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**Mahatma Gandhi**  
**Antarrashtriya**  
**Hindi Vishwavidyalaya**

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DISCOURSE  
WRITING

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Editor  
Mamta Kalia



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हिन्दि

# हिन्दि

## LANGUAGE DISCOURSE WRITING

July-September 2009

### Contents

#### Heritage

|          |           |    |
|----------|-----------|----|
| Dussahas | Premchand | 9  |
| Nasha    | Premchand | 17 |

#### Short Story

|                          |                       |    |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----|
| A Woman's Feats          | Suryabala             | 23 |
| Papa                     | Dhirendra Asthana     | 28 |
| Dhampur                  | Meera Kant            | 40 |
| Coming Back              | Musharraf Alam Zauqui | 54 |
| The Mistress of Phoolpur | Pratyaksha            | 72 |

#### Poetry

|             |                     |     |
|-------------|---------------------|-----|
| Six Poems   | Prayag Shukla       | 84  |
| Three Poems | Asad Zaidi          | 89  |
| Six Poems   | Anamika             | 94  |
| Six Poems   | Dinesh Kumar Shukla | 105 |

#### Travelogue

|                 |                |     |
|-----------------|----------------|-----|
| The Earthen Cup | Asghar Wajahat | 119 |
|-----------------|----------------|-----|

**Discourse**

|   |                       |     |
|---|-----------------------|-----|
| Premchand: As short story writer  | Bhishma Sahni         | 124 |
| The sub-altern in Indian Literature:<br>Some Reflections on Premchand and<br>his Godan      | P.C. Joshi            | 138 |
| Godan: The Back Story   | Kamal Kishore Goyanka | 155 |
| Text and Context: A Sociological<br>Analysis of Dalit Characters in<br>Premchand and others | Subhash Sharma        | 162 |
| The Truth About 1857  | Ramnika Gupta         | 179 |

**Memoir**

|                      |               |     |
|----------------------|---------------|-----|
| Premchand: Ghar Mein | Shivrani Devi | 190 |
|----------------------|---------------|-----|

**Interview**

|                           |                            |     |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----|
| Premchand: Interviewed by | Pt. Banarasidas Chaturvedi | 198 |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----|

**Films**

|  |             |     |
|--|-------------|-----|
| A Celluloid Journey to India:<br>Abdolhossein Sepanta and the<br>Early Iranian Talkies | Lalit Joshi | 201 |
|--|-------------|-----|

**Language**

|   |                     |     |
|---|---------------------|-----|
| Hindi in Guyana   | Satishkumar Rohra   | 212 |
| Theatrical performance and<br>Hindi teaching:<br>My Japanese Experience | Harjendra Chaudhary | 218 |

**Pages from a novel**

|                |                     |     |
|----------------|---------------------|-----|
| T'TA Professor | Manohar Shyam Joshi | 221 |
|----------------|---------------------|-----|

**Contributors' Addresses**

229

## Readers' Page

- 1) हिन्दी का नया अंक मिला (अप्रैल-जून 2009)। अंक देखने पर पहली बार इस पत्रिका वेफ़ प्रति आत्मीयता का बोध हुआ। यह पहले भी निकलती थी पर उसमें हिन्दी का स्पर्श नहीं था। आपने सम्पादन में बहुत श्रम किया है, ऐसी श्रम-निष्ठा अतीत की बात बनती जा रही है। मेरी बधाई स्वीकार करें।

मेरा यह निश्चित मत है कि हिन्दी कविता, कथा-साहित्य और आलोचना (इसमें पूफहड़ समीक्षायें शामिल नहीं हैं) सभी शेष भारतीय भाषाओं से आगे हैं। ऐसी स्थिति में हिन्दीतर विश्व वेफ़ सामने हिन्दी को लाने वेफ़ लिए 1950 वेफ़ बाद की प्रत्येक विधा की क्लासिक बन चुकी रचनाओं को प्राथमिकता देनी होगी।

मेरे लेख का अनुवाद अद्भुत है। अनुवादक तक मेरा आभार पहुँचा दें।

-नंद किशोर नवल  
घाघा घाट रोड, महेन्द्र, पटना

- 2) *I wish to congratulate you on relaunched 'hindi'. Both the issues that have come out so far, have been ably edited.*

*Being an author of high literary merit yourself, you are providing the literati with an overview of eminent litterateurs including Phanishwar Nath Renu, Kunwarnarain, Mridula Garg, Ravindra Kalia, Rajee Seth, Chitra Mudgal and Amarkant.*

*By running regular columns namely heritage, focus, conversation, poetry, films, short story, discourse and language, you substantiate the parameters of Hindi.*

*The special attraction in your first issue (Jan-March 09) is the heartwarming article on Kunwarnarain by his son Apurvanarain. He gets his father's person and poetry into perspective not only by giving us an intimate glimpse of his flesh and blood but also by displaying his own power to gnaw into the sinew of his father's craft. His comments belong neither to a cuddled son nor a captivated one. On the other hand, they are those of a discerning, erudite savant. He also throws himself heart and soul into the translations of Kunwarji's poems*

Deepak Sharma  
B-35, Sector-C, Aliganj, Lucknow

- 3) *'I was extremely impressed not only with the quality of the publication but also its intellectual content. In fact, I was also very touched by the excellent views expressed by the Vice Chancellor Shri Vibhuti Narain Rai.*

*Suchandra Chakraborti  
Via email,*

- 4) *'I dare say that this volume (April–June 09) is not only well-edited, it, rather comprehensively captures the scenario of contemporary Hindi writing well. Candidly focus on Amarkant apart, the way you have highlighted the younger generation, deserves hearty compliments. Really I am very happy that you have excellently displayed editorial vision and insight in this issue.*

*Bharat Bhardwaj  
11/A Hindustan Times Apartments  
Mayur Vihar-I, Delhi.*

## Editor's Note

The trimester of July, August and September causes ripples in the main land of Hindi because of several reasons. Katha-samrat Premchand was born on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1880. He lived a short life but packed it with his penmanship. He wrote more than 280 short stories, 12 novels, quite a few essays, editorials and book reviews that are ever relevant to the cause of literature. The month of July brings back his contribution to Hindi which the Hindi world commemorates in various ways like holding lectures, seminars and conferences. We have devoted some pages to the doyen of Hindi fiction by translating afresh two of his short stories– ‘nasha’ and ‘dussahas’. These stories express Premchand’s social concern and point towards the maladies of his times. No wonder that progressive writers and thinkers like Bhishma Sahni and P.C. Joshi have written about his art and commitment. Another scholar Kamal Kishore Goyanka reflects on Premchand’s craft and craftsmanship in ‘Godan’. When Premchand was writing about the have-nots of society, there was no specific bracket of dalit thought in literature. Modern day analysis has resulted in making this a whole area of social concern. Subhash Sharma reflects on the dalit characters in four important novels. Premchand’s wife, Shivrani Devi wrote an extremely vivid and readable biography of her husband entitled ‘Premchand: Ghar Mein’. We carry a few pages that reveal the live-wire dialogue between the husband and the wife.

The issue carries poems of four poets, each of whom holds a special place in contemporary poetry. Prayag Shukla and Dinesh Kumar Shukla have a sensitive apparatus for responding to nature and its surroundings whereas Asad Zaidi and Anamika spark off at gender anomalies and contradictions.

Asghar Wajahat has this wander lust in him which takes him to far off places and he comes back with a bagful of memories. We offer only a window-view of his trip to Iran and Azerbaijan.

Our short story section has five authors whose works of short fiction provide a variety of expressions. Dhirendra Asthana’s short story ‘Papa’ is a two way outlet of emotions for father and son of a new generation whereas Musharraf Alam Zauki’s short story ‘Coming Back’ elaborates on present day e-romance. Senior writer Suryabala

has sarcasm reserved for husband-wife relationship whereas younger author Meerakant gives a graphic account of a maladjusted woman's agony. Pratyaksha is a new entrant in Hindi and she experiments with a number of techniques.

The academics of cinema have always been of interest to men of letters. Professor Lalit Joshi writes about the beginnings of Hindi cinema via Iranian movies. Satish Kumar Rohra documents the hindi scene in neighbouring country Guyana and Ramnika Gupta brings up a few queries about the historical unrest of 1857.

There was a tragi-comedy of errors in the previous issue when our translator jumbled up a few poems. Vimal Kumar's poem 'to see that beauty was a new experience for the mirror' was published to Nilesh Raghuvanshi's credit thereby doubling the confusion. Vimal Kumar and Nilesh Raghuvanshi are both award-winning fine poets. Our apologies extend to both of them. We shall atone by presenting them with better care next time.

O yes August is very close to all of us for we love our independence. September caps it with a Hindi Day on September 14. Hindi gets a huge facelift from government offices, universities, colleges and voluntary organizations. The two have a close knitted history of struggle, development and achievements.

There has been an increase in the e-presence of Hindi. Our author vice chancellor Mr. Vibhuti Narayan Rai, in a recent dialogue unfolded the University's project of creating a website 'hindisamay.com' to provide information of Hindi literature ranging from Bhartendu, Ramchandra Bhukla, Premchand to Jaishankar Prasad. Its first phase will comprise of works that are free from copyright. Mr. Rai hopes to make it a prime network like classic reader.com and Gutenberg.org that serve their English readers.

*Handa k*



## DUSSAHAS

Premchand

Translated by  
Ravi Nandan Sinha

In the Naubasta locality of Lucknow, there lived one Munshi Maikulal Mukhtar. He was a perfect gentleman, extremely generous and kind. He had such professional expertise that there was hardly a court case for which he was not hired by one or the other side. He also loved the company of *sadhus* and wise men. From them he had picked up a certain amount of knowledge of philosophy and the practice of smoking *ganja* and *charas*. And for drinking, well, that was his family tradition. After drinking, he could prepare good legal documents; wine would light up his intellect. *Ganja* and *charas* improved his knowledge and wisdom. After smoking the drug, he entered into a state of meditation and experienced a sense of non-attachment to worldly things. People in his locality were impressed by him, not by his legal expertise but by his goodness born of generosity. Carriage drivers, milkmen, *kahars*, all were obedient to him; they would leave their hundred things to do something for him. His wine-generated large-heartedness impressed everyone.

Everyday when he came back from the court, he threw two rupees before Algu *kahar*. He did not need to say anything; Algu knew what that meant. Every evening a bottle of liquor and some *ganja* and *charas* would be placed before Munshi ji. And then, there would be a party. Friends would arrive. On one side, there would be his clients sitting in a row and on the other his friends would sit. The discussions centred on spirituality and non-attachment. Once in a while, he would also talk to his clients about a court case. The party ended at ten in the night. Apart from his legal profession and those enlightening discussions on spirituality, Munshi

ji did not concern himself with anything else. He had nothing to do with any movement, any meeting, or any social reform in the country. In this sense, he was really above worldly things. The partition of Bengal took place, the *Swadeshi* movement was launched, liberal and extremist groups were formed, political reforms began, aspiration for independence was born, the country rang with voices calling for defending the nation; but all that did not disturb the unbroken peace in Munshi ji's life even one little bit. Except for the court-office and his drinking, he considered everything else to be *maya*; he had no interest in anything else.

## 2

Lamps had been lit. Munshi ji's party was in place, the devotees had assembled but the wine-goddess was nowhere to be seen. Algu had not returned from the market. Again and again, people looked towards the door with eagerness in their eyes. One man stood in the veranda waiting; two or three gentlemen were in the street in order to have advance information. But Algu was nowhere to be seen. That was the first time in his life that Munshi ji had to wait for such a long time for his bottle. The expectation generated by his waiting had taken the form of deep meditation; he neither spoke to anyone, nor looked at anyone. All his faculties were focussed on the point of waiting.

Suddenly news came that Algu was coming. Munshi ji woke up from his trance, his friends bloomed with joy; they sat up alert, their eyes filled with desire. Delay coupled with hope increases the pleasure of getting something.

Soon Algu was standing before them. Munshi ji did not speak angrily to him because it was his first mistake; there must have been some reason for it. With half open eyes full of eagerness he looked at Algu's hands. There was no bottle in them. That was unnatural, but he did not lose his temper. He asked sweetly—Where is the bottle?

Algu—I did not get it today.

Maikulal—Why?

Algu—The *swarajists* are blocking both ends of the street. They are not allowing anyone to go near the wine shop.

Now Munshi ji was angry, not with Algu, but with the *swarajists*. What right do they have to stop my drinking? He continued with some annoyance—Didn't you mention my name?

Algu—Yes, I did. I tried to argue with them, but who would listen to me? Everyone was returning from there, so I also came back.

Munshi—Did you bring the *charas*?

Algu—There too it was the same story.

Munshi—Are you my servant or of the *swarajists*?

Algu—I have not become your servant to get my face blackened.

Munshi—O, so those scoundrels were blackening people's faces also?

Algu—That I did not see for myself, but everyone was saying so.

Munshi—All right, I'll go myself. Let me see, who has got the guts to stop me. I'll send each one of them to jail. After all we've a government here, it's

not an anarchy. Was there no constable posted there?

Algu—The inspector saheb himself was telling everyone—whoever wants to go in, can go. Let him buy, or drink wine; but no one was listening to him. Everyone was returning.

Munshi—The inspector is my friend. Come Idu, will you come with me? Rambali, Bechan, Jhinku, let's all go together. Pick up an empty bottle, each of you. Let me see, who can stop us. Tomorrow itself, I'll teach them a lesson.

### 3

When Munshi ji reached the street leading to the wine shop, there was a big crowd assembled there. In the middle of the crowd, stood two very respectable men. One of them was Maulana Jaamin, a well-known religious man of the town. The other person was Swami Ghananand, who was the founder of the Seva Samiti and a great well-wisher of the people. Facing them was the inspector with a number of constables. When he saw Munshi ji and his friends, he said cheerily—Come Mukhtar Saheb, today you had to come yourself. All these four people are with you, aren't they?

Munshi ji said—Yes, I sent my man first, but he returned empty handed. I heard that there is a ruckus here; the *swarajists* are not allowing anyone inside the street.

Inspector—Oh no, who can prevent anyone from going in. You can go freely. No one will say a word. After all, what am I here for?

Casting a glance full of pride on his friends, Munshi ji entered the street.

Maulana Jaamin said to Idu politely—Friend, it's time for your *namaaz*, how come you are here? Can we solve the Khilafat problem with this kind of faith?

Idu felt as if iron shackles held his feet. Ashamed, he stood there looking down. He did not have the courage to take another step.

Swami Ghananand said to Munshi ji and his friends—Son, take this *panchamrit*, God will bless you. Jhinku, Rambali and Bechan automatically extended their hands to receive the *panchamrit* and drank it. Munshi ji said—Drink that yourself, I don't want it.

Swamiji stood before him with joined palms and said humbly—Please have mercy on this mendicant, don't go there.

But Munshi caught hold of his hand and pushing him aside entered the street. His three friends stood with bowed heads behind Swami ji.

Munshi—Rambali, Jhinku, why aren't you coming? Who has the power to stop us?

Jhinku—Why don't you come back? We should listen to holy men.

Munshi—So, is this the kind of boldness with which you started from home?

Rambali—I came here thinking that if someone stops us forcibly, we will handle it. But did we come here to fight with holy men?

Munshi—It's truly said, villagers are really sheep.

Bechan—You can act like a lion, we are happy to remain sheep.

With a show of great arrogance Munshi ji entered the wine shop. There was no activity there. The wine-seller was dozing in his seat. He sat up when he heard Munshi ji coming. He filled the bottle and then began to doze again.

When Munshi ji came back to the end of the street, he did not find his friends there. A crowd gathered around him and started taunting him with insulting words.

One of them said—What a drunkard he is!

Another said—*Sharmche kuttist ki peshe maradan bivavad* (Shame cannot face men).

A third man said—He must be a confirmed addict.

Meanwhile the inspector came and dispersed the crowd. Munshi ji thanked him and set out for home. A constable accompanied him for security.

#### 4

The four friends of Munshi ji threw away their bottles and began to walk home. They began to talk among themselves.

Jhinku—Once when they caught my horse-cart for free work, it was this swami ji who pleaded with the peon and got me released.

Rambali—Last year when my house caught fire, he came with the Seva Samiti workers, otherwise nothing would have been saved in my house.

Bechan—What arrogance this Mukhtar has! If you have to do something bad, do it secretly. One shouldn't be so shameless.

Jhinku— Brother, one should not speak ill of anyone behind his back. Whatever else he is, he certainly has courage. How boldly he entered that big crowd!

Rambali—That is no boldness. If the inspector had not been there, he would have been taught a lesson.

Bechan—I would not have set foot in the street, even if I was offered fifty rupees for it. I could not lift my head for shame.

Idu—By coming with him, I got into such trouble. Now wherever Maulana will see me, he would scold me. Why should one act against religion that one has to be ashamed of it? Today I felt so mortified. I take a vow today never to drink again. I'll not even look at wine.

Rambali—The vow of a drunkard is never any stronger than a piece of weak thread.

Idu—If you ever see me drinking, blacken my face.

Bechan—All right, then from today, I also give up drinking. If now I drink, let that be cow's blood for me.

Jhinku—Then am I the only sinner here? From now on if you ever find me drinking, make me sit in front of you and hit my head fifty times with your shoe.

Rambali—I don't believe you; even now if Munshi ji calls you, you will go there running like a dog.

Jhinku—If you ever see me sitting with Munshi ji, beat me with your shoe a hundred times. If a person is not true to his word,

he is not the son of his father.

Rambali—Then friends, I also take a vow today that I will never drink if I have to buy it. Yes, I don't mind drinking if someone offers me.

Bechan—When have you ever paid for your drink?

Meanwhile Munshiji was seen walking hurriedly towards them. Although he had won the battle, there was a certain look of embarrassment on his face. For some hidden reason, he was not able to enjoy that victory. Hiding in some corner of his heart, compunction was mocking at him. He could not understand why but that act of misplaced courage was tormenting him.

Rambali said—Come Mukhtar Saheb, you took a long time.

Mushi—You are dunces, all of you; you were misled by a mere mendicant.

Rambali—These people have taken a vow today that they will never drink.

Munshi—I have never seen a man who, after being addicted to it once, can escape from its clutches. Merely talking about giving up is another matter.

Idu—You will see it happening, if I live.

Jhinku—One cannot live without food, but other things you can give up whenever you want. You only have to feel ashamed of it once. No one ever dies for want of drugs or drink.

Munshi—Well, I'll see how brave you are.

Bechan—What is there to see? Giving up drinking is not a big thing. The most

that can happen is that I'll feel dull for a couple of days. During the war, when the Englishmen, who drink wine like water, could give it up, it is not very difficult for us.

Talking like this, they reached Mukhtar Saheb's house.

## 5

The living room was deserted. The clients had all left. Algu was asleep in a corner. Munshiji sat down on his seat on the floor and began to take out tumblers from the shelf. He still did not believe that the vows of his friends were genuine. He was confident that when they saw the redness of wine and smelt its pleasant scent, all their vows will vanish. I only need to encourage them a bit; all of them will join me and there will be a party. But when Idu began to leave after saying goodbye to him, and Jhinku picked up his stick to go, Munshi ji caught the hands of both of them and spoke in very sweet words—Friends, it's not the right thing to leave me alone like this. Come, taste this a bit; it's really very good wine.

Idu—The vow I have made to myself will stand.

Munshi—O, come on, what is there in these things?

Idu—Do enjoy your drink, but please excuse me.

Jhinku—God willing, I'll never ever go near it; who wants to be beaten with shoes?

Saying this, both of them freed their hands and left. Then Mukhtar Saheb held Bechan's hand, who was going down the

stairs of the veranda. He said—Bechan, will you also betray me?

Bechan—I have taken a very big vow. When once I have called it cow's blood, I cannot even look at it. I may be a despicable, worthless fellow but I respect cow's blood. I say, you should also stop drinking and spend some days in prayer. Haven't you been drinking for a long time?

Saying this, he said goodbye and left. Now only Rambali was left there. In great sorrow Munshi ji said to him—Rambali, see how all of them have betrayed me! I never thought these people will be so fainthearted. Come, today let only the two of us share the drink. Two good friends are better than a dozen such false ones. Come, sit down.

Rambali—I am ready, but I have taken a vow that I will never buy my drink.

Munshi—*Ajee*, as long as I am alive why should you fear. Drink as much as you want.

Rambali—But what when you die? Where will I find such a generous man?

Munshi—Well, that is still in future. I am not dying today.

Rambali—Who knows when a person will die? I am sure you will die before me. Then who will buy drink for me? Then I'll not be able to give it up. It's better that I am careful right from today.

Munshi—Friend, don't talk like this and disappoint me. Come, sit down, take just a glass of it.

Rambali—Mukhtar Saheb, please don't force me so much. When addicts like Idu and Jhinku, who sold their wives'

ornaments for liquor and are complete dolts, can give up drinking, I am not so shameless as to remain its slave. Swami ji has saved me from total ruin. I can never disobey him. Saying this Rambali also left.

