

Cane

I never knew sugar came from a plant. I had always thought the sole purpose of plants was to bear tasty, natural food to eat, though I always preferred fruits over vegetables. However, what I saw before me was the most delectable assortment of vegetables I had ever seen. I stood and stared at this dense forest of chutes. They looked like they had not been touched for centuries; they were stiff and had this shade of yellowish brown that was not common to sugar. I knew that since they were plants, they would eventually be cut down and transformed by a fancy machine into sugar. The accumulation of peels through which they grew out of was a reminder of their finite lifespan. These were sugarcane.

While observing, I could still hear the low hum emitted from the farming vehicle my *dada* was maneuvering about a few hundred feet east. He rode it around for about three hours every morning, pushing and pulling dirt. At least that's all I imagined he was doing at my age, though he did always say it helped the plants. He'd at times pick me up and I'd be seated on his lap, guiding the crawl of the machine. I'd try to turn it around before I steered us too far away and would get a face full of the smoky fumes coughed out by the machine. I would ride around for a few minutes, high on life in this moment viewing the expansive miles upon miles of sugarcane while mounted on the massive contraption. *It's helping the plants*, I'd think to myself, smiling.

When I wasn't going for a joyride, I got bored of the sugarcane quickly. The thought of going home drifted into my mind as I scratched up some pebbles out of the damp dirt. The farm wasn't too far away from home, just a half an hour drive. The dirt road off in the distance would take you right to the gated entrance of the village. I conceptualized the entire route in my head,

since I had ridden down the winding road with my dada ('grandfather') on many occasions. The allure of the freshly cooked *bhinda* and savory *raita* waiting for me at home drew me there. I thought for a moment at how the sugarcane were able to resist the heat year-round. They still stood rigid and uniform, showing no signs of weakness. For a moment, I grew dismissive of my selfish thoughts after being inspired by the sugarcane.

But it was too hot; I couldn't continue to be pestered by flies and monitor the grass to avoid cow droppings. I pleaded and asked if we could go back to our home in Vanesa, Gujarat. He patiently and chucklingly told me to count the number of sugarcane plants there were instead, so I went.

On the way back, I looked further off into the distance on the opposite side of the dirt road transecting the farm. The laborers my dada had hired were taking a break under the shade provided by the sturdy sugarcane. They passed cold water around and sat down in unison for a brief pause to collect themselves. I could see rain clouds coming in from the far distance as well. My dada had told me it was going to rain later this afternoon, so it'd be a shorter day today. I remembered what my second grade teacher had said about these types of clouds back in October. *Cumulonimbus* was their name. They were large, sometimes dark, and could span for miles. They were closer to the ground than the *cirrus* clouds above my head at the moment, but they were approaching.

I looked to my immediate left and tabulated the *bhinda*, *rangar*, *bataka*, *gobhi*, *limdi*, and *pudina*. My dada told me the names of all these plants every day on our way to the farm. He said I'd have to remember all of them and what they looked like, how they grew, their growth patterns, how much water they needed, and, of course, what they tasted the best with. There was

no doubting that we both shared a heavy appetite. He always ended the conversation by saying that I would run the farm one day.

Much later, when it was well established to me that sugar came from a plant, I visited my farm. I spun my car keys in my hand and wiped my brow as I approached the location of the sugarcane I always played by. They came into my view, and I stood still for a second. I was surprised for a moment, but only a moment. I accepted the truth and walked over to the steaming hot spaghetti that lay across the dirt where my sugarcane used to be. No longer were they straight as an arrow; they were all wilted from the intense heatwave that was not native to Vanesa during the winter season. Before he passed, my dada had always told me in our weekly phone calls that the expected harvest grew less and less compared to years prior. I was dismissive.

There was a loading truck nearby which toted the last of the bushels of harvested sugarcane from the cropping season which ended a week ago. The sugarcane were noticeably shorter in length. After scouring through the loading truck for a few long minutes, I found a decent chute and peeled the outer dermis off. I gnawed on the raw cane as I continued to walk around, the floral sweetness blanketing my tastebuds.

Back in the States, I always perused through a select few scientific journals daily and read whatever catches my interest. Occasionally, something concerning a drought would appear in connection with South Asia. I'd glance at it for a moment before continuing my browse. To me, I always had a mindset of negligence. *It's not that bad*, I would think. If it was, my dada would be making more of an effort to get it through to me. The short stump of sugarcane had suddenly reached its end and I was only left with its base.

Where there once were a bold array of several thousand sugarcane was now where their wilted and starved remains resided. The running waterway had dried up; apparently it hadn't rained in four months. The drought had persisted for far longer than anyone had hoped, and the cyclical dry seasons had effectively ruined the harvest for going on two years now, according to my Vanesa neighbors who have had to endure the farming conditions on their own land in recent times (Auffhammer).

I wiped my brow again. The unmerciful sun drenched the plants with radiation rather than the water which they so craved. Even the workers had left, and who could blame them? The working conditions were no longer fit for them to continue slugging around tending to the crops, especially when they were already beyond revival. One of the workers who remained was Shanti, an old woman who had worked for my dada long before I can remember. She stayed only to oversee the farm after my dada's passing, though there was regretfully little she could do about the lack of water let alone the sun's might. She was deeper into the patch of sugarcane stumps and caught my eye as I approached her. She had been one of my overseers while I was at the farm, often warding away snakes and mosquitos while I played on my patch of dirt all day. I embraced her, noticing how thin she had become since I last remembered. I'd imagine that the failing of the harvest for a period this drawn-out would have an effect on local vendor vegetable prices. It was hard enough for the less-affluent to get by before the farms were failing. Now, their struggles were compounded; where they once had to make difficult decisions, they now were forced to make *impossible* decisions. Many pulled their children from school, were relieved from their positions as house hands and farm workers, were displaced due to rising sea levels and

forced to move inland, or in some cases were forced to move to the coast to find a steady source of water (Omanathan 53).

Now walking past the sugarcane, where I had once seen the globular blobs of purple that resembled *rangar* were the shriveled remains of a dense vinery resting on a brick-solid mound of soil. As I walked down the path, the rows that once teemed with life and color were now burnt to oblivion.

The drought had pervaded into the minds of the Indian people - no one knew how long this was to last. After a quick search, I noticed something peculiar: India was overdue for one of the wettest monsoon seasons in recorded history (Goswami). While the science was sound, how exactly does one go about explaining this to a largely illiterate and desperate collection of Indians who have relied on and been failed by the harvest over the past two years? And when this rain does come, what is the guarantee that the harvest will be saved? I am inclined to think that the excessive amounts of precipitation would cause cataclysmic flash floods that could wipe entire mud-built communities away within minutes. Additionally, the flooding will range towards extreme crop treatment once again, washing away whole fields of vegetables and sugarcane. This projected stochasticity from extremely dry to extremely wet will be impossible to prepare for as the weather patterns become more inconsistent. Without our capacity to predict the weather, the entire farming infrastructure in India is beginning to crumble; no longer can it remain dry throughout the summer and moist during the monsoon season, and no longer can we be able to provide food for our impoverished and subsequently keep a roof over their heads (Omanathan).

After great deliberation, I took a seat back where I started, the ground resembling clay more than soil. I took one final peek up at the sun and prayed that my sugarcane would again share a similar tint one day; but that day is far from our reality.

Works Cited

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