his future plan of becoming a taxi driver. Bablu advises him to give up such 'faltu' dreams and to come back to Sharan if he knows what is good for him but he turns down this suggestion for Tourist business.

Rahul paces fast in Tourist track. Andy and Steve, he meets, appear to him to be a different 'breed of tourists': Like Karen they broke boundaries, getting friendly with street children inviting them to their hotels... Most of the time they hung around in their room with the boys, ordering endless rounds of ice-creams, Cad burys, Pepsi, biryani (123-124)'. These delicacies are not showered upon these boys out of human sympathy. The novelist reveals frankly:

'The month flew past in a heady cocktail of sex, grass and gifts the like of which Rahul had never known. Clothes perfumes, cassettes, chocolates. Andy had a box of 'toys'. A wig of short blue hair, another of long, blonde hair. Silk stockings, lacy panties, bras. Rahul would wear them and be photographed. Sometimes with nothing else on... Sometime with Dinesh, also naked. Andy was obsessed with the camera (125).

Besides getting money. Rahul gets watches walkmans and cameras as gifts from tourists. So there is no reason for saying goodbye to it. He gets inescapably stuck deep in the dirt and filth of this business. Pestonji explains Rahul's moves and attitude thus:

'He started charging fee for sex it was better than ending up with unwanted objects. He developed a base of 'regulars' local residents who paid two hundred rupees per hour'

It was an easy life, getting pampered and earning at the same time. Better than the scramble for existence at railway station (126).

This sex game which Rahul, thinks would take him closer to his dream-cab, puts him into a horrible situation. He meets a foreigner named Greg who further introduces him to his middle-aged Indian friend



Narayan. Their meetings continue for a week. Then Greg invited Rahul to spend the night with them and even the price is decided to which Rahul agrees. Rahul is taken to a bungalow where everything is red. Naked Greg jumps on Rahul pointing the steel blade of a knife at Rahul's phallus. Terrified Rahul screams and Narain captures the scene and expression. Rahul requests them to let him go but they frankly say 'Too late, Rahul. you made a commitment. We have got the whole night. You'll go when we're finished.' Then Greg lowers his threatening tone 'C' mon, man. Enjoy yourself. We're just having fun. Meher Pestonji describes his beastly assault: 'he put in arm around Rahul's waist and lowered his face giving Rahul, a full-blooded kiss on the mouth. His teeth felt like scorpions, his body smelt of sweat. Rahul could not extricate himself from the vice-like grip on his mouth. He shuddered. Never had the impulse to run been so strong. But he was naked. His clothes had been taken sway (140-141).

This inhuman game crosses all the limits. Different postures difficult objects. One photograp had Rahul's mouth gaged by a chain. For another he was strung by a leather belt from the fan with Greg ejaculating under him. It was the longest night of his life. Tasting fear in the most intense form he had known he screamed, cried, pleaded but the more he begged to be released the more Greg got turned on. When at last his clothes were turned, he staggered away, half deranged'. (141) Instead of ten, he is paid only two thousands.

Rahul is not able to walk properly. He totters like a drunk. He wants to drown all the scenes of night into oblivion. In desperation he searches for a cab knowing not where to go 'He did not want to go back to the Gateway. Nor could he face Karim Bhai at the Barsati. And Sharan was ot of the questions (142). In a week he switched from charas to garda. His regular supplier, out of generosity, offers free to get over his depresison. Rahul now becomes scared of going with tourists. He dares not repeat any such mistake. One day with trembling fingers Rahul lifts the handset of a public phone and dials the numer of Sharan. Shekhar picks the phone up. Hearing his voice, Rahul breaks into sobs. Victor and Shekhar come running to help him. They take him to their house, give him bath, provide him neat and clean clothes. Shekhar gives him medicines. All try their best to restore his physical and emotional health. Victor begins : 'Our friend Rahul was going to make something of his life. He was determined not to remain Sadak Chaap. He told us about Govinda rising from a banana seller to stardom. He told us about Vinod driving a Maruti. He told us he was going to be like them, get off the streets, succeed'. (155)

After a little pause, Victor continues, 'Then our friend Rahul disappeared'... We didn't hear from him for months. He forgot us. Only kept in touch with his best friend Bablu who told us he was making lots of money... We were happy for Rahul. And we told each other, if Rahul can do it, so can we (155).