## 6

Munshi ji put the cup to his lips, but before he could fill the second cup, his desire for drinking disappeared. It was the first time in his life that he had to drink alone as if it were a medicine. First, he felt irritated with his friends. I must have spent hundreds of rupees on these traitors and today they have run away on such a trivial matter. Now here I am, alone like a ghost; there is no one to talk to. One should drink in company. When there is no pleasure of friends' company, what is the use of drinking and then simply going to bed?

And how insulted I felt today! When I entered the street, hundreds of people were looking at me with fire in their eyes. When I returned with the wine, they would have torn me into pieces, if they were allowed to. Had the inspector not been there, reaching home would have been difficult. Why this insult and this disgrace? Is it not only for merely making my mouth bitter and burning my heart for a moment? There is no one here to talk to or laugh with.

How worthless people consider this thing to be, only today I understood, or else those who have been addicted to drinking for years would not have rejected my offer thus, only because a holy man gave them a slight hint to do so. It is true that in their hearts

people consider it to be evil. When milkmen, cart-drivers and *kahars* can give it up, am I even worse than they are? After this insult, this going down in people's estimation, this loss of repute in the entire town, this infamy, if I get intoxicated for some time, what great achievement will that be? Is it right to fall this low for some addiction? Those four fellows must be speaking ill of me at this moment; they must be thinking that I am a wicked man. I have fallen in the eyes of these fallen men. I cannot stand this. Today I will bring this passion to an end, I will end this insult.

A moment later, a crashing sound was heard. Startled, Algu woke up and

saw that Munshi ji was standing in the veranda and the bottle was lying broken on the ground.

**References:**

*Charas*: an intoxicating drug.

*Ganja*: hemp.

*Kahar*: a caste of palanquin bearers.

*Maya*: illusion.

*Namaaz*: prayer by a Muslim.

*Panchamrit*: a holy mixture made of milk and other things offered to the devotees after a Hindu worship ceremony.

*Sadhu*: Hindu holy men.

*Swadeshi*: the Home-rule movement in the Indian Freedom Struggle.

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Premchand (1880-1936) was born at village Lamhi in Varanasi. He is widely known as kathasamrat or emperor of fiction in Hindi. His real name was Dhanpat Rai. He started writing in Urdu under the pen name Nawab Rai. Later switched over to Hindi under the pen name Premchand. His short stories depict rural and urban pre-independence society in all its shades. In his memorable novel 'Godan' Premchand portrays the plight of farmers. He gave up his government service to become a full time writer. His essays like 'Mahajani Sabhyata' 'Jeevan Mein Sahitya Ka Sthan' are relevant to this day.

Dr. Ravi Nandan Sinha, edits *The Quest*, a journal of Indian literature and culture established in 1987. Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust India have published books of Hindi poetry and fiction translated by him. Presently, Head, PG Dept. of English, St. Xavier's College, Ranchi.

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## **NASHA**

Premchand

Translated by  
Dhiraj Singh

Ishvari's father was a big shot. Mine, a mere clerk. We weren't rich and landed like he was. But we were good friends. Friends who'd argue all the time. I didn't often have kind words for people like him. I called them blood-suckers, compared them to all sorts of lowly things like the Amarbel, the parasite vine that grew on top of trees. He spoke up for people like himself, though he didn't have much of an argument. There isn't much you can say in their defence now can you.

I never bought Ishvari's argument that equality between men was a myth and that there were and always will be small men and big men. How could one anyway prove his line of thinking, without getting caught in a web of morality and ethics. In the heat of the moment I'd often say some very nasty things to him but to his credit Ishvari always kept a cool head. I never saw him even so much as raise his voice.

Maybe he was only too aware of the holes in his case. But one could never accuse him of not practising what he preached. He rarely had a kind word for his servants. He had in him a huge measure of that special contempt and lack of empathy the rich have for those below them. Small things like an unmade bed, a glass of milk either too hot or too cold or a bicycle not properly dusted would see him in a solar storm. A lazy servant or one that answered back was anathema to him. But with friends he was the picture of chumminess. And I was his best buddy. Maybe if I was born in the lap of luxury I too would've thought



like he did. I say this because my own position was not based on any deep convictions about the equality of men, but came from the hopelessness of my situation. But in my heart I knew Ishvari would still be rich even if he was born poor like me. That's because he was deep inside a lover of all things beautiful and all things rich.

Once during the Dussehra holidays I decided not to go back home. I was broke and didn't want to ask my folks for ticket money. I knew they were anyway stretching themselves beyond their means getting me an education. Plus, there was the added burden of impending exams. There was so much left to study and I knew once at home I'd never go anywhere near my books. But I also didn't want to stay back alone and haunt the hostel. So when Ishvari invited me to go with him to his place I jumped at the offer. It was a godsend. Besides we could really study together. Despite his other failings, he was a good and hard-working student.

However, there was one thing he wanted me to guard against. My rather vocal love for rubbishing the rich! It could, he said, land him in trouble. His old-world feudal family still ruled over their fief as if it was their divine right. But the other side of the story was that the fief also thought so. And this equilibrium of thought was very important to their co-existence.

This wasn't exactly music to my ears. "Do you think I'll go there and stop

speaking my mind?"

"Yes, I'd like to think so..."

"Then you're thinking wrong."

Ishvari was wise not to answer that. He simply kept quiet and left the matter to my obviously over-heated conscience. He also must have known how stubborn I was when it came to our arguments about class and equality.

This was a first for me. I had never travelled second class. In fact, I hadn't even travelled inter class. Ishvari had made second class travel possible for me. The train was to arrive at 9 pm but I was so excited about our journey that Ishvari and I were at station soon after sundown. We generally hung around at the platform and then decided to go to the Refreshment Room for dinner. Just by looking at us the staff there didn't take long to figure out who was Mr Moneybag and who was a hanger-on. I was surprised and angry at myself for being so over-sensitive to the deference they showed Ishvari while treating me like the hanger-on that I was. After all, Ishvari was the one footing the bill. I assumed that my father's monthly salary was probably less than what these waiters earned as tips. Ishvari himself left them 8 annas. Was I wrong to expect them to show me the same courtesy they were showing my friend? Why was it that they jumped at his every whim while my requests fell on deaf ears? Suddenly I didn't feel very hungry.

The train arrived and we left the

Refreshment Room. The waiters did all but kiss the ground where Ishvari walked. They looked through me as if I were his shadow. And to add insult to injury, Ishvari observed: "Just look at these people, how well behaved they are. And then there are my servants... who know nothing about nothing."

Still smarting from the slight I was quick to add: "Maybe if you tipped them as generously... they'd be even more well-behaved."

"What do you think these people are doing it for the tip?"

"No, not at all! Good behaviour and gentility runs in their blood."

The train started. It was an express train. Once it left Prayag it only stopped at Pratapgarh. One man opened our compartment door to peek in, and I immediately shouted, "Don't you know this is a second class coach?" He came in and gave me a look one reserves for the very naïve and arrogant. "Your humble servant knows that, Sir," he said and sat on the middle berth. I had never been so embarrassed in my life.

We reached Moradabad by early morning. There was a whole contingent waiting to welcome us at the station. There were two well-dressed men and five others who looked like workers. The workers picked up our luggage and started walking. The two others started to walk with us behind the workers. One of them was Riyasat Ali, a Muslim and the other Ramharakh, a Brahmin. Both of them

were regarding me with eyes that said, 'but Mr Crow, aren't you trying too hard to be a swan'.

Finally, Riyasat Ali asked Ishvari, "Is this young sir your class mate?" For Ishvari this was a signal to start spinning his yarn. "Yes and not only that he is also my room mate. In fact you could say he's the reason I am still studying in Allahabad otherwise I'd be dumped back in Lucknow long ago. You don't know how much I had to beg him to come with me. His folks must have sent him at least a dozen telegrams but I sent them back. The last one they sent was 'Urgent' meaning it cost four annas per word. But that too I sent back."

They both looked at me surprised. As if they'd been hit by the news of a flood. At last Riyasat Ali spoke up, "I must say the young sir likes to keep it simple." Ishvari had an answer for that as well. "He's after all a Gandhi follower... doesn't wear anything except *khadi*. Actually, he burned all his English clothes. You won't believe it but he's a prince. Their state's annual income alone is two and half lakh rupees. But look at him and you'd probably think I've picked him up from an orphanage."

Now even Ramharakh seemed excited by Ishvari's story. "It's rare to find someone so rich do that... I'd never have guessed looking at him."

But Riyasat Ali had seen better. "You should've seen the King of Changli. He

used to walk around the market place in a cheap kurta and coarse shoes. I heard he used to work as labourer somewhere and next I hear he had opened a college worth 10 lakh rupees." I wanted no part in this conversation but somewhere in the depths of my heart I had already begun to like the sound of my quirky richness. It was almost as if with each line I was being pushed closer to my dream life and the riches it contained.

When it comes to horses I am no cowboy and that is an understatement. My only experience with the four-legged kind is hopping around on mules as a kid. Waiting outside the station were two strapping horses to take us to Ishvari's house. I felt my knees wobble. But I made sure my face didn't betray any signs of trepidation. I was now completely at the mercy of my friend. And I was glad Ishvari played the role of a gentleman host to the hilt. Had he raced his horse I too would've been forced to keep up with him and without doubt I'd be under my ride in no time. I was glad Ishvari let me keep my head high and did nothing to pierce my fast-growing bubble.

His house was like a fortress. The gate itself was like the Imambara gate, outside which there were liveried guards. Its inside was teeming with servants. An elephant was tied in the front yard. Ishvari introduced me to his father, mother, uncles and aunts with the same enthusiasm as he'd shown at the station.

Meaning I was now not just a prince in the eyes of the servants but in pretty much everybody's. After all, these were the boondocks where even a police constable would be thought to be an officer. For many at Ishvari's house I was someone who simply couldn't be addressed by name.

When I caught him alone I asked him why he was so keen on taking my trip in front of his family. But Ishvari had his reasons. "Without this 'dressing up' they wouldn't even talk to you".

Just then before us materialised a masseur. "My princes must be tired... let me press your feet," he said. Ishvari pointed towards me. "His first," he said. I was on my bed, lying on my back ready to be given a foot massage. This was my first foot massage, an act that I had many times in the past crucified my friend for, calling it names such as 'the kick of the rich', 'Big Foot massage', 'opium of the asses' etc. etc. And now here I was getting myself one.

By the time my debut was completed in right earnest the clock struck ten, which in these parts is a good enough time to announce lunch. But that too was not without its rituals. We had to bathe first. Usually I wash my own clothes but here I behaved exactly like a prince and dropped off my dirty clothes where Ishvari had dumped his. This was another first for me. I felt I couldn't be caught dead washing my own clothes.

In the hostel's dining room we all sat at the table with our shoes on but here things were done differently. A servant stood outside our room to wash our feet. Ishvari went before me and got his feet washed. I too did likewise. In my head a tiny voice was beginning to ring, bloody hypocrite, it called me.

I had come here expecting to prepare for the exams and here I was whiling away my time playing Big Prince. Our days were either spent crossing the river on a reed raft or fishing or watching the wrestlers or playing chess. Other times we'd be feasting on omelettes made on a stove in Ishvari's room. And I was further getting spoilt by the battery of servants that followed me around like baby chicken. All I had to do was call out and things would be done for me. If I went to the well for a bath, there'd be someone to pour water over me. If I lay down on the bed a hand would start fanning me. The irony of the situation was that everyone now called me 'The Gandhi Prince'. It's not as if I squirmed every time a servant came to be of assistance to me. I was enjoying every bit of the attention.

They'd all follow me around to see that my breakfast was on time or that my bed was made. I had in this time become more rich than the rich. Where Ishvari would sometimes make his own bed, I'd still be waiting for mine to be made. As if making my own bed would turn me back into a frog.

And one day I almost had it. Ishvari

was upstairs talking with his mother. And it was already 10 pm. I could barely keep my eyes open but just couldn't bring myself to make my own bed. At about 11.30 Mahra came to my room. He was one of the favourite servants of the family. That day poor chap must have been out on some errand. But what was I to do, I was after all royalty. So that day poor Mahra received from me the worst tongue lashing of his life. Ishvari, who was within earshot, came inside and congratulated me for finally having learnt the right way to deal with servants. "This is the only way these buggers understand."

Another day Ishvari was invited out for dinner and I was alone at home. The sun had set and still no one had come to my room to light the lantern. I just sat there stubbornly staring at the matchbox and the lantern on the table beside me. How could I, the two-and-half-lakh-rupee prince, light my own lantern. This imaginary fact was burning me up from inside. What's more, I was dying to read the newspaper, but how could I. Just then the family accountant Riyasat Ali passed by and lo and behold my anger erupted upon him like the Vesuvius. "I don't know how you people can manage with such servants... in my house they'd be kicked out immediately," I thundered. Finally it was Riyasat Ali who lit my lantern, shaken as he was after my Vesuvius moment.

Thakur was another casual worker at Ishvari's house. A loose canon of

a man but a hardcore follower of Mahatma Gandhi, he held me in very high regard. In fact, he could barely speak a full sentence in my presence. One day when I was alone he came and stood next to me with folded hands. "My good sir is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, isn't it? I have heard some rumours... like when we're independent there would be no big land owners in the country. Is that true?"

Suddenly, as if by magic I was my old self again. "Of course, who needs these land owners anyway. Do you need these blood-suckers?"

But Thakur was not convinced. "You mean, my good sir, all their land will be taken away?"

"There are some," I said, "who'll only be too glad to part with their land. And those who won't will obviously be forced to give up their land. But you know what... we've been actually waiting to distribute ours among the people of our state."

Suddenly Thakur grabbed my feet and started pressing them. "You are so right, my lord, the landowners here are terrible. Maybe, I could come and humbly serve you in your state and perhaps get a small piece of land in return."

"Right now, my friend, I don't have that right. But when I do I will surely call you over. Maybe I could teach you how to drive and you could be my driver."

Later, news came to me that that evening Thakur got drunk and beat up

his wife. And as if that wasn't enough he was also ready to bash up the village money-lender.

This is how our holidays came to an end and we started off for the station once again. It almost seemed the whole village had come to see us off. Thakur in fact came with us till the train. I too played my part to perfection. In fact I was keen to tip them handsomely to leave them a taste of my wealth and breeding. But my shallow pockets prevented me from doing that.

We'd already bought our return tickets. All we had to do was to board the train and say goodbye to the boondocks. But the damn train came packed like a sack of potatoes. This was the Durga Puja rush. Most people were returning home after the holidays. The second class section was packed too. So you can imagine the situation in the inter class. And this was the last train to Allahabad. If we gave it a miss, we'd find none till the next day. But our power and pelf helped us get some place in the third class. Something that left me, the-two-and-a-half-lakh prince, rather upset. What an anti-climax was this to the journey to here when we had whole berths to ourselves. Now we barely had half a seat.

But the train was full of people. There were also people who had had an English education and saw no small virtue in the ways of their masters. One gentleman was rather vocal about his love for the British. "When did we ever have a judicial

system like theirs, where everyone is equal. Even the king can be taken to task if he wrongs a peasant." Another seconded this claim. "You are so right. You could even sue their Emperor. Take him to court if you will."

Next to me was a man who couldn't get a place to sit. So he remained standing, a big cloth bag hanging from his shoulders. I think he was going further east, to Calcutta. I guessed he chose a place close to the door so that he could get some fresh air. But what he probably did not realise was that he was pretty much cutting off my share of air. And then there was his big bag that rubbed on my face, once, twice, thrice... and then I could take it no more. I stood up pushed him away and landed two tight slaps across his cheeks.

The impact and suddenness of the act had made him angry too. "Why do you hit me, man? I have also paid my fare." This was enough to send my princely blood boiling and I got up once again and further rewarded him with several

more slaps. Suddenly it was as if the whole compartment had got into action. Everyone started raining blows on me.

"What man? If you're so touchy you should travel first class."

"He maybe a big shot in his place but here he dare not act too rich. I'd have turned him into a pulp had he even touched me."

"What was the poor guy's fault? As it is it's like a cattle train here."

"He was only standing by the door and this prince and a half felt insulted."

"The rich, I tell you, are not human."

"See, this is what your foreign rule does to people."

An old toothless man also spoke up. "Not getting inside office but behaving like an officer!"

Ishvari was the last one to scream at me. "What a bloody idiot you are, Bir!"

I could suddenly feel my spell crumble to a thousand pieces and reality break in around me once again.

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## A WOMAN'S FEATS

Suryabala

Translated by  
Pooja Birla

I'm of average height and built, an almost-beautiful woman; you can call me a lady; well educated, cultured and intelligent, perhaps can even say that I'm intellectual. I'm also married, to an almost-dignified, handsome and healthy man of five feet eleven inches, and am the wife of a husband who is a man of few words, and even those - uttered softly... gently.

Kids? Of course, daughter and sons, born, fortunately, in a timely and convenient manner; kids that have grown into precocious and obedient young adults who complete their homework on time. Fortunately, we have adequate enough means to ensure that this little caravan of one husband, two domestic maids and three children can skip along the path of life, feeling happiness at every bounce. In other words, the children's studies, after-school classes and extra curricular activities, midterms and finals, all take place in a convenient and organized manner. That's us - convenient and organized.

My husband gives me what I want to run the house; he lets me go wherever I want to go. He never interferes or stops me, doesn't even question what I do. When I ask him to accompany me, he comes along; and doesn't when I don't ask him to. Our food is also always simple and wholesome. If, occasionally, I repeat dishes too often, I murmur apologetically, "Sorry," and he responds extremely softly, "It's alright."

End of discussion.

In other homes, I've seen enough of calamity-causing, seismic husbands who have convulsions because either the salt is a little less or the chili, a little more. First there's the earthquake and then the aftershocks of mollified offerings. It takes a good hour or two to deal with the whole year's casualty calendar. But in my home, I swear, this hasn't happened even once, which is why our friends and neighbors say my husband is no ordinary man - he's a saint.

We have one colored TV, two phones and get three newspapers. The newspapers are scanned before and after office; the TV is usually turned on when he's home. He has no favorite channel or show. Irrespective of what is on, he watches it; whatever the subject, he doesn't get upset or change the channel, ever. He's never in a dilemma of what to do with his time. It passes, on its own, comfortably enough; otherwise most people have a full-fledged workout thinking of how to spend time, save time. No such indecisiveness pervades my husband's world. He is the ideal solution of these problems, which is exactly why our friends and neighbors say my husband is no ordinary man - he's a saint.

Oh but what can I say about myself? Just thinking about me is embarrassing. I have no wisdom or quietude to match his saintliness. The more angelic he gets, the more bent and misshapen I become. If I laugh, I chortle loudly, splitting

my sides, and when I cry, it's a monsoon deluge, showing no sign of ceasing. I function on a short fuse; even the smallest thing gets me fuming and frothing, at my saint-like husband, without a syllable being uttered. I'm well aware on such occasions that it's all my fault but he, in his quiet and gentle way (without knowing, hearing or understanding why I'm furious), says, "It's OK," or, "So sorry..." Our neighbors say that to date they haven't heard his voice raised. It's true; when I haven't heard it inside the house, how can anyone sense it outside?

Take for instance, a Sunday; if I see him leaving, no matter how hard I resist, I can't help asking, "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Out."

"Out, where?"

"I was to meet someone..."

"Who?"

"You don't know him."

"OK. When will you return?"

"I may come back soon, or it may take time."

See, didn't I tell you earlier - soft spoken, man of few words. Tell me, is this any excuse to fret or hit the roof? No, right? But I don't miss the opportunity to start an argument. To hell with his equanimity when I want to squabble! One time, I got down to it pretty fast.



I said, "You never even talk to me. All the time, it's newspapers, TV, computer, phones."

He kept the newspapers aside, turned off the TV and said in matured, measured tones, "I'm sorry. OK, tell me what should I talk about?"

Tell me, don't you think he is compliance personified? He is asking *me* to tell *him* what he should talk about with me.

But when it came to suggesting something, my mind drew a blank. Nervously I tried to come up with a topic I could introduce but no luck. I got increasingly anxious; he was waiting for me and I couldn't come up with anything.

Faltering, I said, "Arey, if there's nothing else, tell me about your day in office. So many big things must have occurred. Tell me about them."

"Yes, sure," he said and tried to recall. Then, in an even tone, he began telling me as I prepared to listen attentively. When he reached the office in the morning, his peon, Pyarelal, had gone off, like always, to get tobacco leaves from another peon, Kamta. The woman at the switchboard came in late. By ten thirty, the packing department was on 'go slow' mode because of which the consignment that should have been loaded by three thirty was still being loaded till five thirty, in fact, five forty-five. The trucks had to wait longer. Tensions between the packing department and the loading

people remained high because of all this. Cashier Baruha extended his vacation and several bills couldn't be reimbursed. Makhija, the assistant at the chemical lab, was again caught stealing some cultures. Meanwhile there was a power cut for an hour-and-a-half...the tanker at Rehmatganj broke down. There was a budget meeting from three thirty... and then I hear, "Should I talk more or is this enough?"

His inquiring tone wrenches me out of my torpor. Uff! I had forgotten that I had asked him to talk. He was giving me this long, faithful account of his office drama to oblige me, whereas, I had heard the first two sentences and then drifted off. Who knows, maybe I fell asleep. I hadn't managed to hear or understand much. Isn't this the limit of my impoliteness that first I attack him with demands and questions and then yawn and get distracted while he tries to appease me with appropriate answers. Now he was forced to ask if we should talk some more.

