

Lighting a Clay-Oven

Madhusudan Pal writes :

60 years' on. and the wretched of the earth had very little to cheer about on the eve of 60th anniversary of independence day. The sons and daughters of 'midnight children' who inherited the crown on August 15, 1947, continue to flourish at the expense of starving millions. For a teenage girl as depicted in a photograph [*The Statesman, Kolkata, 07-08-2007*] August 15 came and went without making any impact on the slumdwelling community she belongs to. In a way the poor girl illustrates a state the vast majority of Indians are forced to live in. They need freedom from hunger, not independence day ritual devoid of any substance. The photograph as mentioned, depicts the 3-year-old girl lighting a clay oven with her left foot forward and right foot back.

The little child is alone at a temporary shelter. Floods have compelled the child's parents to leave home and flee for life in the temporary shelter. The clay-oven was lighted and some food is being prepared. Steam is emitting from the pan on top of the oven. At this stage the parents must have gone either to salvage some belongings from the flooded home or to collect some necessities leaving the three-year-old in charge of the hearth. But the fuel in the clay-oven is damp wood which has ceased to burn. Yet the wood inside the oven is glowing. The three-year-old child will not let the fire within the glow die and be extinguished. The child puffs-out blasts of breath from the little mouth. She took into her deep breath. She is fully concentrated body and soul, to blast off puffs of air into the glowing mass of damp wood inside the damp clay oven. The little child is aware of the heat inside the oven. She keeps safe distance from the oven. Yet she cranes out her head, her two little hands set to balance herself, so that her puffs of breath reach the glowing wood inside the oven. She shows amazing willpower, mental poise and a high level of intelligence. She is only a three-year-old baby yet she carries a huge load of responsibility on her little shoulder. She is trying hard, the swollen vein on her neck makes it clear. Abject penury—a bamboo basket, three pieces of utensils, a small bottle, some pieces of wood strewn around and a corner of the hanging polythene sheet constituting her universe. Poverty swallows her. She is unmindful of her surroundings. She is bent on kindling the fire by blowing air into the spark visible.

The three-year-old is a spark and there are tens of millions of such sparks scattered in the country. They are development-oustees, a new genre of refugees in their own soil. In this case there is a barrage damming a river upstream, a symbol of development. But the barrage refuses to hold water when that is the need of the hour, again a symbol of failed development. The inevitable flood, a curse to the inhabitants, visits the riverine basin, forcing the people to flee regularly. Development for the rulers is tantamount to assassination for the ruled daring to live across the development zone. In this photograph the three-year-old is not prepared to surrender to fate. She is a beacon. She beckons the supine, quiescent and indolent to wake up and agitate. □□ □ 14-08-2007

