

FIRE-HYMN

Keki N. Daruwalla

*KEKI N. DARUWALLA (b. 1937), the recipient of Sahitya AKademi Award (1984) and Commonwealth Poetry Award, is a landscape poet of eminence and a well known writer of short stories. His poetry is, in his own words, 'a totally impressionistic recording of subjective responses'. He claims his poems to be 'rooted in the rural landscape' and hence 'earthy'. He shuns sophistication, as he thinks that it, 'while adding gloss, takes away the power of verse'. The themes of his poetry are love, death, domination, cynicism, plight of human society and violence. He writes with intensity and vigour involved in poetic creation. Since he had been in police service, violence is unavoidable in his poetry. His important volumes of verse include **Under Orion** (1970), **Apparition in April** (1971) and **Crossing of Rivers** (1976)*

A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

- 1. How has 'fire' influenced human life?**
- 2. How is fire related to rituals of different religions?**

FIRE-HYMN

The burning ghat **erupted** phosphorescence:
and wandering ghost lights frightened passers-by
as moonlight **scuttled** among the bones.
Once **strolling** at dawn past river-bank and ghat
we saw **embers** losing their cruel redness
to the grey ash that swallows all, half-cooked limbs

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bore witness to the fire's **debauchery**.
My father said, "You see those half-burnt fingers

And bone-stubs? The fire at times forgets its dead!"

A **Zoroastrian** I, my child –fingers clenched

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Into a little knot of pain,

I swore to save fire

From the sin of forgetfulness.

It never forgot, and twenty years since

As I **consigned** my first-born to the flames --

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The nearest **Tower of Silence** was a thousand miles --

The firm-hymn said to me, "You stand forgiven,"

Broken, yet **rebellious**, I swore this time

To save it from the sin of forgiving.

B.1. 1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- a) The poem describes the scene of a burning ghat.
- b) Passers-by tend to ignore the burning at the ghat.
- c) The sight of burning becomes frightening at night.
- d) The redness of fire appears cruel to the speaker.
- e) The half-burnt limbs at the ghat suggest the true working of fire.
- f) The speaker belongs to Zoroastrian religion.
- g) The speaker is not pleased with the views of his father.
- h) The 'first-born child' was consigned to fire under compulsion.

B.1. 2. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the poem:

- a) The wandering ghost lights passer-by.
- b) The grey ash that all.
- c) The ghat is littered with
- d) The fire at times its dead.
- e) I swore to save fire from the of forgetfulness.
- f) The nearest was a thousand miles.
- g) The speaker consigned his to the flames.
- h) The speaker was broken yet
- i) The second time the speaker swore to save the fire from the sin of

B.1. 3. Answer the following questions briefly:

- 1) How did the passer-by get frightened?
- 2) Which event does the expression 'the burning ghat' refer to?
- 3) Where do you think is the ghat located?
- 4) What does the speaker see/observe in the morning at the ghat?
- 5) Why does he say that the redness of the fire is cruel?
- 6) In what sense does the fire forget its dead?
- 7) Why does the speaker reveal his religious identity?
- 8) Why did he consign his first born to the flames?
- 9) What did the firm-hymn say to him?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

hymn (n): a song of praise

erupted (v): break out, thrown out

scuttled (v): scurry, run fast

strolling(v): walking, leisurely

embers (n): pieces of wood or coal that are not burning but are still red

debauchery (n): immoral behaviour

stubs (n): the remains that have not been burnt

zoroastrian (n): a Parsi, who believes that there is a continuing struggle in the world between the forces of light and dark

consigned (v): sent off, delivered

Tower of Silence (n): The Parsis dispose of the dead bodies on this structure

rebellious (adj): unwilling to obey rules

swore (v): took oath (for something)

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. What are the different forms and roles of fire at the ghat?
2. How does the ghat appear to the common people?
3. What is the fire's debauchery?
4. What has offended the religious sentiment of the speaker when he was a child?
5. Why do you think the speaker consigned his first born to the flames?
6. Why was the speaker 'broken' and how did he regard himself rebellious?
7. Why did he swear twice to save the fire from two different sins?
8. Though the poem reveals the religious leaning of a Parsi, it still has its human appeal. Justify it with your own comments.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Fire: the saviour or the destroyer?
2. Should one adopt a critical attitude towards religion?

C. 3. COMPOSITION

Write a short essay in about 150 words on the following:

- a. Concept of sin in modern life
- b. Forgetfulness is a matter of habit

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

phosphorescence	scutled	staulling	emberes
Zorastrian	consined	rebelious	hym

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write the synonyms of the following words:

dawn	_____	losing	_____
swallow	_____	forget	_____
pain	_____	nearest	_____
silence	_____	save	_____

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following line carefully:

*The **burning ghat** erupted phosphorescence:*

*And **wandering ghost** lights frightened passers-by*

In the above lines '**burning**' in 'burning ghats' and '**wandering**' in 'wandering ghost' are verbs in '-ing' (gerund) form. Such forms of verbs can be used as adjectives.

Add '-ing' to the following verbs and fill in the blanks to complete the following sentences:

- | | | | | |
|------|--------|------|-------|-------|
| lose | stroll | cook | swear | break |
|------|--------|------|-------|-------|
- a. The _____ news was quite sensational.
 - b. People were in long queue for _____ gas.
 - c. The match was so fine that we admired even the _____ team.
 - d. The _____ persons have the opportunity to breathe fresh air.
 - e. We could not attend the _____ ceremony.

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex 1. In the expression 'half-cooked limb' (line 6) and 'half-burnt fingers' (line 8), 'half' suggests the process stopped mid-way.

Make similar structures from the given words (using 'half') and use them in sentences of your own:

done, written, sketched, drawn, hearted

E. GRAMMAR

Ex. 1. Read the following lines from the poem carefully:

i. as moonlight scuttled **among** the bones.

ii. once strolling **at** dawn

Mark the use of prepositions 'among' and 'at' in the lines given above.

Use the following prepositions to complete the following sentences:

i. The military rescued several peoplethe flood.

ii. The world of insects and animals awake at night

iii. Naghaz listened the lecture attentively.

iv. The prizes were distributed winners.

v. The police inquired the murder case.

F. ACTIVITIES

Ex.1. Write a report on how dead bodies are disposed of in different religious communities.

Ex.2. Draw a picture of a burning ghat (you may procure one from some book or journal) and discuss with your friends the rituals / activities performed at that place.

Ex.3. Read the poem 'A Psalm of Life' by H.W. Longfellow and discuss the views of the poet on life and death.

Ex.4. Who are the Parsis? Write a short note on the contribution of the Parsis to the building of modern India.

