

Mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful

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e.e.cummings paired these words to describe Spring in his poem 'in Just', but I think they hold good for all seasons. Playing with mud seems to be a delight we leave behind in childhood, allowing the word to acquire connotations of dirt and inconvenience and stains. Just how mud-luscious a light shower can be was brought home by the sight of three children playing in a park.

The rain had softened the dry Haryana soil, darkening its colour from a bleached yellow to golden brown. Two girls and a little boy loosened and shaped the earth, rapt in the business of creation. One of the girls was clearly the leader and she kept the other two busy with her instructions which included plucking flowers and fetching some more water. They squatted in a circle, heads bent, arms entangled as they sculpted the mud. No sooner were they done than they ran off, without a trace of regret at being called away by the girls' mother. Curious, I walked over and was gifted with the sight of a beautiful shivalinga rising from the earth, decorated with a surprise-burst of yellow flowers.

Mud being the marriage of earth and water, too much of water can turn mud into slush, giving it a less malleable quality. One student on a school excursion to an eco-farm discovered how slippery mud can be to his detriment. The bunch of adolescents were giggling and back-slapping their way through pesticide-free vegetable beds, heading towards a gobar gas plant. Walking on the mud ridge bounding the pit containing sludgy dung, the boy slipped and slid all the way into it. When he emerged from this revolting mud-bath, the teachers had to requisition

bits of clothing from his friends— an extra shirt here, boxer shirts there, to clothe him after the vital soap-and-water scrubbing.

As anyone who has travelled through Indian villages knows, there is a deep relationship between the Indian psyche and earth. Land is not a commodity one owns but a companion, a living entity, a perverse goddess fecund in one area and barren in another. Mixed with water, or clay, she conveys her capacity to hold, to make safe, into pots and vessels and lovingly made homes. So, naturally a Sangam poet described love with the most startling of similes...mud.

But in love our hearts are as red
earth and pouring rain:
mingled
beyond parting.

That evocative simile also hides within itself the greatest quality of mud: the potential to nourish life and make it grow. The earth dry, baked to hardness sometimes, just needs a little water and one seed to nurture dormant life. There is nothing so soul-satisfying as loosening a bit of earth, working it free of stones and weeds with one's hands before planting seeds. And no sooner has one planted the seeds and spread manure, than the wait begins for that first sight of green above the ground. To work with soil is to integrate oneself fully with the wind, the water, with sun and rain, with vermin, ants and cattle, for each of those carefully nurtured seedlings is at the mercy of these elements. And the day comes when stem and stalk begin to hold miraculous shapes, a brinjal, a green chilli, or a pumpkin, and one understands their existence is intrinsically linked to ours as one plucks them for a meal.

A friend of mine bought nine acres of fertile land near the western coast of Karnataka. Used to the stifling concrete of the city, she decided

to build a mud house for herself in the middle of the farm. Watching it take shape, the mud being patted into walls that grew higher each day, she felt it looked like a delicious chocolate cake. The ditty pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake ran gaily in her head all day long till her home was built. The walls of her mud-house breathe, they don't intrude on their surroundings but assume space within them.

A cook of ours once appropriated what was the lawn behind the kitchen to grow potatoes. Good cooks are precious and have to be humoured in their flights of fancy. The painstakingly mown grass and all identifying green disappeared and we had to live with an ugly stretch of brown mud for a while. But that was a minor inconvenience when measured against the real possibility of never ever eating her raw jackfruit pulao or raisin 'n' tomato chutney. On some infinitely auspicious day, Sumitra the cook declared that we could harvest the potatoes. I walked gingerly over the ground but could see nothing. *Plus she wants an advance-against-salary — the temerity*, I fumed. But on drawing a rake through the ground, I found gold. The baby potatoes were round, the skin tender and golden. Then on, it was a treasure hunt, to sift lumps of mud from nuggets of gold.

That is the other quality of mud: to hide and hold tight forever. Stories abound of people burying treasures or discovering them in their backyards. A schoolmate of mine once found a garnet and diamond ring in her garden, while watering some plants. It did not belong to anyone in her extended family and truly was a lucky find. She wore it every day to school. Ever since then my secret desire is to discover an uncut rock of a diamond in my garden someday.

Perhaps the saddest of buried-treasure stories is that of Anil Kumar of Mandi. In the year 2000, intending to grow sugarcane on the 500 square metres of land he owned, he asked villagers to help

themselves to the topsoil. In his absence three women discovered gold discs and necklaces and bracelets and urns filled with bits of gold. Hearing the women squabbling over the find, the villagers came rushing and at the end of a free for all, about 500 kilos of Harappan gold was discovered and looted. Many villagers ran to despatch their find away from the village, growing rich overnight, but Anil Kumar got none of his land's treasure and had to yield his land to the government. The government managed to find, at best, 10 kilos of this priceless history.

Ants shift enormous quantities, for them, of earth while building their homes and an interesting drama begins. The ant-hills later become the home of snakes. When those snakes are discovered, people begin worshipping them. One of my early childhood memories is of the conical ant-hills on the edge of our garden, separated by a hedge from the road. At the junction of two roads, on the outer side of the hedge, the tall ant-hills were smeared with fresh kumkum and turmeric everyday. Red hibiscus were offered, their colours bold against the yellowish mud of the ant-hills. Strangers, passers-by offered milk at the opening, and waved camphor flames. I never saw the snakes that lived there, but was always aware of their presence beyond and the strange beauty of those lamps lit at dusk.

One of the abiding images of the Buddha is of him seated cross-legged beneath a giant bodhi tree in the forest. One hand rests in his lap, the other touches earth. Traditionally, that act symbolises his victory over the temptation by Mara. Yet it seems that very simple act of touching earth conveys the message of how important it is to remain grounded at all times, grounded in the centre of our beings. It is something that all of us can do, and by that simple gesture, we can emulate in the easiest way possible, the Buddha.

Near home, there is a pond bearing hundreds of lotuses. The flowers wave over the water, and seen from a distance, look as though they are air-borne. The metaphor of the lotus as a way to live in the world, untouched by the mud below is perhaps a disservice to mud, for the lotus derives its sustenance from it. There is a dichotomy in the way we both rely on the earth to bear us, supporting us from birth through to death, and use mud as a synonym for besmirching a thing. If we are to distance ourselves from dirt, then we must *be* pure and exalted like the lotus, otherwise there is nothing intrinsically wrong with living rooted in a mud-luscious, puddle-wonderful world.