Tears escape down sunken cheeks and drip of Rahul's chin. Victor does not stop there. He resumes, 'Sudeenly Rahul vanished completely...' Someone said he'd gone to America. We could not dream of going to America. But the thought of Rahul in America propelled us. We have to make something of ourselves in Bombay (156).

In order to escape this voice Rahul puts him palms over his ears. 'Out of the blue we got a phone call', continued Victor 'Our friend Rahul was lost. He was desperate. He needed us. And we rushed to him. He has been our role model. How can we let him die? (156)

Aparna comes to see Rahul and makes him realize that he committed a big mistake by staying away but throws suggestions at the same 'mistakes can be corrected Rahul. How thin you have become! And you were all set to be such a success!' Rahul can not hide from her the pang of breaking his whole dream. Aparna cautions him of the risk of taking drugs and contracting HIV. Rahul answers defiantly, 'Everyone has to die' Aparna further asks him what he will do if gets AIDS, He answers, 'Jump into the sea and drown. Mere aage peechhay koi nahin.' For a month he lives at Sharan. He goes with Victor to find Karim Bhai; the fruit seller. They get the news that he suffered from cancer and left Bombay but left a message for Rahul with Yusuf Sheikh, his distant relative. They further go to Yusuf who tells them that



Karim had died but has left an envelope for Rahul. They come back to Sharan with the envelope. Rahul with a curiosity tears open the envelop and finds that there was no cheque, no money in it. Aparna reads the letter. The most touching part of the letter is:

'Bachcha, our has been a strange and special bond. You are almost the same age as my son. I have watched you grow from innocence to depravity. I have seen you struggle to make something of your life. Failure doesn't reveal the intensity of struggle, especially when the odds are against you (174).

Your money has been on my conscience. I often wondered what to do with it... I am convinced I was right in not giving it to you when you were half mad... Forgive me, bachcha, in the weakness of pain I used your money for treatment. But I have tried to make up. I have made over my fruit stall to you... When you, recover, you will have an honest profession waiting. (175)

Aparna asks Rahul if he would like to run a fruit stall but he rejects the idea and tells her frankly that he wants to live well. All his friends who earlier lived at Sharan try to convince him to start the fruit business. But he lets them know, 'I want money. I want fun, I want to have a good life. (183)'

Aparna seeks the help of a lawyer, Thomas who interrogates Rahul. He tells Aparna that his colleagues and he have been trafficking this racket for months. Thomas tells Rahul that he and Aparna will take him for a ride and Rahul has just to guide them to Narain's house. So that Greg and Narain may be nabbed and other children may not suffer. They drive almost two hours but Rahul does not recognize the house. Then they drop him at the Gateway. The lawyer grumbles that 'the breakthrough had been so near and yet so far'. Rahul returns to the Gateway and Pestonji tells how does Rahul take this return :

'Rahul realized that the best part of returning to the Gateway was not having to make a break with his old and trusted friends. It gave security to his freedom. blinking at the old familiarities, he stretched his hands wide raising them to the sky. With all its perils and frills, this is where he wanted to be (190).'" Despite all the mess, Rahul has been through he is not ready to give up that tourist business perhaps this trade has become synonymous with his thought of living well. His idea of good life includes eating at hotel, wearing good clothes, making money. This way of living takes him down the drains and leads him unto trouble, but he doesn't seem afraid of the trouble : 'Trouble comes, trouble goes. Who doesn't have troubles?(177) His life does not seem to have any room for dilemmas. He decides to go his own way. This creation seems to have got out of the control of his creator. All the sincere and painful efforts of Aparna in disciplining Rahul's life and placing him well and respectably in life turn futile.

It is the point of view of Rahul that prevails at last, not of Aparna. This street child is not just walking, he is running and running not at a normal pace but too fast to control. Such runnings in almost all the cases result in fractures. This fracture i.e. the physical hurt and more significantly the moral hurt in the form of depravity is a irreparable loss.

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