I felt dejected and to save the situation said, "Let it be. You must be tired. I'll make some tea. Should I?"

He had turned on the TV once I declined his offer of more conversation, and was watching it serenely. He hadn't heard my question for tea. I waited for a while and then asked again, "Do you want tea?"

"OK, I'll drink some," he answered, in a quiet voice.

I walked towards the kitchen like a smart and responsible wife; put the pot on the stove. Suddenly, out of a place I didn't know existed, a wave of exasperation rose within me, as if I was having a fit; as if all the functioning rationality was being exploded molecule by molecule; a destructive bulldozer had materialized out of nowhere and was determined to tear down and level all the buildings standing in line like well-behaved school children. It seemed that I was controlling this destructive force and, at the same time, also screaming, all distraught, pleading for the bulldozer to stop. Amidst the internal strife, of the why and how, I could make out some little meaning...

What does he mean, 'I'll drink some'? Is he doing me a favor? Why can't he be like other normal men and simply say, 'Yeah, sure, make tea. Even I can use some right now'? Or he could have said, 'Put ginger and black pepper too, make it really strong and spicy, OK?'

But this line of thinking was pointless, the daydreams obscene, unlawful even... these castles I built in air had come crashing down, wrecked and razed to the ground. What was left, tacked to the detritus, was a sickening, depressing phrase, 'I'll drink some'.

This was the mirage of my private world. Outside, the water on the stove had begun to boil; on the tray, as is our custom, I had arranged the cups and saucers, the sugar and milk pots.

Abruptly, once again, the fit seized me. This time the water was boiling inside me. The flame looked wild, leaping into the air, scorching and searing things it touched. I had no control over my mind or body, the maddened and maddening exasperation had taken charge. I tried to restrain myself but the delinquent part threw a spoonful of powdered black pepper into the boiling water along with the tealeaves and ground ginger.

As he takes the first sip, my heart is pounding inside my head and I forget to breathe. He's going to say something now... now... now. I can't wait any more.

My impatience gets the better of me. "What? What happened? Too much pepper, right? Say... say it... say something!"

"Yes."

I will my heart to stop pounding as I ask him, "So?"

"It's all right."

"What?!" I can't believe my ears. Now the internal demon is lawless, unmanageable. "All right... how is it all right? Why don't you just tell me honestly that the tea is not just spiced with black pepper but soaked in it? It's a damned black pepper soup... and I've made this fiery soup deliberately, so that these glacial walls between you and me crumble; so that the ice melts and water flows, and brings in a wind that ruffles even if it is turbulent; wind, water, ice, storm, thunderous clouds and lightning..."

all together. Enough of this saintliness! Just a dash, but I want some madness, an irrationality, a reaction. I want this armor of precious metals to crack and the real, alive, breathing man to emerge...”

I keep waiting but the storm doesn't come; no thunder or lightning; no angry clouds or pelting rain. I get up from

my seat, feeling remorseful. I hear myself say, “Sorry, I put too much pepper, I'll make it again,” and I leave the room with the tea tray.

You don't believe me, do you? Even I was watching, stunned and shell-shocked, my 'angelic' husband and I, drinking tea together, quietly... peacefully.

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Pooja Birla graduated from the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program in 2007 and has just received her second M.F.A. in Literary Translation. She has some intentions of becoming a writer. She loves to gossip, do the NYT crossword, and drink chai. She misses the monsoon rains of Bombay but has developed a deep appreciation of Iowa's clear blue skies.

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## PAPA

Dhirendra Asthana

Translated by  
Eishita Siddharth

APAN KA KYA HAI/APAN UDD JAYENGE ARCHANA/DHARTI KO  
DHATA BATA KAR/ APAN TOH RAAH LENGE APNI/PEECHHE CHHOOT  
JAYEGI/GRANA SE BHARI AUR SAMVEDNA SE KHALI/IS SANSAR  
KI KAHANI.....

The lines of the poem by Rahul Bajaj were creating a magical hypnotism in the pin drop silent conference hall of Air India. Now, the reading of the poem of Rahul bajaj was a hard thing to find for the city. Enlightened people from far -fetched suburbs used to come by local, auto, bus, taxi and their personal car to be a witness to this moment. Rahul was the pride of the city. All the Indian literary awards conferred on him were splendidly displayed in a proud splendor in Rahul's house. His study was full with the celebrated books from all around the world. People from the newspapers, magazines and T.V. channels used to come to his house persistently for his interview. His mobile phone had the number of the CM, home minister, governor, cultural secretary, police commissioner, page 3 celebrities and prominent journalists.

He was being taught at the universities. He was being invited to Assam, Darjeeling, Shimla, Nainital, Dehradun, Allahabad, Lucknow, Bhopal, Chandigarh, Jodhpur, Jaipur, Patna and Nagpur. He was living contentedly in a comfortable and luxurious two room bedroom hall apartment in the miraculous city—Mumbai.

He travelled in maruti zen. He wore Raymond and Black Berry pants, Park Avenue and Van Heusen shirts and Red Tape shoes.

He had cleaned and destroyed all that was awful, discolored and astringent in the past. But , do things get destroyed that way!!!!

ATTITH KABHI DAURTA HAI ,HUMSE AAGE/ BHAVISHYA KI TARAHA/KABHI PEECHHE BHOOT KI TARAHA LAG JATA HAI/HUM ULTE LATKE HAIN AAG KE ALLAV PAR/AAG HI AAG HAI NASON KE BILKUL KAREEB/AUR UNME BAAROOD BHARA HAI.

It was his intimate childhood friend Bandhu who had started writing poems while in college. And stood at the confluence of the naxal activities. But before he could explode as a bomb he was mercilessly killed by some unknown people in the valleys of Dehradun.

Rahul got scared. Not because he saw death so closely for the first time. But the 24 year old Bandhu was the school in the life of the 20 year old Rahul. He looked up and all the roads of the city looked deserted and scary to him. The beautiful city had been inhabited by some cursed ghosts. He was totally alone and also unarmed. He was spending his life under a monopolistic shadow of his proud, autocratic, omniscient father who was the owner of Gita Electricals with some undone, unripe poems, some sort of revolutionary ideas some moral and pure dreams and a pass certificate of intermediate. But it was all so little and oppressive that Rahul lost his way. That night he drank till late and came home at midnight. He used to drink before

also but then he used to go to Bandhu's place.

Rahul remembered , clearly. His father thrashed him with a curtain rod. He came in the porch while he was beaten and fell down after being knocked down by the hand pump. The big, long nail that joins the handle with the hand pump, passed through his stomach and slashed it. This six inch black mark on the right side of his stomach brings back the memories of his father every morning when he takes a bath. Siddhartha vanished one night leaving his wife and son and was called GAUTAMA BUDDHA. Rahul had climbed on the same hand pump and had jumped from the porch to the other side of the roof , in blood, while his father , mother and his three brothers and sister looked out from the room's window staring horrified. There was a sea of fire on the other side and one had to swim through it. Maybe mother fell with grief afterwards.

I have car, bungalow and servants. What do you have? Amitabh Bachchan is asking- wriggling with arrogance. Shashi Kapoor is quiet. Basking in the warmth of affection. He said with a deep pride- I have mother. The arrogance of Amitabh cracked.

Rahul couldn't understand. Why didn't he have a mother? Rahul was also not able to understand that why in this world no son ever says full with pride that he has a father. Why a father and a son are always standing at an unseen strand of conflict.

AB JABKI UNGLIYON SE PHISAL  
RAHA HAI JEEVAN/AUR SHARIR  
SHITHIL PAD RAHA HAI/ AAO APAN  
PREM KAREN VAISHALI.

Rahul Bajaj's poem was resounding in the conference room of S.N.D.T. Women's University. He got surrounded by young ladies after the recitation.

It was the conference hall of the Hindi department of the Kumaon University. After a single poetic reading the head of the department had sent his most intelligent student to take him for a round to see Nainital. This student had a sort of an emotional and intellectual relationship with Rahul through letters. She used to write letters to him after reading his poems in the magazines. Twenty years before, on the street of the cold Mall Road this girl Ketki Bisht a student of M.A. Hindi had held Rahul's hand and had asked suddenly- "Will you marry me?"

Rahul was amazed. The throat was dried up from inside. In this chilly October of the hills his forehead was full with the drops of sweat. There was an ocean of surprise in his eyes. Rahul at that time held a reputation of a young, gifted and quick tempered poet. He used to work in a weekly newspaper in Delhi. But was this enough for marriage? And then he didn't know much about the girl. Apart from the fact that she was bubbling with some rebellious kind of notions, that the challenges of life filled her with a desire to live. Her eyes were brimming with intense confidence.

Will I be able to make my dreams stand on their legs while I walk on this lane of confidence? Rahul thought and peeped in Ketki's eyes. "Yes!!" Ketki said and started smiling. "Yes!!" Rahul said and kissed Ketki's forehead. The nearby crowd started halting in astonishment. Twenty years before it was a surprising thing. Specially, in a small town like Nainital. Mr. Bisht's daughter..... Mr. Bisht's daughter..... rumors ran through the air.

But the next morning in the presence of the Bishts and the head of the department Rahul and Ketki became husband and wife. The very same evening Rahul and Ketki came back to Delhi- to start their life in a small rented room in Sarojini Nagar. Sitting in a chair in the conference hall of S.N.D.T after the autograph session Rahul could see his past running ahead of him.

Rahul was coming down the stairs at the Andheri station. Vikas was climbing the stairs. He held a cigarette in his fingers. Rahul held Vikas by his fist. The cigarette dropped on the ground. Rahul dragged Vikas and took him outside the station. After reaching a secured corner he left Vikas's fist and said panting- "I told you, to have your life's first peg and first cigarette with me. Didn't I say so?" "Yes!!" Vikas's voice fell. "then?" Rahul asked. Vikas lowered his neck and said slowly- "Sorry papa! It won't happen again." Rahul smiled. Said "You have a friend like Papa. Appreciate it." and

then both of them went their respective ways.

Vikas was a first year student in the JJ College of arts, Mumbai. Ketki wanted to make him a doctor but Rahul saw the artistic inclination of his son and so after he did his high school with science he gave him the permission to do inter in arts and then take admission in JJ. He wanted to be a commercial artist. In those days Rahul was an editor in a daily newspaper. It was his daily routine to come in the midnight and then sleep till late in the morning.

One Sunday morning he asked Ketki, "Vikas is nowhere to be seen."

"Finally , you remember your son?" Ketki was standing holding a satiric thread. "but the house is yours from the very beginning." Rahul replied- unaffected. "This is not a home." Ketki was bitter. After a long time she got a chance to be a part of a conversation. "It's a guest house. And I'm the house keeper. Only ,a house keeper. "

Rahul was not in a mood to be involved. The CEO has entrusted him with a responsibility of making the outline of the Pune edition. After lunch in the afternoon he wanted to shut himself up in his study and do the required homework. He called up Vikas's mobile.

"Papa....." it was Vikas on the other side.

"Son where are you?" Rahul was a bit stern.

"Papa, I have a show in Rasberry in Bandra next Monday. That's why I'm at my friend Kapil's place since a week. Rehearsals are going on."

"Rehearsal? What show ? "

"Papa do you ever remember anything except yourself. It was only last month that I told you that I have joined a rock band."

"Rehearsals can be done at home also." Rahul was getting agitated like typical fathers.

"Papa you forgot even this." A sort of satire started floating in Vikas's voice too. "Only few days before when I was practising at home you scolded me so badly saying- it's home and not a place for dancing and singing."

"Shut up!!!" Rahul switched off the mobile. He saw Ketki was looking at him satirically. He lowered his head. He was going to his study slowly. Ketki was following him.

"What???" Rahul asked and discovered that his voice was breaking. This breaking contained a sort of pain as if some experiment has been proved unsuccessful.

"You failed Rahul." Ketki's eyes had the years old confidence.

"You also think so Ketki??" Rahul took off his shirt and vest. "Do you want that Vikas should think of me like I do for my father when I see this mark on my stomach!"

"No."

“Then?” Rahul had pain in his voice- “I tried to give Vikas a democratic atmosphere. I wanted him to take me as his friend not as his father. “

“A father cannot be a friend Rahul. He can behave like a friend but he is a father after all. And he must be a father.” Ketki completed her sentence swiftly and went out of the study.

Rahul collapsed in his rest chair. When he didn't get up till late the next morning Ketki called the family doctor. Doctor told- “Blood pressure has made a hole in his life.”

Rahul's eyes were filled with surprise. He didn't smoke. He drank alcohol occasionally. He never used to eat fried or oily food. He never used to drink even water outside his home.

“Then how?” he asked Ketki.

But till then Ketki had already left for the market to purchase the medicines prescribed by the doctor.

After exactly one week of the disastrous collapse of the world trade centre in America on 11<sup>th</sup>. September 2001 Rahul Bajaj was remembered by his son Vikas at eleven p.m. in the night. In those days Rahul used to work in a news channel as an input editor and lived in Delhi along with his wife. In this channel's job leave aside Vikas , even Ketki used to spring up in his eyes like some sort of a forgotten memory. He had left Vikas all alone in his well settled home in Mumbai. Vikas had started working as a visualizer in a

multinational company's Mumbai office. Usually Vikas's mobile used to be “not reachable.” In fifteen twenty days when he remembered his mother he used to call her on Delhi's landline and chatted with her. It was through Ketki that Rahul used to know that Vikas is doing well. His job is good and he has become a rising rock singer. He used to tell his mother that the house maintenance is being given on time, and that the bills of the landline and power are being duly paid. The people at the society miss them and that he has purchased a second hand motor cycle from one of his friends in instalments. He used to tell that the crowd in the Mumbai locals is becoming life threatening. Now its difficult to board and de- board no matter what the time is. The traits of a well to do middle income family were present even here. and even there. Rahul was passing his life. And so was Ketki. Ketki had started giving some tuitions in Delhi to be busy.

That 's why the call from Vikas had moved Rahul.

“Baapu.....” Vikas was under the intoxication of affection, alcohol and freedom- “Baapu, we also had our head office in the world trade centre. Everything is finished. The office , and the boss. Madam has closed the Mumbai office by sending an e-mail.”

“Now?” Rahul tried to be in control- “Now what will you do?”

“What else I'll do, I'll struggle. For the time being I have a month's notice



salary with me. After that we will see.” Vikas seemed reassured.

“You do one thing, you lock the house and come to Delhi. I’ll fit you in my channel.” After many days there sounded a concerned father in the all time busy and professional voice of Rahul.

“What papa.....” maybe Vikas got irritated- “at times you talk what things. My career, my desire, my passion everything is here.....you want me to leave all this and come there, where everybody goes off to sleep at eight o’clock. Where power comes scarcely. Oh shit..... I hate that city.” Vikas was being deluded. “mummy keeps telling me about the problems there. I’ll stay here. I love Mumbai, you know. Next month I’m going to Pune with my band for a show.”

“Whatever you wish.” Rahul gave up. “if there’s any problem then do inform.”

“Well done. Now that’s like tough guys.” Vikas gave a guffaw and said again- “Take care.....bye”

Rahul was disheartened. He tried to give himself consolation. After all everything is there in Mumbai’s house. T.V., fridge, computer, VCD player, washing machine, gas, double bed, wardrobe, sofa, bedding. Our son is capable enough to earn his meals for two times. He tried to be at peace with himself but something was there that was making a hole in his peace. He came back home after some time. When he was coming back he called up the

secretary of the society and requested him that if the maintenance is not received on time he should give him a missed call. The money will be transferred in the society’s account. He then requested the society’s secretary to take care of Vikas. Secretary was a sikh. Good humored, he said- “You don’t worry. Your son is fine. I see him some times on bike saying BYE UNCLE. “

Ketki was astonished when she saw Rahul back home. It was only eleven forty five. Rahul never used to come before two.

“It was Vikas’s call”. Rahul told – “He has lost his job but there’s nothing much to worry.”

“Then!!” Ketki couldn’t comprehend anything.

“He was drunk.” Rahul lowered his head. His voice seemed so distant as if coming from the other side of a century. Smearred in ashes, dull and helpless. It seemed as if one of the coals sparked afresh amongst the dying coals inside Ketki. Maybe Rahul’s voice provided the needed air.

“When we were coming to Delhi, I told you not to leave Vikas all alone in Mumbai.”

“Ketki don’t talk like fools. When children grow up they go to London, America, Germany and Japan. Jobs come and go. And then, we are still living.” Rahul sat on the sofa and started taking off his shoes. “It’s not a big issue that he is drunk. After all he is a young

chap of twenty two.”

“So then!!” Ketki asked “Why are you looking worried??”

“Am I worried?” Rahul told a lie, “Vikas is facing an adverse situation for the time being. He is a talented boy. He will get another job. If he is not going to struggle now, when is he going to do that? He needs to grow up through his own experiences and reality. “

“It’s for you to know.” Ketki took a deep breath. “Hope these beliefs do not deceive you. “

“Don’t worry. I’m here.” Rahul smiled. Then he went to his bedroom to sleep. Rahul used to have his dinner in his office. That night Rahul did only two things. He rolled from right to left and from left to right.

The morning was busy as usual. Newspapers, phone, news, news channel, interview, administrative problems, controversy, marketing strategy, bureau coordination, order, instruction, target.....a constant chaos of twenty four hours was forever present. In this chaos time used to fly like wind and sensibilities melt away like wax. Amongst all these pre occupations the December of Delhi came. Shivering with cold, fog and rain. Vikas couldn’t be contacted anyhow. The phone kept ringing at home. When some special dish was cooked at home his heart skipped a beat. Don’t know what Vikas would have eaten! The food declined to go down the throat. Ketki used to take shelter

under Kumar Gandharva and Bheemsen Joshi. She used to try Vikas’s mobile. She used to call the wife of the society’s secretary and ask- “How is Vikas?” There used to be a sole reply- “Haven’t seen him since many days. I’ll ask him and call you.” But she didn’t call. When Ketki used to look at Rahul with her distressed eyes, he used to say- “No news is good news.”

“What kind of a father are you?” Ketki finally collapsed one night-”There’s no news of our son since three months and you are enjoying.”

“Ketki!!” Rahul held her at her vital spot. “I was twenty years old when I left my home and ran away. From Dehradun. Then I married you. I struggled and earned a position for myself. Of course you were always there with me. We went from Dehradun to Delhi, from Delhi to Lucknow, from Lucknow to Gowahati and from Gowahati to Mumbai. And, again we are in Delhi. Did it cross your mind for once that even I had a father. That even I was a son?”

“But where do I figure in all this matter Rahul?” Ketki protested. “It was between you and your father. But I’m involved here. I’m Vikas’s mother. My heart keeps whizzing all the time. I think I should go to Mumbai for a few days.”

“Fine.” Rahul got serious. “I’ll do something.”

Rahul flew for Mumbai by the afternoon flight of 12:35 on the first

day of the new year. He had the keys of the house in his briefcase and the debit and credit cards of three banks in his purse.

The house seemed strikingly faded, sad, anarchical and ruined. Rahul's house which he had given to Vikas as a keepsake. The name plate at the door was obviously in Rahul's name but inside it was casting its shadows like a handicapped house keeper.

Slowly Rahul started getting scared- "Im being made from the other side and being demolished from this side." Rahul thought. The darkness of the twenty first century was adamant for staying in his body like the future. His beliefs, his morals, his thoughts in which the educated lot of the country believed, were lying scattered in his very own house amongst the dirty, filthy clothes of Vikas. The book shelves in the hall were covered with spider webs and lizards were resting in peace there.

He picked up the receiver of the phone- it was dead. That means the bell used to ring in the exchange office. The precious and expensive works of Nagarjuna, Nirala, and Muktibodh along with the collected works of Kalidasa seemed to be panting under centuries' old dust. An electronic guitar was lying lopsided on the sofa. There were three ashtrays on the T.V., in which there was not even a pinch of space for ash. There were empty cigarette packets lying in the corner along the showcase. The shoes were leaving their imprints on the floor

while moving.

Rahul came inside- with a strong apprehension. There were many empty cans of 20 liters' bisleri placed in a row on the kitchen platform- empty, without cover. The cover-lid of the washing machine was open and it was completely filled with Vikas's dirty clothes. There were stains of oil and spices on the curtains. There were posters of some foreign singers in foolish postures stuck on the doors of the bathroom and toilet. Rahul's study room was closed. The computer and printer in the bedroom was missing. Rahul opened the door of his study with the key- it was dusty, humid and damp but since it was closed the room was as it was- just the way Rahul had left it. This tired, awaiting and sad room seemed to be giving Rahul a sort of consolation that all was not lost. Rahul sat in his revolving chair lying in front of his writing table and started making a futile effort of calling Vikas's mobile which to his surprise started ringing.

"Hello", it was Vikas, sounding exactly like Rahul, vanished since three months.

"Papa", Vikas shouted- "How are you? How is mom?"

"What do you care?", Rahul got irritated.

"Papa, my mobile was dead, got working just day before yesterday. I was going to tell you. Good news! I got a job just day before yesterday in Reliance info com. Pay is fifteen thousand. I was

going mad without a job since three months. In between I met with an accident. I was in the hospital for fifteen days. Bike got damaged. Sold it as junk". Vikas was going on telling without stopping, without any grief, pain or guilt. Just like plain news.

"You didn't inform us about the accident", Rahul was suddenly seized by strange melancholy.

"What would have happened then?" Vikas was giving logic. "Your blood pressure would have risen. You people would have come here running. But it's the medicines that would have cured me eventually! Then, my friends were here. What use would these bastards be!!! You would have been terrified if you had seen me papa. The left eye was awful. It was completely bulging out. There were seven stitches on the forehead. Lip was slashed. Everything is fine now."

"From where did the money come?" Rahul asked.

"Friends gave it. Had to sell the computer. Now I'll pay them slowly."

"And for how long you have not been home."

"Maybe, since eight or ten days". Vikas told soothingly.

"And the house's telephone?"

"It's dead." Vikas said- "From where would I pay the rent? It was hard to manage food."

"Even the maintenance would not

have been paid?"

"Yes." Vikas said.

"Don't you think you should have told all this?" Rahul got irritated. "Is this the way your generation behaves with mothers and fathers?"

"Papa, don't start giving lectures." Vikas also got irritated. "Nobody is stealing the house? Finally there's a job, I'll give everything. Now listen, let me talk to mom."

"Mom is in Delhi."

"In Delhi? So where are you?" Vikas got a bit amazed.

"In Mumbai. In my house". Rahul said.

"Ok bye. I'll come in the evening". Vikas disconnected the phone. There was a streak of a vibration in his voice for the first time. What is the difference? Rahul was asking himself. Just like I ran away from my home Vikas is away from home- living and dying according to his choice. In his own, parallel world. He was tied with his mummy-papa by some imperceptible thread, but even this thread was missing in Rahul's world. When ,after seven years papa died in Jodhpur with brain cancer, mom broke her silence. On his mother's orders his younger brother found out his address and sent him a telegram- "Father is no more. If you want you can come."

He didn't go. If father was out of his life, if mother, wasn't able to remain a mother, if his brothers and sister had

disowned him, so why would have Rahul gone to open the door of a closed world? When he was jumping out of the house, immersed in blood, couldn't his mother have come forward and prevented his exit. Did this notion ever cross the mind of his father how an inter pass twenty year old boy is surviving in this world?

Rahul Bajaj found that a tear had rolled down from his left eye onto his cheek. Maybe the left eye is connected to the heart and the right eye to the mind. Rahul thought and then smiled at his finding.

With the help of two house maids the house was set in order by evening. The secretary of the society had changed. The name of Rahul Bajaj was splendidly written on the notice board in the list of all those who have not paid the maintenance. Rahul cleared all the arrears and gave post dated cheques for the coming twelve months to the secretary. He also deposited a cheque of three thousand combining the previous fourteen hundred and the forth-coming sixteen hundred in the electricity account. He also gave the application to the secretary for the surrender of the telephone along with a cross cheque. He sent all the dirty clothes of Vikas to the laundry. He sold the T.V., fridge and washing machine to one of Ketki's friends for a sum of ten thousand rupees. He was invited by this same friend's (Revati) husband Lalit Tiwari for dinner.

Vikas came at eight o'clock in the night. He had bought a bottle of Bag

Piper along with himself.

"It's you who said, have the first peg with me". Vikas said. "That didn't happen but we will say cheers together to celebrate my new job".

"Agreed!!!", Rahul was unchanged. "I'm locking the house and going out."

"Will do", Vikas was not even a bit worried. "My office is in Marol. It is not possible anymore to catch a train from Andheri for Meera Road. I'm thinking of becoming a paying guest somewhere near my office."

Vikas didn't go to Revati and Lalit's house for dinner. He ordered a chicken biryani from Pushpak hotel for himself.

Next morning was Sunday. Vikas was ready when Rahul woke up. He had made a double omelet for his father.

"Where?" Rahul asked.

"I have my rehearsal". Vikas said. "Today is my show in the evening at seven p.m. in Rasberry at Bandra."

"Can't I come in that show?" Rahul asked.

"What?" Vikas wondered. "You'll come to watch my show! But you and mummy are the types for Kumar Gandharva, Bheemsen Joshi.....!!!"

"After all, what you sing is also a kind of music." Rahul intervened.

"Yes!" he punched with his fists in the air. "I'll wait." Then he picked up his guitar and went down the stairs. For a long time Rahul was perplexed

with the studs which hung in Vikas's ears and with his short, spiked colored hair. When Ketki called up he was unable to figure out as to who he was with- Vikas or himself. Ketki was surely with Vikas-"When you have closed the house for him then why don't you arrange for his funeral side by side". She was crying. She was a mother and possibly she was with her son. Rahul doesn't know what a mother is. He was not even a bit moved by Ketki's crying.

Rasberry. A discotheque, for the new generation boys and girls. There were posters outside- NEW SENSATION OF INDIAN ROCK SINGER Vikas Bajaj. Rahul bought a ticket of three hundred and went inside. There was a crowd of weird looking boys and girls. The air was filled with the smell of drugs. Beer was on its high. Youth was intoxicating. There was a passion to live for the moment. The contours of the buttocks were clearly visible from the jeans of the girls. Boys were wearing tight t-shirts. Their hair were tied up like plaits. Their muscles were bulging out from their sleeveless t-shirts. The breasts of the girls were moving like tennis balls inside their shirts-free from the clutches of their bra. Maybe Rahul was the only adult there whom the crowd of Rasberry saw with curious eyes from time to time.

After a short announcement Vikas came onto the stage- along with his guitar. Bending his neck onto his knees he stared singing some sort of an ear deafening song that filled the hall with applause,

the girls swayed and the boys started dancing passionately.

This sort of a boy has been made out of him? Rahul thought and was drawn into a corner by the constant pushing of the boys and girls. The crowd went nostalgic and started shouting "Once more" for Vikas. Rahul's heart was slashed into two. He called up Ketki and said slowly, "Can you hear the noise? It's the noise of Vikas's success. I don't know whether I'm happy or sad. For the first time a father is very uncertain Ketki." He disconnected the phone and started looking at Vikas.

He came out after the break. Vikas also came out saying "Hi guys! Hello girls!" he had a cigarette in his mouth. He touched Rahul's feet and said "I'm very happy that my father is sharing my happiness."

"My child." Rahul embraced Vikas, "Be happy wherever you are. I have to go now. My flight is at ten fifteen. You will get all your ironed clothes from Revati aunty's house." Rahul Bajaj's throat had choked- "Where will you stay from tomorrow? Should I leave the keys of the house.....?"

Before a father inside Rahul Bajaj melted, Vikas was being called on stage. He again touched Rahul's feet and said, "Don't worry about me papa! I'm like this. You go. Best of journey. Sorry." Vikas waved his hand, "I can't come to the airport. Give my love to Maa." Vikas went inside, amid the crowd, the frenzy and the noise.

It was very dark outside. In this darkness Rahul Bajaj was very lonely, helpless and confused. He longed to be with everybody but he was with no one. He had neither father nor mother. Now he didn't have even his son. And after

reaching Delhi even Ketki was going to leave him. Rahul stopped a taxi, sat in it and said, "Santacruz airport. "

A song was being played in the taxi-  
"BABUL MORA NAIHAR CHHOOTO HI  
JAAAYE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

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Dhirendra Asthana, born 1956 is a creative writer and a journalist. Right from his first collection of short stories 'log-hashiye par' to his latest novel 'desh nikala'. Asthana has exuded a confidence of expression and experimentation. He also writes for films.

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## **DHAMPUR**

Meera Kant

Translated by  
Ranjana Kaul

Wonder why days and nights are an unalienable part of life, just like legends. They follow each other one after another, never seeming to end. Expending their lives pursuing each other. Does the night chase the day, or is it the day which wanders around looking for the nights which succeed sorrowful evenings retreating from daylight. The darkness increases, swallowing the doors and windows of the house whole, without even stopping to chew them up. It is a hungry beggar, Nitya thought to herself as she turned over on the bed. The roots of the mind are also very dark, entangled with one another. How can one see through such darkness! They say there are seven subterranean worlds below the earth. How many such worlds lie below the realm of the mind!

How can Nitya deal with the turmoil inside her? All she can do is turn restlessly from side to side like someone stirring a pot of boiling milk to prevent it from spilling over. It seems this fire and this tumult will only ebb with the dawn. Everyone awaits the gleam of daybreak even if it is stricken with frost. She will also see a dawn tomorrow. Time which is just a few hours away is also called tomorrow but then what else can it be called? Just as her house is called a home because it is one. So, tomorrow she has to go back home. Her own home.

She remembers a time when this word 'home' was like a beautiful recurrent dream in her mind. Home is an aspiration, a desire, and having one of your own is a profound experience. This is what she had written with a lipstick on one of the large mirrored



doors of the almirah that day when she had first decorated Chandramohan's room in Ghaziabad and made it into a home. Today, why does the same word 'home' bubble in her mind like boiling rice. Suddenly, she sat up and told herself not to think about all this. Tomorrow she has to return home, her own home.

She had not articulated these words in the night, how would her ears see these words in the darkness? So, her ears remained oblivious just like her mind. She picked up her pillow and came out into the open. Perhaps her mind would be able to breathe more freely here. She spread out the rush mat standing against a wall of the courtyard, placed her pillow on it and tried to lie down. The moon, shining with the mild luminosity of the thirteenth day of the dark half of the lunar month, seemed to be looking at her. In that dim light she felt as though she had become an image of stone or an ancient ruin which lives both in the past and in the present.

An old yellowed memory floated into her mind. Prabha bua sitting on a string bed on the roof of this very house embroidering a pillowslip and young Nitya sitting with an open book in her lap admiring the word 'Welcome' and the roses embroidered on the pillow cover. Prabha bua was working on the green thorns around the rose.

"Bua how does one do such beautiful embroidery?"

"How would I know... ask the needle."

Wrinkling up her nose in disgust Nitya buried her nose in the book. Prabha bua was smiling. Pulling the thread upwards with the needle she asked- "Are you reading a story? Is it good?"

"How would I know...ask the book!" Nitya answered laughing so uproariously at her own wit that Prabha bua stopped her work to stare at her. And then her laughter was no longer solitary.

Nitya's childhood was closely linked to Prabha bua. What was Prabha bua's relationship with her, apart from being an aunt, her father's sister? She was an elder sister, a younger mother, an older friend, maybe everything or nothing at all, because like the others even Nitya did not know where Prabha bua....! Nitya's thoughts abruptly shivered to a halt. She remembered the letter sent by Prabha bua many years ago from Dhampur in which she had written only one quotation in her beautiful small handwriting- "Within all of us lies an immeasurable space which has not been mapped or explored. If we want to understand the turbulence and turmoil which exist inside us we must pay attention to this immense space as well."

At the end she had written- 'I am not writing the name of the author because you don't have to appear for an exam nor does it make any difference.' She had not even signed her own name at the bottom of the letter. Perhaps that was of no significance either!

The world of the mind is full of the clamour of images, events and words.

These frequently bump into each other even as they attempt to avoid contact. Sometimes a word searches for an image which sits leaning its head upon the shoulders of an event, or an image pursues a happening which hides motionless in the shadow of a group of words.

Today, in the dim light of the moon, resting her head upon the pillow slip embroidered by her aunt, Nitya wants to recall all those moments when she really discovered Prabha bua. But where can she find those lost moments? The moments of the present smile feebly as though apologizing for all those innumerable moments which have already been massacred. Prabha bua often used to say, "Nitu, history is not meant to be forgotten but to be repeatedly brought to mind." Nitu tried to follow the memories of the past just as one tries to chase the sun in winter. But then how much of the winter sun does one manage to capture!

The family of Prabha bua's father, Kalicharan, had moved from Hapur to Delhi after Kalicharan's elder sister Prano Devi was married to Ambika Dutt. Both these orphaned young children had been brought up by their uncle. Though Kalicharan was two years younger than his sister he was married off earlier because his aunt wanted him to marry her brother's daughter. However, it took a while to find a boy for Prano. Finally, a proposal came from Ambika Dutt of Delhi, a man who had already lost two wives. Their good luck lay in the fact

that the gentleman had already received two lavish dowries but had no children. This time he did not have much interest in dowry, so Prano Devi, despite being an orphan, became a part of this well to do household.

Prano Devi was deeply attached to her younger brother, Kalicharan or Kali. Soon, she managed to persuade Ambika Dutt to invite Kali and his family to live with her. At this moment Kalicharan's family consisted of his wife and his son, Dwarka Prasad. Ambika Dutt owned a flour mill. The work was increasing every day and he urgently needed someone to take over the job of a manager if he wanted to save his life from being disfigured by the dust and chaff of the wheat. In such a situation, it was impossible for him to get a more trustworthy and reliable manager than his brother-in-law. And then, the relationship being what it was, Kali would be obliged to accept any salary without quibbling. He would never have the nerve to ask for more and Prano Devi would also remain perpetually indebted to her husband.

The rest of Kalicharan's three children, Saroj Bala, Prehlad Prasad and Prabha Bala were born in the environs of the flour mill in Delhi. Prano Devi ruled vigorously over the household and Ambika Dutt governed their lives with equal authority. Which child attended which school or college, how much he or she studied, all these decisions were ultimately taken by Ambika Dutt. He

had only one son who did not burden him with the necessity of taking any such decisions on his behalf. The son left school after the eighth class and took up the responsibility of becoming the local bully. His behaviour prompted Prano Devi to speak to her husband and Ambika Dutt immediately decided to involve him in the working of the mill. Keeping his nature and disposition in mind he was assigned the task of collecting dues, a job which he cheerfully accepted. Gradually he began to control all the finances of the enterprise and fill his own pockets. His poor uncle Kalicharan was left helplessly scrutinizing the incomplete pages of the company accounts books. He continued to draw the salary decided upon many years ago which, like an old and tattered covering, barely fulfilled the needs of his growing family. One month Dwarka Prasad would grow out of it and another month it would be Prehlad Prasad. However, life progressed with relative peace of mind under the shelter of Prano Devi's love and affection.

The first voice of revolt was raised by Prehlad Prasad when he refused to work in the flour mill. He had decided to study for a B.Sc. in Physics. The thought of doing a B.A. in Accounts like Dwarka Prasad and dreaming of the mill day after day was unbearable to him. He managed to get his way as far as the B. Sc was concerned but when he pushed to do his Masters Ambika Dutt decided to put his foot down. He decided to

cut off all financial assistance which the boy received from the family. Prehlad now began to support his studies by doing tuitions. There was no rancour in his heart, on the contrary, he was quite happy. He had never imagined that he would be able to escape from the mill so easily. His home lay within the environs of the mill but his world lay outside it.

The only member of the family who had access to this world was Prabha Bala, that is, Nitya's Prabha Bua. Prabha was only three years younger than her brother Prehlad. She was good at studies but in keeping with the wishes of Ambika Dutt she had been enrolled in a tailoring course after completing the 11<sup>th</sup> class. She enjoyed embroidery and stitching but her real interest lay in the books she borrowed from her brother Prehlad bhai sahib. The fiction and romances which Prehlad bhai sahib brought home were never returned until Prabha had read all of them. She had even visited Delhi University with her brother a few times and the library which was as big as the flour mill. She also enjoyed going to the Delhi Public Library near the Railway station with Prehlad bhai sahib.

Sometimes bhai sahib would go off in another direction leaving her alone near the book shelves. Alone in that vast room surrounded by innumerable books! She would feel a strange arid fear. So many books, so many stories, so much knowledge! Many ideas must be refuting and challenging each other.

But they are all sitting here quietly without even a shadow of dissent. Isn't it strange that opposing ideas can sit side by side mutely in the same room without any debate or argument? When words become silent, they alter their character, and the opposite is also true, for when silent words speak up they too change. Prabha Bala gently caressed one word after another, just to determine whether the words would speak up when they were touched. Prabha bua told Nitya all this one day standing in a silent corner of the Delhi Public library. At that time Prabha was not yet married.

Nitya also knew that Prehlad chacha would sometimes take Prabha bua to Regal or Odeon or for a film festival to see a movie, pretending that they were going to the library. Later Prabha bua would narrate the entire story of the film to Nitya when they were all alone on the roof.

Prehlad chacha became a lecturer in a college within a few years. Prabha bua used to carry this victory of his around with her like brooch on a sari. He had been working for around six months when the fateful day arrived. He went to Assam on a college trip. One day one of the boys suddenly slipped and fell into the Lohit river. Prehlad Prasad also jumped in to try and save him. And then neither of them was ever found. A glimmering bright window in Prabha's life was suddenly slammed shut leaving her bereft. Nitya's grandmother, that is Prabha's mother, could not bear

the shock of her son's death and she also passed away.

Dwarka Prasad, Prabha's elder brother, had two children by now, Mukesh and Nitya. Saroj Bala, the elder sister was married and had gone to Bareilly. She also had a daughter. Prabha bala who was younger than Prehlad was quite few years younger than Dwarka Prasad and Saroj Bala. However, she was nearly twenty years old and Prano devi became very concerned about the marriage of this motherless niece of hers. She spoke to Kali and made him pay more attention to this matter. Somehow, it proved to be quite difficult to get a suitable groom for Prabha and if one was found there was a very high demand for dowry. Ambika Prasad was also becoming a little lax and was gradually losing control over the mill. His son was regularly showing a loss in the financial registers.

The doors of the house would open hopefully to admit prospective bridegrooms and their families, and then quickly close behind them as they departed. Sometimes, one opens a door expecting to see a particular person but finds someone unexpected standing there instead. Similarly, one day Saroj's husband, Prabha bua's brother-in-law Dushyant jijaji, arrived from Bareilly. He had been sent to Delhi for six months for training by his company. For Kalicharan, the absence of a young man in the house due to Prehlad's death was now filled by Dushyant Kumar. He was tall, well-built and had the knack of

narrating every incident like an interesting story. The sea of silence which had invaded Prabha bua's life was thrown into turmoil. She had the responsibility of looking after Dushyant, keeping his likes and dislikes in mind. When her brother in law or jijaji left home looking dashing and handsome, her eyes would follow him. At that moment she felt as though she was looking at Prehlad not at Dushyant. This was something jijaji could never understand, neither could Janaki bhabi, who felt it was her duty to warn her elder sister-in-law, Saroj. She wrote to her asking her to come to Delhi.

Janaki bhabi pointed at Prabha and remarked to Saroj, "Bibi, look after your house. Men are so fickle. God knows what kind of training will happen here while you are in Bareilly." Saroj bala became wary. Kalicharan was now quite old and was suffering from Diabetes. Saroj sought the help of her elder brother Dwarka Prasad and the search for a groom for Prabha acquired a new urgency.

It was decided that it would be better for Prabha to be away from the city, so they looked for a boy outside Delhi. Soon, Prabha bua was engaged to be married to Radheyshyam who was head clerk in the Income-Tax office in the small town of Dhampur. Both sides were equally anxious to have an early wedding. When Prabha bua was dressed as a bride she examined herself in the mirror. Nitya noticed the slight smile on her lips. She pulled at the edge of Prabha bua's sari

and told her affectionately, "Bua, you are looking pretty." Prabha bua answered almost brazenly, "That is true." Nitya found her frankness a little odd. She wanted to know what was going on in her bua's head, "Bua, what are you thinking about?" "Nothing, I was remembering my mother. She used to say that the worst thing that can happen to a girl from Delhi, or a cow from Mathura is to be sent away from its hometown." Prabha bua gave a short laugh, "Do you know she was from a village near Delhi and went to Hapur after her marriage." After a while she added gravely, "But her luck changed and the entire family came back to Delhi."

Nitya was shaken to the core. She could not meet Prabha's eyes but she held on to her hand and said, "Papa says Dhampur is a nice place... look, the colour of your henna is so beautiful." "Just like Dhampur," Prabha bua said pulling her hand away as she walked on ahead.

Even before Prabha arrived in Dhampur to become a member of the head-clerk's extended family her ill-luck had begun. The house already contained two elder brothers-in-law, their wives and children. There were also two sisters-in-law, one unmarried, the other a young widow. The sisters-in-law were either dedicated to the kitchen or to jewellery. Prabha's simple, handloom saris, many bought at the Khadi Bhandar sale, and her lack of ostentatious jewellery, set her apart from the other women of the

household like a black cardamom in a yellow curry. Radheyshyam, the head-clerk was a typical small town Romeo. He was fond of having a good time and saw every new movie within a week of its release with his friends. When his sisters-in law teased him saying, “What sort of an ascetic have you brought home?” he would feel even more alienated from Prabha.

Prabha who used to accompany Prehlad bhai sahib to plays in Sapru House, or English movies like Ben Hur which she did not fully understand, could not find any enjoyment in occasional trips to the typically small town Dhaampur bazaar. There was only one hope left– that the birth of a child would help to reconcile her to life in Dhampur. But this hope did not materialize for quite some time. Finally, one day Radheyshyam babu took Prabha to Delhi for a series of medical tests and examinations. As soon as the doctors arrived at the conclusion that it was not Prabha but Radheyshyam who was responsible for the couples childless state, Radheyshyam abandoned the tests and returned to Dhampur rarely showing his face in Delhi or in the house of his in-laws thereafter.

In fact, Radheyshyam’s aversion to his in-laws even extended to Prabha. He seemed to revert to the days of his youth, his moustache aquired greater dimensions, and he attempted to assert his masculinity by spending most of his evenings away from home.

His relationship with Prabha was near the end of its tether but the household generally placed the blame on the wife. During this time one day when Prabha opened her little box she discovered that all her jewellery was missing. When the news of the theft reached Delhi everyone was stunned.

“What theft? There is barely any room in that house. Three small rooms and more people than possessions. There is hardly any place to put down your foot... when did the thief enter the house? He must have given it to some woman of his” said Kalicharan, wiping his mouth with the ends of his muffler as he lay on the bed he occupied in his old age.

Jijaji, Dushyant Kumar, had been transferred to Delhi and had settled there with his family. Prabha Bala had been married only five years when she got the news that jijaji had died in an accident. The shock of this tragedy coming after the death of Prehlad bhai sahib devastated Prabha. After her marriage she had only met her sister Saroj Bala occasionally on festivals and that too generally amidst a crowd of relatives. During the mourning for jijaji, when Prabha moved towards Saroj to console her, Saroj pushed her aside with her elbow. Despite Dushyant Kumar’s death, Saroj had evidently not been able to erase the old incident from her mind, or perhaps Dushyant had been in the habit of occasionally referring to Prabha in glowing terms and this had wounded Saroj. Dushyant’s death had provided Prabha with the possibility of

mourning for her brother once again but now she had to return home discomfited, nursing the pain in her heart. These two tragic incidents made her feel even more detached from life.

Saroj Bala's daughter went abroad after her marriage. Saroj had Dushyant Kumar's pension and his house but her loneliness was not assuaged by these. Janaki bhabi was not likely to let such an opportunity slip by, therefore it was decided that Saroj Bala would live with her and Dwarka Prasad and would give them the rent she earned from her house to pay for her keep. Her husband's pension was enough to pay for Saroj's needs. In this manner, not only did Janaki Bhabi's financial situation improve considerably but she could also try to convince everyone about how supportive and concerned she and her husband were about their widowed sister.

Nitya had finished her schooling and wanted to study a foreign language. However, as she did not get admission in a regular college she started doing her B.A. by correspondence besides which every evening she attended the three year German course in Max Mueller Bhavan. She also started learning music from the Sangeet Kala Kendra.

Chandramohan was a talented young man from the interior of Bihar who came with his theater group to Delhi for a visit but then settled down permanently in the city. Other boys from his village, who were studying in Delhi, had taken a room on rent in Katwaria Sarai.

Chandramohan also joined them. He had a good grasp of music so he soon started getting work providing music for plays and cultural programmes.

Nitya and Chandramohan decided to get married after they had been friends for nearly two years. Nitya first wanted to test Prabha bua's reaction to the decision before sharing it with the rest of the family. Ambika Dutt had passed away nearly a year ago but she was stunned at the response she got from Prabha, "Look Neetu, Think carefully before you say anything at home. Uncle has not yet departed from this house... nor is he going anywhere...this house belonged to him and it will remain his... I am afraid..."

"What?"

"I'm afraid in their anger they may marry you off in Dhampur as well." Then after a while she added softly, "God knows how long babujis and other elders like him will rule over households."

Nitya's decision stunned her father Dwarka Prasad. Before Janaki could react, Saroj Bala started turning the beads of her rosary agitatedly, "Neither caste nor community...and works as an actor... couldn't she find anyone else in the world!"

Nitya finished her German course around this time and started getting work as a translator. She would leave home in the morning, spend the day in a library and return home in the evening. She required no financial support from her

family. In these circumstances, at the urging of Mukesh, Nitya was married to Chandramohan despite a complete lack of enthusiasm in the family.

The two of them spent the first fifteen or twenty days after their marriage in the room in Katwaria Sarai which had been vacated by Chandramohan's friends, who had temporarily shifted to the rooms of their friends in J.N.U. This arrangement could not last too long and soon Chandramohan rented a room for a nominal amount in the house of his friend in Ghaziabad. Nitya now shifted from Delhi to her home in Ghaziabad.

Soon the leaves began to turn brown. In Delhi spring is overtaken by autumn very quickly. During the long melancholy afternoons one could hear only the sound of one's own footsteps on the leaves scattered on the wide silent streets of Mandi house.

Chandramohan was now quite busy with his theatre groups. Nitya had started working in a private company so she had to travel to Delhi. Whenever she was free she would do her translations. Both of them were busy trying to improve the financial situation of the household. Days, months and years passed like empty carriages before their eyes. Nitya now had the memories of Chandramohan's companionship rather than Chandramohan himself for company.

Living with memories is just an illusion. Whenever Nitya spoke to him about starting a family Chandramohan

avoided the topic. If Nitya referred to the matter more seriously he would blow on the tendrils of her hair and remark, "I am not in the mood to become a father yet, my dear." If Nitya maintained a stony silence he would try to persuade her,

"Let us first get settled properly. We haven't been married very long... don't think about all this ... concentrate on your job... pay attention to the foreign delegations... do more translations...you know darling, money... money is the real necessity in life."

"Once the child is here the money will also come."

"Don't talk rubbish...think big...we can always have children...concentrate on your work...on your work."

At such moments she would remember Prabha bua. Once when she had come from Dhampur she had told Nitya very sadly, "Nitu you didn't see your grandmother... do you know she didn't have a nail on her forefinger? I used to find that finger of hers very strange. I would often ask her- 'Amma, why doesn't this finger have a nail...is it broken?' She would reply, 'No it hasn't been there since I was born.'"

"Since birth?" Nitya had remarked in amazement.

"Yes...Then once I asked her... why is the nail missing? And she answered, 'Because I am a mother. Anyone who is a good mother doesn't have a nail on this finger.'"



“Why?” Nitya asked with childish curiosity.

“I asked her the same question- ‘why?’ She replied-‘so that I can apply kajal to my children’s eyes without worrying. If anything gets stuck in their throats I can quickly pull it out without hurting them.’” Nitya listened eagerly.

“And do you know Nitu...I thought what she said was true. I would check the forefinger of every woman who visited us very carefully. But everyone’s nails were intact and I felt very happy at the thought that my mother was the best mother. There was no one else like her.” Prabha bua became silent. She looked at the nail on her forefinger, “Look Nitu,my forfinger has a nail...but I could never even become a mother, not better or worse...just nothing.”

Nitya felt that sediment of sorrow which seeped from Prabha bua’s body to her mind had now passed on to her. She checked her own forefinger and then turned her eyes away, “Who knew what fate had in store?”

Chandramohan often went out of Delhi with the theatre groups and whenever there was less translation work Nitya would go to her parents house. Saroj Bala’s influence over Janaki had grown to such an extent that even Nitya was silenced by the changed environment at home. There was no one with whom she could share her marital problems and in any case her marriage had been her own decision. One day she overheard Saroj Bua whispering, “Bhabi, be careful,

it doesn’t seem right for Nitya to come and stay so often.”

“I am sure everything is fine ...otherwise she would have said something,” Janaki had whispered back.

“What can she say and how can she complain...but these are not good signs. One can understand it if she is expecting or she is ill...but I cannot understand why a married girl should visit her parents so frequently.”

Saroj Bala used to give her brother Dwarka Prasad some money from her pension if the need arose. This was a big support for the family. After the death of Ambika Prasad his son had taken over the flour mill. Dwarka Prasad had now been reduced to a mere employee. Kalicharan had also finally left his bed and passed away. Mukesh only managed to hold a job for a few months, he had not yet been able to settle in life or in employment.

Even before Nitya’s marriage Saroj Bala’s growing assertiveness had increased Prabha’s solitude and sadness. After her marriage, despite the fact that her brother and sister-in-law were not very welcoming, Prabha would often come on festivals and birthdays and try to build bridges of relationships. When she entered the house saying, “Happy Dussehra, bhabi,” Janaki would lower her head under the pretext of pulling her sari over it and mutter under her breath, “Here she is again ....she will be stuck here for at least three or four days.” Then she would stand up and

embrace Prabha saying, "Welcome bibi... you have come after so many days. Nitya is really fond of you... she remembers you very often."

After a day or two Prabha bua would tell Nitya, "When I leave, just take out a handloom sari for me...even an old one will do." Nitya would always feel very depressed as she handed over the sari. Anyhow these were all old memories. Now Nitya has already been married for five years. Two years ago she had bought a blue, black and white sari for Prabha, with the intention of giving it to her at their next meeting, even before bua had an opportunity to ask for one., "Bua your sari... I have bought it with my own salary." They say that thoughts follow one around like ghosts but in Nitya's case it was the handloom sari which haunted her since she never saw Prabha bua again, nor for that matter did anyone else.

The last time Nitya met Prabha she was astonished by what she saw. One hot summer afternoon. Prabha had entered the house with a cloth bag slung over her shoulder. Nitya was meeting her for the first time after her own wedding. Prabha's skin had become rough and tanned. When everyone dispersed for a nap after lunch, Nitya persuaded Prabha to go with her to the bathroom and gave her a bath, scrubbing her to peel off layers of dirt. There was so much dirt that Nitya had to keep on pouring water over Prabha. The drain was flooded with soap scum and layers

of dirt. Prabha bua burst out laughing loudly, "Look at the flood of dirt... It looks as though Dhampur will get washed away like the water in the drain."

Then she wore an old sari of Nitya's and both of them sat under the draft of the cooler. Gradually she stretched out her legs and relaxed against the pillow. She closed her eyes and as her mind wandered off to some unknown destination she slowly called out to Nitya who was lying down next to her, "Nitu."

"Yes, bua."

"Nitu, you know everyone has a heart and there is a nameplate on it. The nameplate on my heart... sometimes I want to turn it upside down ...reverse it....because it has sorrow written on it... but then I don't do it." Nitya's sleep had fled. She was lying on her side with her eyes closed, feeling the presence of Prabha bua. Her ears heard, "Do you know why? Because behind the nameplate is written-happiness. If I turn the nameplate over then happiness will be in front and sorrow will shift to the back, clinging to the walls of my heart, closer than it was before."

Prabha bua was not feeling sleepy. Perhaps she had become accustomed to the sleeping pills which Radheyshyam uncle used to give her frequently. It must have been convenient for him to keep Prabha in a state of somnolence. Her body would remain alive while the passions of her heart would be stilled. Nitya thought this to herself with a sarcastic smile on her lips. How would

he understand that the passions of the mind cannot be quietened? They can just change direction sometimes...moving towards a dead end, aimless and unfocused.

In any case directionless paths were becoming a part of Prabha bua's life, "I like wandering around on the roads Nitu...I like it very much and I especially like crying on the roads... houses belong to people... some have one, some don't...some have less, others have more... but the road belongs to everyone.. equally..so it also belongs to me."

Some day will she come across a weeping Prabha bua sitting by the side of a road. Nitya remembered something else Prabha had said, "Do you know Nitu, sometimes at home, when everyone else is having their meals, I eat only fruits because they are just like the roads....they belong to everyone and no one."

Mukesh said that she often came away from Dhampur without informing anyone. At such times he used to escort her to the bus stop and put her on the bus to Dhampur. After a month or so she would be back again. She would leave her bag at home and wander through the streets. When she was tired she would sit down and watch people coming and going around her, and return home late at night. In the morning Mukesh would bundle her into a three wheeler, take her to the bus stop and put her on the bus to Dhampur.

Dhampur-Nitya repeated the word with tears in her eyes and a thin smile

on her trembling face. What is this Dhampur? Dham means a place to stay—a home, and pur means a settlement, also a place to live—a home. Both Dham and pur?Home twice over? Nitya remembers how as a child one of the games she used to play was— 'house, house'. Little girls often hear their friends repeating the sentence, "Lets play 'house, house,'" and then once they reach the threshold of adulthood the same sentence is repeated by their parents and elders—come and play house, house. House meaning home, meaning Dhampur! Something which is not real but make-believe, like any imaginary game. An illusion which constantly gives the impression of truth, a reality for which and with the support of which, women spend their entire lives. An illusion for which women have been searching for centuries.

There is another Dham which is the body in which the soul resides. It doesn't have any pur attached to it but it also slips away gradually, almost imperceptibly. Despite our knowledge that this home, our body, is transient we take care of it, live for it, suffer for it. Though we beg God for deliverance from the illusion that is life, yet how difficult it is to leave it!

The last time Prabha bua came from Dhampur, she reached home at seven in the morning. She had either traveled by the night bus or had spent the night at some religious guest house or dharamshala. As soon as she entered

Janaki bhabi said irritably, "Bibi, why can't you live in peace in your own home... there are disagreements in every house over one thing or another....one doesn't run away every time one is upset."

"No, bhabi, there hasn't been any disagreement. Who am I to be upset with anyone," Prabha answered and then added in a soft voice, "I am generally upset only with myself. I try to calm myself but...."

"What will phoophaji,uncle, think?" Mukesh remarked.

"Son,beta, he has a lot of things to think about. Don't worry about him...I am not staying on."

"Come, I will put you on the bus...go back to Dhampur," Mukesh said.

"Arre, beta, how many times will you send me back to Dhampur....now my body is tired... I don't feel like staying. Make arrangements for me in any place of pilgrimage.... or if you know someone in Haridwar...." Prabha bua said, as she sank down exhausted on the floor and leant against the wall clutching her bundle like bag.

"Listen, you make some tea," Dwarka Prasad instructed Janaki coming out of his room, "Give Prabha some tea and refreshments...this time I will personally escort her to Dhampur."

"All right bhai sahib, it is fine," Prabha said. Then she gathered her strength and stood up, "Bhaabi, make some tea, I will just be back." she got ready to go out.

"Arre, where are you going," Dwarka Prasad said in a thunderous voice.

"Nowhere, bhai sahib... I will go and get some biscuits of my choice from the market at the back...bhabi,make some tea... I will just be back with the biscuits." Prabha bua departed in the direction of the market, with her bag slung over her shoulder. But after this she never came back. She did not reach Dhampur, nor did anyone ever see her. Who knew where Prabha bua was lost, what had happened to her? Maybe she was living like a vagrant in some dharamshala or wandering around the streets aimlessly. How could one find out? News papers do not publish details of all the unclaimed bodies that are found. Nitya is waiting for her, even today, with the blue white and black handloom sari and an increasingly crippled hope.

Nitya is also waiting since the evening for the arrival of the morning. There is a faint orange glow in the sky. Often this light, this sunshine halts at the very threshold of the mind. Inside there are glimmers of light and shades of darkness, like at dusk. Nitya searches within her mind in the light of memories of the past. How long will this shadow war, this struggle in the wings continue? All her life?

Every morning, she opens her eyes to a new day which is not her own and she has to live through the 'alien-ness' of this day. When she needs a day of her own she cannot find it anywhere near her. Perhaps she is only fated to have as much of a day as the tiny pinch of salt one adds to flour or sometimes even forgets to add.

And Prabha bua? Even her nights were scorned, yet they must have seemed

her own-dark nights just like her benighted life. Did she ever consider scrubbing them, washing them till they became bright, making them her days? What would she do with all those chaotic dreams stored in the alcoves of her nights? Nitya thought, Prabha bua would tuck them away in her blouse. There they would be safely hidden from the day. In any case it must be years since anyone peeped in there.

The morning had arrived. Nitya had her breakfast in a strange frame of mind. Everyone thought she was anxious to return home. They helped her in her work and she left for the bus stop with Mukesh, after saying goodbye. The bus for Ghaziabad was standing there and some passengers were already seated in it. The conductor was standing near the bus trying to gather some more passengers... "Ghaziabad...Ghaziabad."

Nitya walked swiftly in that direction with Mukesh following her. The conductor saw her and got ready to give her a ticket, "One or two? Where do you want to go?"

Mukesh had just put his hand in his pocket to pull out his wallet when Nitya

gave the conductor the fifty rupee note she had clutched in her hand-"One ticket...Dhampur."

Mukesh stopped searching his pocket, "Nitu?" He stared at her, forgetting his hand in his pocket. The conductor repeated in a surprised tone of voice, "Dhampur!" But Nitya took the ticket from his hand and, slinging her bag over her shoulder, she boarded the bus without a backward glance. The conductor shrugged his shoulders and also got into the bus. The driver started the engine when he heard the whistle and the bus moved.....towards Ghaziabad or Dhampur ...who knows?"

Buses generally travel to predetermined destinations and carry their passengers wherever they want to go. But Nitya? Though she had boarded the bus to go to her Dhampur she had no idea whether it would take her to her destination. She might even get off midway. She would take the decision now that she was in the bus. For the time being, she had bid farewell to all those people who always and in every circumstance ensured that the daughters of the house were put on the bus to Dhampur.

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## COMING BACK

Musharraf Alam Zauqui

Translated by  
Shyamji Mishra

“Would that love had the tongue so that the covers of lovers would come undone. When the tongue unfolds the secrecies and the ways of love, the heavens call out: O you, the concealer of love! Why do you conceal it? The wool and the cotton possess fire. The more you conceal them the more they manifest it.”

### **There was no computer at the time**

‘You have forgotten her; no?’

‘Can’t say...’

‘But I can say confidently. She hasn’t been there anywhere within you for the last five months.’

In the dark of night Tarana’s voice felt icy-cold..

‘Why should you believe so?’

She laughed out softly. ‘For, that world is only a make-believe one — a fairy land. And a fairy land is for children only. But when men like you go there, you carry along with a lot of suppressed desires that you can’t share with your wives even’ ....She became a bit serious... ‘But to forget her just in five months!? Sanyal, at least you must keep from taking after the mould of other men.’

The dark over-powered me. The dark that, in spite of my quietly coming out onto the balcony, has over-powered the whole of my existence. All that had happened all of a sudden, ... all the things. The whole world around me changed, and completely so. Time that had been moving on like rising waves, seemed to have

acquired a magic wand in its hand. Time waved it. 'Stop, you moving age! Stop there.... No. Recede back.' Sailing in his middle age, on the threshold of his forties, the person was a young man once again. Time waved the magic wand once again. A very beautiful young lady was standing there...

Perhaps no magic wand was needed there. As soon as we entered that world, we grew romantic. It was the world where you just switched on a common electric button, there stood open all the doors of internet on the computer screen...

There was no magic here...

No magic box here.

No horse of age... Only a river flowing along the magical fairy land. There was the bazaar of beauty. And suddenly, like a supernatural happening, there was a girl belonging to any country, any religion, any community; and she asked you,

'Do you like romantic chat?'

A fancy of the fairy land, emerging out of the fairy land, would brighten up, with all its elegance on the CAM or the Net Camera. I would set the microphone wire in my ears. The sweet romantic sound of 'Jalatarang' ... and...The flowing stream of the gaining on age, with all of its images and beats of by-gone days would get obliterated...

Perhaps, the world was not so shrunk then... The moon was shining in the sky. The sky was star sprinkled... Far away, ...on the darkling sky a couple of floating clouds were seen. But, the caravans of

the twinkling stars stretched those clouds over themselves. And then leaving the moon and these caravans alone, those clouds proceeded on.

The computer did not exist then...

No internet was there...

No mermaids were there...

The age had its own limits. And those limits couldn't be moved forward or backward. But Love was there, even at that time 'the platonic' was perhaps more free then than it is now— the one that would settle down much deeper at heart than stray externally. The nights were moon-lit then. Should I look back, 16 years ago, some well defined cities of today would look like villages or small towns. No refrigerators, no telephones. Mobiles couldn't be thought of. Despite their complexities and inconveniences the life in small towns was beautiful and lovely. Love had its own identity then. Had its own moods and manners, its own swellings of the sea. Like the rain-emanated scents of imagination, love looked like a far high star shining in the sky, and it was not possible for every one to touch or even to see it.

But, perhaps, at the vulnerable stage of age, no sooner I befriended literature than the meanings of love changed for me. The keenly blowing wind that would carry you along with itself, and being blown away you couldn't think, even in the least, what was happening to you. But your whole existence got submerged in that moment and felt the thrill of each and every moment.

And suddenly, in the small town, in the form of Tarana, I had the chance of feeling myself lucky. The deer-like Tarana. With the whole of her being, she was made or written for me only. After a few brief meetings the feeling of airy flights...—people were, perhaps, not so very cultured in small cities till the time... or, so very commercial. Things had begun to take wings, to get speed. From our college to our homes, the tales and stories were gaining circulation... Sanyal – Tarana.....Tarana-Sanyal....

But, as it seems, both of us were full of rebellion. Or, the family members of both the houses were quite aware of the rebellion.

That day as Tarana met me, our love, gradually gaining momentum, was preparing itself to create a new chapter.

It was a small narrow stream that we were standing by. At some distance the keeper of a make-shift-shop was selling onions and potatoes. Two dirty young boys were laughing, looking at us... Tarana touched my hand: 'Why didn't you come home? You are frightened...'

'No. I'm not frightened.'

'Don't tell a lie. You are frightened; perhaps because of the stories touching us are gaining circulation. Do you know...?' She tightened her grip on my hand. 'I keep awake all through nights. The house, doors, windows, all disappear, as if they were parts of a castle made up of airy nothing. The whole of my countenance

gets transformed into a broad smile only. And you get transformed into a beautiful psychic being.... I hold your hand, kiss you, soar away far and high; and I am all an embodied joy... a trance. There is an old well within the inner courtyard. I come out stealthily and sit silently on its parapet. While the whole house is asleep, I keep looking at the moon. The moon sets and you... What's this Sanyal?

The keeper of the small make shift shop called out, 'Potatoes, ..Onions...' Both the little dirty boys were still looking at us. Tarana's hand tightened on mine;

'Tell me.... What's this?'

'Should I?'

'O yes, do.'

'The levels of *Dopamine and Norepinecrin* have gained in you.'

'What?' Tarana was startled. 'What is it?... dopamine?'

'A chemical, darling, that produces the feeling of pleasure or joy in the mind...?'

'Tarana smiled, 'That means love...and that? ... and that? .. Nove...'

'Norepinecrin'

'O yes, that very... so you are Sanyal... What's that?'

'That also is a chemical that produces commotion and excitement at heart?'

Tarana gave a start, 'So your love is just this much?... to watch the levels of dopamine and norepinecrin? Only this



much is love? —an escape from literature to the world of chemistry...and that... that happened to me!? At mid-night I opened the door and quietly got out of the house, just to look for you in the street. But then, I became aware of what I was doing. When I recollected, I got frightened. The whole of the street was deserted. Had people seen me at the time, who knows what they would not talk of me.'

'Nothing. This shows the declining level of serotonin only.'

'You mean...?'

'The urge of sacrificing oneself for love... to the verge of insanity...'

'Slap you I will...'

Tarana burst out laughing. The two boys too, looking at us, pealed with laughter.

On the balcony the night was well-lit. The stars were playing the game of hide and seek.

The emotions of sixteen years ago were ready to fall in showers, all at once. That long ago, only one name was there enshrined at heart and the mind — Tarana. And that name opened the doors of fragrance... In a vulnerable moment of solitude the swift-footed wind would cause a surge of excitement through the body, and then all my senses would be taken in thrall by a sentence of Tarana, "I know this much only that I must possess the object I love."

It must be three o'clock at noon that day. As soon as I stepped on the

threshold of my home, I came to know that Tarana was hospitalized. Passing on the news to me my sister-in-law looked at my face momentarily. My father, who was sitting silently on a cot, also shifted his glance onto my face. I put my books on the table standing nearby.

"I am going. I might not get back even at night." Having uttered this much I got out of the room. I tried to, but it was difficult for me to guess the extent to which the level of chemicals — dopamine and Norepinecrin had shot up, or the level of serotonin gone down bringing her almost to a state of insanity leading to her hospitalization. Anyhow, the condition could not be normal. In the pervious week itself, trying to get dissolved into every fibre of my being, she had shown the symptoms of the hard struggle that was undergoing within her. She had said:

"My breaths are breaking like the strings of pasta, and getting dispersed too. They want to see you all the time. Why do you go away Sanyal? Why don't you keep with me in the way as stagnant time lives with me in my room at the time when thinking of you I get dissolved in you."

Her palms were the red-hot coal. Recovering herself she continued. "Sometimes, something like the mist fills up the room, and then lots and lots of things of the world seem to resound in my room. You get lost in the mist and then it feels the string of breath will get snapped...Don't go away please.

Stay by me Sanyal before the strings of breath get dispersed.”

My feet moved fast. She was in the general ward. A couple of some other patients also were there besides her. As small cities have their own sense of history and courtesy, a number of women from her locality were also there around her. As she saw me, a strange delight that overspread itself on her face cannot be depicted in words. The next moment, despite the presence of other people and her own family members also in the general ward, she was in my arms...weak...sickly... She was trying to tell me that she could not speak, her voice was gone. I pressed her in my passionate embrace.... Tarana was crying. Holding her firmly against myself, and moving my fingers round her eyes very lovingly, I was saying:

“Assuredly I am here...your Sanyal... your voice. Didn't you tell me I had the finest voice on earth and that no human voice could be sweeter than mine? At the present time you only have to listen to me, for I am the body, the voice and the soul for my Tarana...your voice. I'll put the music of this voice on your lips, and your lips will be those of the most beautiful girl in the world. When you will converse with me in tune with my voice, the music created there by will be the sweetest one in the universe. But Tarana, today I am only an echo of yours. Feel my voice forgetting yours...”

Tarana gathered up closer. Her hands felt firmer on my back. My shirt was

getting soaked with sweat. As I lifted up her face, she was smiling — a smile that might be seen in a few of the finest masterpieces ever created.

I stayed on the bed next to hers in the general ward that night. It is known to all that the wind had wafted away the whiff of our odorous story through the small city. Now this story will take wings, disperse...but, perhaps, considering all the possibilities of the future I rested reassured.

The Net was not there at the time; mobiles also were not there. Even little common conveniences were far away from the general life. But the magic of love was there in all its profundity, and perhaps deeper than what it today is.

Outside, on the balcony the dance of stars continued in the milky shine of the moon. The young feeling that was there, sixteen years ago, stood revived.

But as any story began in the by-gone days, the stories told by the maternal or paternal grandmother, a magic world would come alive in the wonderstruck eyes of the children lying on their beds in the moon-lit night under the canopy of the blue heavens...There was a king...There was a queen... There was a demon...There was a magician... But, after sixteen years, in the modern world, the story will begin something like...There was a computer. A lake-fairy swam out on the Net. But there was no magic. Swimming on the water the fairy asked you, “Do you like romantic chat?”

### **What relations do you have with her?**

Tarana came in my life. We became a part of the rush of the cosmopolitan. And then we begot a little son too. Despite being a part of the rush of the cosmopolitan, the writer at my heart neither died nor did he go into oblivion, for Tarana did not let it fall into a slumber even for a moment. Her love was neither transient nor false. After our marriage too, to her eyes, her Sanyal was her lover. In my journey from literature to serials, Tarana had sacrificed all that could be called hers. If there had occurred any change in her, it was the physical one; the change that would co-occur as the mother begot a novel form of her love, giving it a separate entity in the world. The impressions of fulfillment in seeing the child grow, changed the girl in her into a woman. But in most of her essentials she remained Tarana only; the same Tarana of sixteen years ago. But one day:

A computer arrived in the house, and the Net connection too. And there began a new story.

Is it that despite your loving some one very much, there remains a void at heart to be filled up?— or, an inconspicuous suppressed desire to be gratified? Is a person seeking to fill up some nooks of his sexual urges with the help of the Net, not a divided personality, despite his having a very loving wife and equally dear children?

The world of the Net was the world of desires that lurked at the hearts of

unsatiated young men, the aged, and the adolescent with a dream to feel satiated. From *Orkut* to High forward, Love Happens...and the Dream Comes to COM, there is a big racket of boys and girls with fictitious names all over the world, participating in the concerns of all — from children to the aged.

But there was a sense of guilt too at my heart. Why should this world get populated for me when Tarana was there? After all, why should we cherish a desire to get acquainted with unknown girls? And that too, not just one but a thousand of them — a vast world of them taking in its fold so many countries, communities, religions; the vast world of the internet.

‘Is it a sin to enjoy the vast pleasures, and satisfaction therefrom, that this magical electronic world offers?’ I ask myself. One part of my self answers, ‘No harm. They all do it’; but the other part cautions me, ‘The satisfaction is false. They leave you more thirsty than otherwise.’

Despite the immeasurable love of home and relations, the new technology has opened up a new fountain head of unlimited love. You can no more be fully satiated with the homely love, for, you begin to feel the need of lots and lots of it. The sex urge, that was erstwhile checked by moral and cultural codes, has attained explosively violent dimensions.... But, perhaps the world besides ugly faces, has normal and very beautiful faces also... In addition to the

evil there is much good too. In addition to the sex there is an urge to know and understand one another. And one day suddenly...

As soon as I opened the Net I received a message on Yahoo screen. And, dear readers, there began this story. The message read: My name is Mahak. Mahak Ahmad. A resident of Lahore. Aged 23. Mother expired when I was five only. Thereafter I fell in the habit of two things— reading literature and telepathy. I read a story written by you. And then had to spend a month looking for your e-mail ID. I don't have much time at my disposal to tell you all. It seems the whole of the system is poised to take a flight, the fastest one. I fell in love with you without any pre-meditations, for I have been touched by your story to the core of my heart. I would love you even if you were eighty years of age. Should you receive my mail, please send a prompt reply. And, yes. I am putting in an ad on Yahoo messenger for you. If possible, please do come in the evening. You know there is a difference of thirty minutes between Pak and Indian timings. Will you come? Yours Mahak.

God knows how many times I read the message. Just kept on reading it. In the world of literature and serials I had received so many letters before this one, had come across so many girls, but this e-mail made me feel flying in the air; as if the blood in my body were running faster... 'Even if you were

eighty years of age...' The eyes went through the line again and again. 'I am 23.' Was there present within me a man with unsatisfied desires? Or, there was a man reaching 40 who felt pampered with the thought he could still be loved by a girl aged 22 or 23... I don't know what the moment was, or what sentiments had taken possession of me, by the time I wrote 'Yours Sanyal', I had sent the e-mail.

That very evening, for the first time, she came on *Yahoo* messenger, and it seemed as if the world, like some fairy land, had opened its doors for me...

When you are in love, your love need not be declared. Its fragrance, like that of civet; makes itself known. The whole of your behaviour shows it. Many a time, presenting myself before Tarana, or while holding her in my arms I felt like a thief. But, as a man, I can tell you truthfully and honestly that at any moment of my love to Tarana, Mahak did never have her presence within me. Does this mean that she was partially present in me while Tarana was wholly; or, was it because of Tarana's love that although Mahak tried to occupy her place in my life she couldn't? Or, remaining tied to a family was a compulsion on me? Or, in this glamorous world of the Net when do we meet physically? Perhaps, this excuse put heart in me, to some extent. But, although it was across the border, Mahak was present physically and of her presence I had read in the Net CAM, was it love? Had,

in any way, Tarana's love faded? And was it because of that I had involuntarily been turned to Mahak? Or, the virility of a man crossing forty had been revived having gained the company of a woman, the woman who not only loved him but wanted to get him with all his physicality.

But, perhaps, it did not become necessary for me to keep the truth hidden from Tarana's eyes. Because, like the jungle storm, one day she came to know the whole truth. She was silent for a while.

'Do you also love her?' Tarana's words were ice-cold.

'I don't know.'

'Perhaps you do...' She took a deep breath... but, the very next moment her eyes regained their age-old love..., the same frenzy, the same passion. Once again she saved me from my entering the slough of guilt. While departing she said only this much, 'How would you have felt had there been any boy in my life?'

'Sanyal!' — passing through the self imposed ordeal I asked myself, 'Sanyal, what will you do? What will you do the next, Sanyal? Time is trying to carry you along with its flow, but there is some strong feeling too as your heart deters you.'

In the evening as I set the Net on, Mahak Ahmad was there on the line. As AOA was on light she wrote, first of all, AOA — the greeting 'Assalam-u-Allaikum'. And then the stream of words

would open the doors of new utopia, and at the moment I was perhaps in some world above the earth, and words of Mahak were nothing but fragrance.

### **From the chat-room**

She asked. She asked a lot. She asked, which of the two — a bird and a dream — is the better one. The answer was 'the bird', because they breathe and they sing of love when it rains, or when it is 'savan': the month of rains and greenery all around. Dreams are unfaithful. They come; they vanish away too.'

She asked, 'Why is it so that star, her favourite star, shining in the sky surpasses the moon?'

She asked, 'Why aren't you a rose, the one that I should pluck and then place by my heart; that you should pervade, like the fragrance, in my breath, my heart...' 'Why aren't you a butterfly, the one that in my forgetfulness, having been maddened by the intoxication of pining for you, I should chase through the beds of roses and having got my finger pricked should write in blood: 'love'.

She asked, 'Why aren't you a rain-drop, the first born of the season, that like a heavenly blessing should descend on my open, uplifted palm; and that I should kiss it and then place it on my head with a dream in my eyes — the dream of getting evaporated, to lose my identity and be one with you, getting lost to the world.'

She asked, 'Before you stepped in my life, the world was not so very beautiful, or I had not perceived its beauty, why?'

She asked, 'Why does a single moment not contain a million of moments within it? And those millions could enclose us and then forget to pass on!'

She said, 'My death, if co-occurred with yours would be much more beautiful than this life is. Do come... taking my trembling hands in yours, close your eyes... for ever... with the sense of my being with you. My body, swaying in the most beautiful intoxication of life; my shining and singing eyes — when they open, they should open on an uninhabited island where there should be none but you, wherever I should cast my eyes.'

And then she asked, 'Listen, why did you get born so very early? — much more early than me... What a cruel revenge is it of yours? Well, you were born alright, but why didn't you wait for me? Why didn't you care for my dreams... Why didn't you hear my steps? For, I was always there in every particle of earth. In so many past, glorious years I was in no other form but fragrance. I was there, my soul. My shadow was there. It was only that you couldn't perceive it.'

She asked, 'Why did you get married before I came? Why didn't you wait for me?'

She asked, 'Who are they that know

you more than I do?... My fragrance should be there within you more than the impression of a flower, fragrance or dream. I should see you more than the wife, the sun or the moon does. I should touch you more than the blowing air does. I should descend upon your being like a pleasant drizzle— the one that ran through life.

She said, 'The palanquin of our lives be placed on the bed of flowers in an isolated island... and your arms like tender branches, be spread over my body...'

And then she said, 'Tell me the truth. Is there any one other than myself, breathing within you this moment?' And after a moment's hesitation asked, 'Your wife?'

Let it be the dead silence or din, each has a poetry of its own. The air bears its own verses, fragrances, rhythm and tunes of love. It was possible that this story would not have taken birth. And, that too for a person like myself, that is, a person devoted to creation, whose unperturbed state of being could be compared to that of the still waters, or the waves on the calm ocean.

But I beg your pardon. The time when this story begins is serious. And it is necessary that the present time and the human rights associated with it, be assigned the function of the witness. And much more necessary is the question arising at the heart of lovers, floating ambitiously over the waves of love, that why they are not birds or animals; and

also, the watchful eyes of the Human Rights to watch if the community of menfolk is, in anyway, thwarting the rights of the womenfolk. But please, excuse me, Here there is no violation of human rights. Contrary to it there enters quietly a woman in the life of a man aged over forty, and leading a quiet married life. The woman was not a wife but a lover aged 22 whose eyes would transform into the rains, dreams and rainbows from time to time. Getting aside, she demanded, 'Grant me my rights.' The answer given was, 'This right belongs to somebody else.' Before she could exclaim 'No', she was as violent as a great river in flood could be.

'No?'

'If it were any other person's right you would not be here. Tell me, why you are here. Why aren't you there with the one who has the right?'

Perhaps she giggled...but she was still asking ... and she asked... 'Why do you feel so very frightened allowing me my own rights? Would I be here if you had lost your right to love? Near you? Near your breath? In your movements...in your restlessness... in your worries...and in your fingers...that while typing on the computer get abstracted from the word to love, and from the word to a passionate persistence... from eyes to the dream, and from lips to the song.'

And then she said, ' Listen to me Flood!...I fly... I swim. On dewy imaginations I weave the webs of waves. Time flies like little butterflies with their

colourful wings around me. Taking them to be the feel of yours I try to grasp them with my hands. Through the long long days I have wings on my body to fly in the rainbow sky. During the night, as I am flying with butterflies with feeling of being with you, I grasp the time with a feel of you, and tying it in a knot, conceal it in the coils of my hair...'

And then she asked, ' Does your son know that some one, besides his mother, has come into your life?'

This was the time when the heart of Venus throbbed, and the planet known as the ninth one in our solar system, Pluto, had been exiled.'

I closed the Net quietly. Anyhow, for a little while kept looking on at the blank screen of the computer. The letters were gone... No, they were shining... and the combinations of them was giving shape to the face of a girl having come from some dreamland. Eyes were lost on the island that was Salan's eyes...All the words on her flower-petal lips were for Salan only...The body trembled. I got up, opened the side-door and began to feel the words typed by Mahak. They seemed to peep from the blue sky across the balcony. I felt as if she were standing in front of me asking, ' How much do you love me?;—the words that were meteor shower; as if an explosion had occurred; as if a shiver ran through the spine...She, too, was looking at him with a smile that expressed pleasure and mystery, both, simultaneously.

'Why don't you speak? Tell me how much you love me.'

'I don't do any.' I typed the few words. She burst out like the torrential rain.

'You do, but you dare not...Well, how deeply does Tarana love you?'

'Very.'

'More than I do?'

'Yes.'

'No. She can't do more.' She seemed reassured.

'No. None can love you more than I do — not even the heart that beats in your body; not even the eyes that would strike up a melodious tune of love just by casting a look ...and...and your lips that play with the name can love you to the extent that I do.'

Mahak stopped. The conflict arising at her heart could be seen on the CAP. A thousand shadows arose and drowned in her eyes...Once again her fingers were on the type. My heart throb took a leap because of a flood of unfamiliar questions arising therein.

She said, 'Well, listen...How much has Tarana touched you? I too wish to get transformed into 'Savan', into the rains, into the wind that should pass touching you...How does Tarana play on your body with her fingers?...Very gently? ...Very quietly? — like the dew drops falling down the leaves? How much has she seen your body? How much has Tarana known...? Isn't it only that much as much

a woman, bound to the role that she has to play as a wife, could know? Isn't it only that much as the pain or hunger...there is at a time in the body...would warrant? Isn't it only that much as much there is the fever of hunger and sex-urge together in the body at a time? But how much does she see you when the two bodies are one? How many dreams can she visualize in every hair on your body? How much can she discover you in the commotions of your breath? Does Tarana see in you, or she doesn't, a new flood in you? — a new song, a new dream and a new flood?...?

Mahak continued to type and it seemed as if I were bathing in the rains of wonder every moment. What is this? Why do I become so very helpless as soon as Mahak comes. The cacti of questions begin to raise their heads from me within... 'You have a son aged twelve,... on the threshold of becoming a full grown youth. She is older by ten years only.'

Do you know the meaning of having crossed forty years of age if you are born in an Indian family?

It means— a grave personality devoted to your family, the one who understood the responsibilities towards children. Having reached this age you emerge a mature person who is looked on by your society with reverence because the society knows this person is an invaluable symbol of our ideal society, is a representative. This person cannot love. And, to him, thinking of any extramarital love is nothing less



than his getting doomed. Here there is no room for any unexpected occurrences.

Even then Mahak had got in through the back door that had remained open, only god knows how. She had come in, and was asking for her full right to love.

### **Tarana and question**

Love is eternal.

The tales of global and geographical changes also are true. In the race of progress and development, there is also a row of mysterious happenings standing along with our worldly race; from miracles to inventions, from the system of downloading a man's brain to the cloning of the human being. In this world of inventions and miracles the heart of Venus ceased to throb long long ago. Only God knows how long ago the heavenly star, that was love, got eliminated from its orbit, got shattered into innumerable number of pieces and was dispersed through the solar system. Plato, the symbol of trust was also exiled by the observers of the celestial bodies. But the splinters of the star — that was love — getting attached and detached with the masses of ice, seemed to be posing questions before mankind, 'why did love get lost? Where did love evaporate? Why did you arrive on the land of hundreds of thousand years ago where there would be no life, the sun sans its fire — just a cool spherical body, and the lifeless earth...? At that time there shone a spark, and emerged out a ray from the star that was love itself.

And after centuries a love story took birth... in the age of inventions, mysteries and the Jurassic... in the form of Tarana, in the form of Sailaan, or in the form of Mahak Ahmad.

'Well, what did you think?' Tarana's eyes were peeping into mine.

'Don't know.'

'There is an honesty in you that you did not fail to disclose to me that you too love Mahak...'

I remained emotionless with my down cast eyes.

'Well, tell me; do you have romantic talks too with her?'

'Yes.'

'Very much?'

'Perhaps.'

'Perhaps you would hold her hand too if she were in front of you...' Tarana's tone was icy.

'Perhaps.'

'No. Not perhaps. You would. Or, possibly more than that...,' she checked herself in the mid-sentence.

'Sanyal!' she continued, 'Didn't you remember me, even for a moment while talking to Mahak?...

Suppose you spent three hours with her in a day, it comes to 90 hours in a month, yes? ...Don't you remember Sanyal...' Tarana held my hands. Swayed by the tender recollections of the by-gone days her eyes were misty. 'Don't you remember? —you used to say a man

who met a woman other than his wife but with the same fervour of love... may be deemed as having dismembered a part of his body. A person who met some other one again and again, is as good as the one who has dismembered all his body parts. Didn't you say that? And you also said how such a person can take his wife or his children in his arms if he has already lost his limbs.' Tarana looked at him, smiled, 'I hope you are intact Sanyal, for me and my children...'

At my heart, my own shriek, smeared with blood, lay loaded with slabs of ice. In a moment, fighting against my own desperation, I took a decision.

'That's the truth of the Net, not of the body...'

'Oh...,' Tarana laughed out amiably.

'They all Net, Where is the person who doesn't do?'

'And people don't share their experiences with their wives even.'

'I don't know the people, my love. I know Sanyal only...' There was not the least resentment in Tarana's voice. 'You said that was the truth of the Net. Had you had romantic chat with her?'

'Yes.'

'Took her hand in yours?'

'Yes.'

'Kiss...?'

'Perhaps.'

'Not perhaps; say 'yes'.'

'Yes.'

'On the lips?'

'Yes...'

'Well, let it be on the lips, the eyes... or as you like... for it is not easy to put into words how intense love is at a given moment, ... but suppose you were before her ... would you do all that Sanyal?'

'But the condition is, if I were before her...'

'You would turn into a 'Tsunami. Isn't it? Don't get frightened Sanyal. Sometimes I feel like talking about petty things. Yesterday I kept thinking for a long time. After all where had I blundered? Where did I leave a void within you in the past sixteen years? Where Sanyal? Tell me. But don't think I'll hinder you. I'll just try to make you understand... for I have loved you. I have loved you intensely. It went all through my tender age. I won't keep you from .... I will convince myself that my luck had only this much for me in store.... Where love falls under compulsion, is restrained, doesn't remain love any longer... selfishness comes in there...'

'Then...?'

'Tell me what you have thought about...'

My words got stuck to my throat. 'Mahak wants to marry me...'

'So...'

'She says she will come to India...'

'Ask her to come.' Tarana took my hands in hers gently. 'Ask Mahak to come.'

'And you...?'

Tarana smiled mildly. 'You know your Tarana. Never liked divisions ever since my childhood... placing Mahak's hand in yours, I'll quit quietly'. She turned away her face.

I felt ponderous thunderclaps operating at my heart. And during the moments that followed, there came before my eyes every aspect of Tarana's beautiful face, her adornments — the sixteen year old Tarana. I felt, it was easy to slip into make-believe world, but very difficult to tread on the stony path of reality. While I was lost in my dreamy reflections. I felt as if I heard the soft musical sound of Tarana's anklet with bells, and in an instant, there was Tarana and Tarana only in my eyes, saying... 'Then, do call her...' I don't know the reason why in the history of tales, till now, the wife is not the heroine. How is it that only the second or the third woman that comes in the life of a man is the heroine? Is it because offering her springs and dreams to her husband through the years of her youth, she gets lost somewhere? But, actually, having had her share in the history of the pleasures and pains of the household, she, in all her splendour, stands on the pedestal of the heroine supreme, having been observed and weighed every moment. She is the fairy of the flowers. What is needed is the eyes that should

recognize this flower-fairy. I was not in any sort of doubts. Detached from the waterfalls and rains of love, I was trying to study all the colours of this flower-fairy. And on that day, perhaps, my thoughts and sentiments reached Mahak. She asked me for the last time:

'Tell me. Should I come to Delhi? I shall not be a burden on you, Sanyal, not even financially. I need your company only, the feel of your presence only. Yes or no, I demand your answer this very moment.'

There was no echo within me, neither that of a fire-work nor that of a blast. Giving much thought to it, I typed quietly, 'No.'

Mahak signed out. She didn't meet again. Moments rolled on to cover months, unawares. Perhaps five months passed.

### **To die in your town**

And after the five months—

Perhaps, this was the time when I was alarmed to see a meteor turn into a long line of brightness to get lost only. But, perhaps, such a void gives birth to an elegy. Or, such a love, once again, gives to the world such a masterpiece as the Taj Mahal. But perhaps, at that time I had no idea that the visualization of such images as an elegiac composition or the Taj Mahal by seeing a shooting star could disturb me to such an extent in the future.

Tarana would ask, 'you forgot her. No?'

‘Perhaps.’

‘Should she really have come, then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You are telling a lie...’ Her eyes would grow mischievous by the touch of love. ‘Had she come you wouldn’t have been able to exercise any control on yourself.’

‘I can’t say.’

‘Why does it happen so? When everything is going on smoothly in life, there enters some one quietly?’ She hesitated momentarily and then added, ‘There was no shortfall anywhere, in any form. Perhaps, we had not left anywhere any void, even such a one as could be natural in the life of a married couple, like an unattended door, or a gap through which any one could jump in to reach you. But, perhaps, a life that has been granted for once only...’

There is a free sheet of paper also. A person feels no guilt or remorse writing the name of any other person on it. Because it is the most exclusive road lying in between the person and his soul, the road that your wife and your children are not allowed to walk along.

Tarana turned to him. “Well, suppose she should come suddenly and stand before you, then? What will you do Sanyal? Will you deny her? Will you ask her to turn back? Or, say, that you have no relations with her. Or, ... tell me.’

So many missiles continued to be shot into the sky, simultaneously...

“Listen to what the flute says.

It complains of our separation”

(From the verses of  
Maulana Roomi)

It was a morning as usual. But, perhaps, not quite as usual. It couldn’t be as usual as other mornings for Sanyal in particular. Just a night ago there was a *Mahal ke kho jane ka tazkera*. Everything was normal a night ago. After high waves in the ocean there were deep whirlpools but there was quiet after it. The waves were calm. And suddenly on that bright morning so many stones had been hurled into the water, and so many webs of the waves were formed in the river.

A knock at the door at 7 in the morning.

The door bell seemed to have brought in an unexpected storm. The boy who opened the door was looking wonderfully at the woman standing before him. Dusky face, sky-blue kameez and a salwar matching in colour. A dupatta hanging down the shoulders.

‘You are Asif, aren’t you?’

And as Tarana came, she embraced her and cried as a sister would.

‘And you are Tarana...? I am Mahak. From Pakistan. Came last night. Where is Sanyal?’

The room seemed to have been caught by a tremendous earthquake. The son, nonplussed, looked at her. Tarana’s eyes still innocent, or concealing their truth were looking at her. As I came out the

two impatient eyes were transformed into the eyes of a stone image that emerges out in mystery stories. She was pointing towards me with her finger. Words were lost to her. The feelings or sentiments had transformed the face and the body into a book, such as no human soul had been able to behold as yet...

The voice of Mahak trembled. 'Tarana, could the two of us be in seclusion for two minutes...Could we talk?

The son, somewhat frightened, was in his mother's arms. Tarana, smiling vaguely, seemed to be saying... 'O, yes; why not?'

But, perhaps, Tarana was not able to look into my eyes. Or, I could not muster up the courage to look at Tarana or the son. When and how she came and stood close to me, I couldn't perceive.

'Which room is yours?' Her voice was cool. To my mind the fragrance from Pakistani garments was not different from the Indian ones.

The room was transformed into an object quite strange to the world. Deep within me there rose the waves of fire that seemed to burn my very existence, trying to turn everything to ashes. The words were lost, disappeared into a channel or a cave. It was difficult to conjure up my thoughts about my son or Tarana standing outside the room. A cold wave had taken the room in its folds.

She was touching me : every joint of the finger, the nails, my clothes, my

body, my soul, or the soul of my souls.

'You are Sanyal. No? How can I believe myself. No. I can't be so very fortunate. You...so close...so very ...close... No. Don't stop me... let me touch you. These are your fingers...these your garments...I can see you, touch you. I am so close to you and... how is it that I am still alive... seeing you.. Sanyal? Would that death capture me, this very instant while I am seeing, feeling and living the thought of you. You never thought that Mahak could come here too. Isn't it? — To your country, to your city, into your house. In the frenzy of my breaths, stealthily, I had made an enclosure and put you therein. I never gave a thought to the inconvenience you may incur by this act of mine. Aren't you all right?... Why don't you speak Sanyal?

'How did you come?' came in a low tone, as some voice had resounded the valley of *Kakeshiyan* mountains, as all the freshness of the air carried along with the blood and circulating through the body had begun to inaudibly call out her name, forgetting all the things in the world...

'Sponsored by the university a group of twenty, boys and girls, has come to visit the ancient monuments and buildings in Delhi. We arrived here last night. Every moment of the night was transformed into a breathing portrait of your name. The whole night I was in the state of worshipping you and in the morning as the first ray of the sun touched the earth, I concluded my

prayers with the final bow and without telling any body...'

'Didn't you tell anybody?'

'No.'

'Suppose someone set out in search of you.'

This was the first shock of the earthquake. Innocently, she was still touching my fingers. 'Hina knows about you, but not much.'

'Who is Hina?'

'A friend of mine....,' she spoke gently. 'This morning at ten we have to report to the police headquarters just to observe some formalities. But I am quite unable to go.' She was shuddering. Her eyes were closed. 'I want to absorb within myself the feel of your presence.' And then she added in a very low voice, 'The purpose of my having opened my eyes in the world will have been fulfilled...'

Like a child she turned towards me, and then she began to investigate the things in the room. 'Isn't this your bed? You must be there in the creases of the sheet, isn't it Sanyal? They bear your touches of the private hours too. I need have all the feel of your touches. Speak to me; won't you?'

She promptly advanced and lay down on the bed. For a moment she closed her eyes... then got up... adjusted her dupatta. She was laughing. No; she was crying. 'Well, I visited my home too. Lay in bed too, saw my room also. Make me stay here with you please. Don't let me go..'

Somewhere, far away, the tune of Maulana Roomi's flute was there in the air, 'Listen to what the flute says...' The flute had turned these moments into disastrous moments. My face was transformed into a stone image. Thinking of Tarana and the son outside, I felt myself to be overcast by the dark clouds of misgivings; and Mahak with her eyes almost closed, resting her head on my chest, was lost in some alien world...perhaps I was trembling. As I gently reached my trembling hand onto her back, she seemed to get lost into my chest, my breaths. But misgivings were there, holding their question-spears, 'If Mahak did not depart?... How should I ask Mahak to go? Her not going back may create a disastrous scene. The matter is concerned with a girl, come from Pakistan, and now missing. And, then?'

The recollection of so many stories, ranging from terrorist activities to suicide bombing, deeply disturbed me during those eternal seconds. But, probably, it was not possible to tell anything to Mahak. And, the fact is — I did not want that Mahak should separate herself from my body. Her love, elevating itself from just an intoxication to the level of worship, was getting dissolved into my very existence. And then time came to a stand still... In a flash Mahak stood apart from me, turned to me with a stream of tears running through her stony eyes.

'I am going away. I'll trouble you no more. I can't even see my love worried.'

But it was necessary to see you once, to touch you, to preserve the feel of your touch at my heart.'

Her face bore a strange smile — 'Don't ask me to stay... And yes, don't have a misconception that I shall get back to Pakistan.' She smiled gently, 'If I can't live in your city, I can die here at least.'

Coming forward she pressed her hot lips on mine, and then swiftly got out of the room. And before I was able to comprehend anything, I felt the earth shake under my feet. The notes of the flute were nearer...

'Since you have made me drunk, don't impose confines on me. Codes of religion are not operative on the insane.'

(A verse from Maulana Roomi)

It seemed as if she had left her everlasting 'presence' in the room. She seemed to be breathing still on the bed, in the garments, on every joint in the finger. I was shivering all through. Her departing words still rang in my ears:

'I may not live in your city,  
But I can die here, at least.'

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Musharraf Alam Zauqui describes himself as an obsessive, compulsive writer in Hindi and Urdu. He has written numerous short stories and a novel 'bayaan' which centres round the tragedy of the Babri Masjid's fall. He is also involved with television and cinema. He lives in Delhi.

Shyamji Mishra, a teacher by profession, translates from Hindi to English.

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## THE MISTRESS OF PHOOLPUR

Pratyaksha

Translated by  
The Author

She squatted down. Her saari crushed between her thighs and calves. Her feet were very fair, broad with small fingers. The nails were cut deep and short and there was a broad band of aalta<sup>1</sup> along the soles miming the strap of a slipper with a three leaf clover in the centre, then two straight lines and at the end three red dots, dot in the centre announcing the completion of the aalta design.

Before she arrived the women present there, hummed

- Oh! who does she deck herself for ? Her husband has left her, gone, God knows when, where?

The humming caught from one end to the other, slithering like a snake before disappearing.

- If it had been any other woman ... Misraaen is a stone hearted woman, see how she laughs all the time.

All eyes widened in disbelief. The women pulled their pallus over their head, held it in place between their teeth and smothered their low laughs. Before any other juicy revelation could occur, Misraaen arrived and immediately the gossip changed course.

- Hey Nanku, hey lad, come give me the basket. Now, you can go, sit in the shade there.

Nanku after handing over the basket went towards the shade



to play marbles and after sometime slipped into slumber.

From the basket today, came out crochette. White fine lace, God knows how many meters. The women assessed the weight of the lace by holding the bundle in their hands and their praise rose in the air like a song.

In winters the women would knit sweaters with colored wool and needles, in summer it would be U-pin and crochette. Every winter Misraeen would make innumerable sweaters, when one could see that there was no one at home to wear them. She had woven meters and meters of lace, dozens and dozens of pillow covers, made needlework designs on bed covers, cross stitch on matty tablecloths, satin stitch and lazy daizy dainty tiny flowers, curving creepers on saree borders, smiling ducks and chicks on children's smocks.

The faster their hands moved over the crochette needle, faster their gossip worked itself into a juicy frenzy. The women would touch her saree, give envious sighs over her corset blouse with puffed sleeve. It was the tailor who lived in the city away from their small town who could stitch such stylish blouses. Phulwaria Misraeen would admit with pride that the tailor charged twenty rupees more for the stylish blouse over the ordinary one. She would take out the paandaan and cut the betelnut into delicate slivers. Then the lime, kattha and the delicious aromatic spices. Every mouthful of the betel would spice up

the gossip. The cackle of women would double up in malicious laughter. They would widen their eyes in disbelief. A small germ of a gossip would be built up. Something would be added and removed. The things hidden deep inside the stomach would arise and ferment and become sour. In that hour or so, in fact, they would discuss the whole world, the world that they were aware of and thus energized they would trudge back home. It would be the time for their children to come back from school. Their husbands who worked as insignificant clerks in this small town, who traded wares, and attended courts as petty munsifs and peshkaars, returned home in the dusky twilight, burdened with baskets of vegetables and their day long tiredness and transformed themselves effortlessly into monarchs immediately upon setting foot inside their homes. Their women would then stand on their toes pandering to their needs as if in awe of their nobler duty of earning the bread for their families.

Phulwaria though didn't have any husband. Meaning now. No, no, even this is not correct. She had had someone tagged as husband. Only now, he had disappeared in some godaweful corner of the world and Phulwaria had no awareness of his whereabouts.

- Re Nanku, come!

She would hand over the basket to Nanku, take care of her purse and get up. The group would disassemble. Her white spiky clean laced petticoat would

show a bit underneath her flower printed saari. The clean white bra strap would peep from the deep neck of her blouse. Not like others who wore beautiful saaris but the underclothes would be so dirty, the edges so filthy with dirt and grime that you could almost puke.

Nanku would run ahead like a little sahib in his old shoes. Near the corner betelshop, the loafers of the town would be gathered in lazy groups. "Puncture is made here". The signboard boasted. And underneath the board, wearing a checked lungi and kurta, the 'mustachio-ed' guy presided over the lumpen crowd. Every time he saw Phulwaria pass by he would start singing without fail.

- 'badan pe sitare lapete hue.. ai jaane tamanna kidhar jaa rahi ho' (where do you go the love of my yearnings, wearing all these stars on your body)

Phulwaria would pull the pallu over her head primly, hold it in place by clenching the edge between her teeth and begin to increase her pace. But if a naughty wind swept away her pallu at that very instant, if not the whole world then at least the mustachio-ed guy could see that the song brought a smile that hovered on her face. But sadly it had been years since any such naughty wind blew across the lanes of that small dusty town. So the mustachio-ed completed the opening stanza of the song, then before Phulwaria disappeared completely from his vision, finished the last lines. Then, with the pride of having done some noble work to satisfaction

proceeded with scolding the lads repairing the punctures before lolling down lazily on the bench. In the meantime the boy from the nearby dhaba, showing all his teeth in glee, arrived punctually, carrying a wire mesh basket holding six glasses of strong special spiced tea. By the time the lads would finish tea, Phulwaria would be reaching home.

In the outer portion of her home was a provision store and next to it, covered by an asbestos sheet was a shed. In front of the shed a board displayed in bold letters

"Flour is milled here".

So many times she had thought to get the sign board corrected, to replace flour with wheat, but these small chores just eluded getting done. Beneath this board there was a smaller hard board displaying the milling rates of wheat, black gram, pulses etc. Phulwaria and her father in law took turns to run the provision shop. The milling work was taken care of by Ajmeri.

Ajmeri's story was also strange. Hamidan and Mukhtar had a good income. Cows, hens, ducks and some farms too. By the grace of God, the crops tilled were abundant. It had been long years since they married but Hamidan's womb remained barren. The cows would bear calves, the first milk would be distributed as per custom in the neighbourhood. The hens and ducks would produce their chicks and the courtyard would fill with tiny wool balls of cloud. Even a handfull

of seeds thrown casually in the wet soil of the courtyard would flower into sturdy plants. But her body remained dry, barren and nothing sprang out of her body, not a seed not a flower.

Her sister who lived in Ajmer, asked her to come, pay obeisance at the Dargah. The Peer would fulfill all wishes. Hamidan stayed there for a month. While returning she fell sick. So much nausea, so much vomiting. Her head reeled. By the time, she reached home she was drained of all energy.

Nadiman's husband was the local hakim. She sent for some yunani medicine but nothing helped. Her health took a turn for the worse. Even a seasoning of asafoetida, normally used in cooking, would induce a sense of intense panic in her. The mutton, she cooked turned into ash and Mukhtar who never complained about anything would suddenly rise up in anger,

"What bibi? The mutton you cook is like weeds and grass, no taste at all."

The plates would remain untouched and fleas would hover over the leftovers in hungry swarms.

The other day she had gone to Nadiman's place to collect the medicine and the sight of fried papad filled her mouth with an unexpected burst of saliva. Swallowing her sudden greed she asked,

"Baji, the papad looks delicious."

Why I had got it from your house only sometime back.

She ate one, then another. Ten, one by one. Nadiman had seen all her life, children being conceived and pregnancies being carried to full term, infants being born, as a routine way of life ever since her childhood. But, here was a barren land of twelve years. She hesitated in saying anything premature. A sense of apprehension kept her mute.

After a month, the situation became so critical that Hamidan would go a little bit berserk even at the sight of the kitchen stove clay. The edges of her tinselled laced dupatta would be constantly soiled by the smoky clay kept safe in the folds of the knots for any such heart wrenching yearnings. The smoke filled taste of burnt stove clay held such a mystery of unexplained hankerings.

For instance, the other day she had gone to buy some provisions and nearby, next to a bench, Badku's mother had set up her temporary three stove eatery. Since morning a huge kettle would be boiling merrily over the fire. Heaps of boiled rice, cooked pulses and fried potatoes with roughly cut thick slices of onion and green chillies adorned the shop. The rice would rise in a sloped cairn on a shiney brass platter. With all available artistry summoned to her disposal, the four fat slices of onion and then a curved beak of a huge fat red green chilli would declare with great pride the wonderfully delicious wholesomeness of this simple meal.

This sight aroused such an intense longing of hunger in her throat. It was

like a snake uncoiling itself from the pit of her stomach with a lightning speed and lodging deep inside her chest. Her whole body shivered with yearning, with hunger, with anticipation. She clasped tightly, the Peer baba's talisman, threaded with black thread around her throat, and ran back home. She ate yesterday's leftover rice with the help of onion and green chillies with such haste and taste that her whole body settled down in a stupor of satiety. Her very soul rose above her body relishing this stupor.

Lying flat on the cot, looking at the beams supporting the roof, her palms caressed her stomach and suddenly her tummy heaved as if a fist hit her. Her heart stopped a fraction then beat a fast tattoo as realization finally dawned. Her stomach was heaving in light undulations. There was no space for doubt anymore. She held the talisman to her closed eyelids with reverence, thanked Allah and then began cooking a meal, after a long long time for Mukhtar, a meal entirely of his choice.

In the night, sharing a morsel together in the dim yellow light of the lantern, the couple once again thanked the Lord for this long awaited bounty.

Hamidan who had always been slender, started to fill out now. Not only her belly, but her hands, her feet, her face, everything. And as her body swelled, in the same proportion the house and other things around started diminishing. This season the crop failed. Then, the hens began dying one after another. Some

strange epidemic swept across. With great difficulty half a dozen chicks could be saved. Still the long awaited arrival of the child was celebration enough to tide over these small mishaps. Mukhtar asked his aunt to come and take care of Hamidan during her confinement. The aunt was a childless widow. Her eyes rimmed with kohl, her teeth stained with beteljuice and her hooked nose highlighting the huge mole beneath them, all contrived to make her look like an eagle or a sharp eyed falcon. However, inspite of her harsh appearance, she was a kind hearted person and now that she got a place where she could pass the rest of her life in considerable security, she put all her energy and compassion in taking care of Hamidan.

A few months later Ajmeri was born. Since the name had already been decided upon, soon after the child was delivered khala came out and declared to Mukhtar that Ajmeri had come into this world.

Mukhtar, the forever simpleton Mukhtar, was so delirious with happiness that it never even occurred to ask whether the child born was a girl or a boy.

The boy began to grow older and as time passed it became increasingly clear that he neither resembled Mukhtar nor Hamidan. It is said that God has created every person so unique that no two people, in this whole world look alike. But strangely another boy exactly like Ajmeri, roamed the streets of Ajmer with kohl rimmed eyes and skull cap adorned head. And as days passed

Ajmeri's face more and more resembled the boy's in Ajmer. And as the resemblance grew, the dry yellow sand of the far away place crept insidiously into this small eastern village trespassing surreptitiously, creating havoc in a place which was already on the road to evolving into a town. A little bit like a child walking helter-skelter wearing oversize slippers of some one elder. The village would transform into a town when the time ordained but in the meantime Mukhtar Mian fell victim to a debilitating attack of paralysis and took to bed.

By this time, the fertile land had turned into a barren hillock. All the cows and buffaloes had died one by one. Half a dozen hens survived and the eggs laid by them were arranged carefully in the aluminium wire mesh basket, to be sold in the neighbouring houses by Ajmeri. The courtyard would be filled with the droppings of the goats, the torn feathers of the hens and the painful groans of Mukhtar Mian.

Paralysis had affected Mukhtar Mian's face in such a manner that it appeared as if an earthquake had raised one part of the earth. The entire symmetry of the face was disturbed. Half portion of the lip was raised above the other. Saliva constantly dripped from the drooping corner of the lip. With unblinking eyes Mukhtar Mian would look at Ajmeri and compare his face with all his known unknown friends and foes.

Confined to bed, this was the only pastime he indulged in. His health

continued to deteriorate. It was ordained for him to go but like those funny quirks of fate, it was Hamidan who went first, due to a snake bite. She was found near the trees at the backyard pond. She had gone in search of some mushrooms, planning a spicy meal. A bunch of rotten bundle of mushrooms were retrieved from the knots of her dupatta much later by khala.

A few days later Mukhtar Mian followed suit. He went away without knowing for sure whether Ajmeri was his own flesh and blood. The lad roaming the streets of Ajmer was one of the good Lord's strange miracles. God also commits one of those rare errors once in a while. But, this was not known either to Hamidan or Mukhtar or even Ajmeri.

In that haunted ruined dilapidated house, only two people remained now, khala and Ajmeri. The rest of the surviving animals also perished and so did Khala, one night, peacefully in her sleep. So, the untold theme of that house that either the crops, the cows, goats, hens and ducks would flourish or the child borne by Adam and Eve, was reinforced. So in the beginning the crops were rich, the cows and goats and chicks and ducks were a plenty and with them, with this bounty, flourished Mukhtar and Hamidan. Then, Ajmeri arrived and the rest went. The earth swallowed the ruins of the house so greedily and so fast that some termite and wood louse infested broken walls and misshapen roof beams were the only remains of the once proud house.

But, how was Ajmeri to be blamed for all this? Had he ever wanted to set foot in this world?

The night Khala passed away, the same night Ajmeri too disappeared from the village. A week later, he was found fast asleep on the outer verandah of Ramavtar Misir's house in Phoolpur. At the crack of dawn, Misraeen, meaning Phoolwaria saw him for the first time.

Ramavtar Misir was a wrestler type of man. He had a passion for wrestling and for thick creamy milk. Giving ample proof of his wisdom and farsightedness, his father while continuing with the ancestral work of priesthood, had also opened a grocery store. The Phoolpur grocery store. The shop ran efficiently, making a decent income. The religious priestly work was super bumper. Money flowed in the house from all directions.

Ramavtar was the only son. There had been three others earlier but before they could take their first breath, they had departed to the next world. Then after various vows and prayers, innumerable religious rituals to appease the deities, Ramavtar was born, a boon from the Gods. And, after him as if the dam broke and in quick succession, a girl Savitri followed, then the twins Rajju and Bijju and another, Binnu and Mannu. But, again, the hardy survivors were only two, Ramavtar and Rajju. Maybe some serious lapse had occurred while performing the rituals, so thought Misraeen, the first.

As Ramavtar continued to grow into a handsome youth, Misraeen felt a pride rise in her chest. And as Rajju grew, it also simultaneously became increasingly clear that, however, old Rajju grew he would ultimately remain the six year old Rajju only.

Clasping Rajju's sorrow like a bundle, tight inside her chest, the first Misraeen departed untimely from this world.

Who would look after the household now? There were only two options. Either Misir marries for the second time or Ramavtar gets married.

Ramavtar's penchant for wrestling, his participation in them, his being a devotee of Lord Hanuman, his emphasis on celibacy, all these factors pointed towards the prudence of tying him down by matrimony. This despite the secret yearning of the elder Misir for a renewal of marital bliss through second marriage. So when the mediator brought Phulwaria's horoscope, the similarity of the girl's name and the name of the grocery store indicated a divine intervention and Misir immediately gave consent for the marriage. Misir had prepared himself for spending considerable energy over persuading his son for marriage but contrary to this, not only Ramavtar abashedly agreed immediately but also began to prepare for the forthcoming ceremony and specially for the wedding night by eating every morning almonds and nuts soaked overnight. The myrtyredom of forsaking a second chance of marital bliss going waste disjointed

the equanimity of Misir but nothing could be done now. So, he began preparing for the wedding and a month later, realizing the delicate situation of a homestead without a housewife, the bride's family arranged for the 'gauna' immediately after the marriage and thus Phulwaria of Khusrupur came to Phoolpur as Ramavtar's newly wedded wife.

The wedding night came and Ramavtar Misir lost his senses at the sight of his pale, fair as a banana stem, wife. He was in such a condition that a woman of even very average looks would have pleased him. His yearning for a wife was so intense that nothing, neither looks nor behaviour, nor attributes, that is lack of them would have come into his way. But, to his amazement the new wife's doe eyed beauty made him delirious. From beneath the border of the saree peeped her flat broad fair feet. The sight of feet evoked such a thrill of anticipation which even a slender shapely feet would not have. The hint of her rounded graceful arms was killing him.

In front of him was his woman, his newly wedded wife sitting hunched up in bridal finery and here was Ramavtar's well nourished wrestler's body, his manic delirium, his restless impatience, his ardor, his madness, his passion and his amateurish ignorance. He lunged over his wife, his rounded wife, his ripe as a fruit, fair as a flower wife. Phulwaria was sitting coyly under her veil, a little abashed but filled with strange yearnings.

She had witnessed many such wedding night scenes in the only cinema hall of Khusrupur with her mother and sister in law. Her sister in law had loaded her with many naughty wedding night tips, her married friends had whispered many juicy details but nothing had prepared her for this attack. Her husband's rough amorous advances filled her with a momentary panic. Then, a fierce pain broke into her body. A surge of nausea rose high from within, bringing along with it a shrill scream. Ramavtar clasped her mouth, stifled her scream with his huge calloused palms and fulfilled himself. Two sharp teeth marks on his palm, however, bore witness to this physical intrusion.

In his amateurish awkwardness and ignorance, misguided by his friends, Ramavtar lost the tender connection with his wife. And after that night whenever he came near her, she became stiff as a log. Ramavtar was in reality a soft hearted person and any physical coercion and force was not in his inherent nature. He gradually began to withdraw from her. During that time, a Swamiji had arrived in the town. It was said that Ramavtar could be seen in the Swamiji's encampment day and night paying homage to him with all his heart.

It is hearsay that Swamiji asked him to remain away from female contact. Ramavtar placed himself completely in Swamiji's hands. Swamiji's fingers caressed his head. The next day, the encampment was disbanded. Ever since

then no body ever saw Ramavtar in Phoolpur.

After being abandoned by her husband, Phulwaria turned her attention towards her home. She began to look after the household, to look after the fifteen year old Rajju who was mentally only six year old, to look after her father in law and to look after the Phoolpur Grocery store. Not only she handled all these but also handled them well. And when during those days the vagabond Ajmeri landed up, she took good care of him as well.

Rajju's hair would be oiled daily and Phulwaria would make two tight plaits, pulling all the hair back tightly and tie the ends with red ribbon bow. Rajju adored red colour. The plaits would be folded, wound up above the ears in a tight wreath round the head and finally the ribbon would end up in a flowered bow. Rajju would look at herself in the small mirror held in her hands, make happy faces, laugh and simper and generally be happy while her hair was being made up thus. Rajju liked her sister in law. She liked her because once in a while bhaujai<sup>2</sup> would hand over her vanity case to her and Rajju could spend hours playing with bangles and bindis. Phulwaria had stitched dark coloured salwar kurtas for Rajju. During her menstrual periods, Rajju had no sense to take care of herself. Despite all care she would stain clothes and to prevent this, Phoolwaria invented a way. She would not let Rajju out of house during

those five days. To keep her occupied indoors, she would woo Rajju with small dolls, tiny utensils, lace, trinkets, colored marbles.

The moot point was that Misraeen second took better care of Rajju than even Misareen, first who was Rajju's mother. On the other hand, Misir had suddenly aged after the departure of his son. His face with a two day black and white stubble, looked hollow and sick. The broken front teeth also added to the emaciated look. When he opened his mouth to talk the air would pass through with a hiss. He was gradually losing his appetite, partly because of his son and partly because of the broken teeth. He would eat sloppily a few rotis soaked in milk in a big brass bowl, and sit languidly in the shop. It was his duty to take care of the shop in the morning. Then, the sales would be slow. After three in the afternoon, when Phulwaria took charge the sales would pick up and become so brisk that the income poured in much more than in earlier years.

Ajmeri lived in the small room behind the milling shed. He had grown into a sturdy young man by now. He would take care of the milling work and keep an eye on Phulwaria who sat in the shop. He would often declare boldly, I am the boss!

So, for all practical purpose life without Ramavtar was not too tough. Phulwaria was still ripe and her youth was at its peak. The loafers of the



neighbourhood heaved a lustfull sigh at her sight, passed frivolous provocative comments. Not paying any attention to all this, Phulwaria would take care to get ready, meet her friends, have a good time. When sometimes during the long lonely hours of night, the thought of Ramavtar ever came into her mind, her face would burn at the humiliation of that fateful night, at the memory of her sharp teeth marks on his palms. But despite this sometimes, during the hot humid nights, lying flat on her back, she would remove her aanchal and some caterpillar crawled below her navel. The lustful comments of street loafers caressed her body, the song which the mustachio-ed sang beat a drum beat on her chest. During these long hot yearful nights, she stayed awake craving for satisfaction of her body like a female snake shedding her skin.

And during the passage of such hot cold nights, one day an accident took place, as if destined to be so. It had to happen and so it happened. The destiny which everyone foreknew. And once again, the medium for this happening was Phulwaria just as she was for the depature of Ramavtar. It so happened that for Rajju it was the time of the month when she was not allowed to go out. The same was followed this month too. But this time for no rhyme or reason, Rajju was not the quiet Rajju, the obedient Rajju, the adorable sister in law of a loving bhaabhi. What made her broode, no body knew. She ventured out, came

back in. A woman from the house nextdoor, caught hold of her and brought her back. Her clothes were soiled, her salwar stained, her kurta dirty. She was admonished. In the evening, she disappeared once again. And this time, she so disappeared that two torturous days passed without any sign of her. Elder Misir went berserk with grief. Phoolwaria cried her eyes red. Atlast, the police was informed. People gossiped, they expressed grief, bitched about, looked down upon Phulwaria, questioned her handling, her intentions. In short, did everything that others do. But, nothing righted the wrong and the vanished girl remained lost in some unfathomable invisible realms. Two days passed and then her body was discovered. It was said that something terribly bad had been done to her. That, her body was naked and that most likely it was the work of someone known.

Whatever happened was, however, too terrible to forget. Once upon a time, the yellow fine dust of the sand had creeped in Ajmeri's house. Now, it happened in Phoolpur. The Phoolpur grocery store came on the verge of closure. It was not as if people did not come to the shop for provisions. People came even now but Misir, who had become the aged Misir now became the crazy old Misir. He would constantly whisper loose insane things to himself, weigh the provisions for the customers all wrong and chatter incessantly meaningless things to the four walls of the shop.

Phulwaria, on the other hand, stopped moving out of the house. When this stopped, the lustful songs and lewd comments from the good for nothing motley crowd too stopped. And when all this stopped, her life itself stopped. In the strange oppressive loneliness of the house, lying all alone beneath the slow moving fan, she felt as if her life was over. She did not feel like sitting in the shop. It was not because she was so fond of Rajju, but it was because she had seen her dead face. And now, whenever she looked at herself in the mirror while combing her hair or applying bindi, Rajju's poor little broken dead face loomed over hers, throwing her in an unimaginable state of terror. A yearning for pushing her face close to a man's chest, hit her.

Looking at her woebegone lost face, Ajmeri would stare at her hard. His muscles shivered and his eyes closed thin and sharp into slits. The dreams which had filled his nights these past months began to take concrete shape and colour. He craved to bury his head deep into the ripe bosom of Phulwaria, to fill his nostrils with her wild fruit smell, to become tipsy with the raw local wine. He waited for the right time. He waited for the dream to become real, the dream of replacing the old board of Phoolpur grocery shop with bright marigold decorated board of Ajmeri Phoolwaria provision store, of sitting in the shop with Phoolwaria like a king with his consort.

But, how could there be any comparison between Phulwaria and Ajmeri? Phulwaria Misraeen, who was a Brahmin woman, who was the owner of Phoolpur grocery store, who was neither married nor a widow and was the owner of this house and this store. And, where was Ajmeri? Arisen from the effects of the wishes and prayers from the mosque of Ajmer, with neither mother nor father, with neither family nor house. A servant only, a servant always. Still, the fine golden hair on the broad wrists captured Phulwaria's heart. His broad chest, the mole on the black threaded talisman adorned throat made her heart go insane. His masculine smell and line of sweat beat a crazy tattoo in her heart.

The small town called Phoolpur, which in many ways slumbered uncoiled in people's heart and mind like an over fed, satiated fat python in stupor, which hung like a drop of sweat from the brows, neither falling nor remaining, held so in a point of time, trembling and holding, a small town steeped in unconsciouness of awareness, and amidst all this Phulwaria stood at the centre of the most important decision of her life, her hand catching the erratic beat of her heart, her mouth agape at this courage within her, her eyes wide and unseeing. A flutter in time.

Everything stood still. The time stood still. The sky and the earth stood still. As if life itself stood still and with it Phoolpur stood still.

*Paulo Coelho has said that when you know what you want then the whole world conspires with you to achieve it. God knows Phulwaria's dream and Ajmeri's dream were fulfilled or not. Whether Phoolpur saw for the first time a woman forsaken by her husband, get married again or not, whether for the first time a woman sought the company of a much younger man or not, whether for the first time a Brahmin Panditayin sought the pleasure of a Muslim man's company or not, whether for the first time a woman thought of herself, of her physical and emotional needs or not? Such things have happened in other*

*places all the time, but in Phoolpur? No.. this has yet to happen in a place like Phoolpur, which is still held in some timewarp, like a butterfly frozen in a pulse of time.*

*We will laugh, we will go through the newspaper, sip a cup of tea slowly relishing it and be engrossed completely in the humdrum banality of our daily lives. And in this very timeframe, in this very geographical spaceframe, in some other Phoolpur some other Phoolwaria and Ajmeri will stand aghast at their courage, eyes opened wide in awe, held captive in that particular moment waiting... Waiting for the right time.*

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Pratyaksha, born 1963, is working in Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd as Chief Manager Finance, currently based in Gurgaon. Writing stories and poems in Hindi since 2006, published in leading Hindi literary magazines. A short story collection "Jungle ka Jadoo til til" has been published by Jnanpith in February 2008. Has been writing a blog in hindi. Interested in classical music, painting and photography.

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<sup>1</sup> aalta - red paint worn by married women on their feet

<sup>2</sup> bhaujai - sister-in-law

# Poetry

## SIX POEMS

Prayag Shukla

Translated by  
Giridhar Rathi

### In Delhi

Even in Delhi  
Cuckoos call  
Leaves fall  
Ants crawl up the tree.

In Delhi, too  
Sparrows fly  
Squirrels hie  
And red becomes the sky.

Even in Delhi  
Rise the stars.  
Even in Delhi  
The butterfly darts.

These too,  
Yes these too,  
In Delhi.

## **The ways of cooking**

*In memory of poet Raghuvir Sahay*

Several are the ways of cooking,  
Several the dishes,  
And several the tastes of dishes aplenty.  
A dish may still dodge  
The ways of cooking,  
And turn it sweet or sour.  
A miracle this?  
We could even say it's a mystery.

The touch of the perfect cook, of course,  
Does count. Though  
Greater yet is the heart  
That cooks.  
And it's invisible.

The palate can make out  
The way the heart lay  
While the dish was cooked.

And, as for the ingredients,  
They, too, count.  
For whoever heard of a dish  
Without them! Though  
We must know how they are acquired.  
The taste goes the way they are acquired.  
That is: Ingredients,  
The heart,  
The dish,  
And the Ways of Cooking.

### **We were not aware**

Unaware, that we had to meet some day,  
We meet and feel this is how  
It had to be.

We sit together,  
Silent,  
Even restless. We,  
That is, a flight of steps, trees, hills,  
sometimes even the sky and the sun and the terrace,  
and the sounds of the day and the night,  
and myself.  
whenever we meet,  
we meet and feel this is how  
It had to be.

### **The lost thing**

The lost thing is untraceable.  
Its vague resemblance in other things  
and a glimpse in the dark eludes us.  
We even pick and try to weigh up  
a number of other things,  
as we go on looking for the lost thing.  
Years pass, yet the lost thing  
keeps playing hide-and-seek  
in our own homes,  
in the streets.  
And whenever one hears people talk of lost things,  
that one pricks our memory,  
the most.

### **Between one poem and another**

Between my one poem and another  
There is all that  
they could not contain.

You might glimpse it  
in the stillness at dusk,  
in solitude,  
in a friend's letter you received  
after a long break,  
in a dream of the house  
in which you had lived,  
or, in the thick  
of the daily grind.

Sometimes it strikes you numb,  
And at other times  
It leaves you gaping at a tree  
As if to prompt you to go ahead  
And grasp it.

### **As the shadows of evening grow**

As the shadows of evening grow  
along a wall,  
sparrows dangle  
like fruits on a tree.  
You hear a train whistling out.  
The body wakes up  
After a nap in the sun.

Roads, platforms. Buses.  
Small stations.  
Dwellings beneath the bridges.  
Monkeys with the jugglers.  
Maids  
Going home after washing the utensils.  
Tourists emerging slowly  
from the ancient fort.  
Elephants. And the gardens mesmerized.  
Playful noisy kids. Peasants  
In fields. Boats in river.  
Tea stalls.  
Days at home within homes.  
Rising smoke  
The grass  
touching the heart of the earth.  
  
A poem engrossed  
In search of the lost.

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Prayag Shukla, born 1940, is a poet, essayist and an art critic. His notable collections of poetry are 'yeh jo hara hai' and 'yahan kahan thi chhaya'. Has published his literary essays in volumes like 'surgaon banjari', 'sajha samay' and 'ardh viram'. He edits a theatre journal 'rang prasang' for National School of Drama and lives in Noida, U.P.

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## THREE POEMS

Asad Zaidi

Translated by  
Rajesh Kumar Sharma

### Almirah

*(Almari)*

In the upper shelves of the almirah  
there was, as ever, patience.  
And silence too.  
Below, so much lay scattered.  
The things in search of which I had arrived  
in this city,  
I could find no trace of.  
I went on putting –  
on fly leaves of books, inside shirt pockets,  
in the stitch of sweaters –  
my name, the room number, the names of hostels,  
addresses of the houses I had rented,  
hoping for a form to emerge,  
like the termite sensing the presence of wood,  
or like the corpse getting identified by a washerman's marker.  
When you open this almirah,  
the door, somewhat wobbly, lurches to a side.

There is so much that is no longer in memory.

It is no longer here either.

Whatever remains

looks like some dead man's last will.

I understand that the things you gaze long and attentively at begin to return your gaze.

When you have held the scissors for a long time,

you do begin to feel the urge to run them through something.

### **In These Words**

*(In Shabdon Mein)*

There is no more any form in these words.

There was once – might have been.

Mere cold letters they are now

that do not even say what they want.

Time was

when I had written *ox* in these words,

I would think it wasn't any *ox*.

Now it seems to have been an *ox* only.

I used to speak certain truths in these words

- such that it would have been better to pull my hair than speak those truths.

*The Sun shines –*

words of such indication have long since been put out.

Words did not have the longevity of hills.

Many did not have the durability of socks and chappals even.

I used to think that the only way was to speak them,

and I could speak.

## **Sisters**

(Behnen)

we have been reduced to coal said the sisters sinking into sand  
cover us up now if you want we shall stop here you may go

the sisters kept visiting us during day changing appearances  
we had fever in evenings

visiting even more heat upon our burning eyes the sisters would come like  
curses into our delirious raving lives on roads overflowing with traffic  
would hover over our heads like troubles

consoled the sisters would sometimes sit

the sisters stood guard in our wives' dark pregnancies

the sisters would curse the thieves who take us by surprise stealing onions  
in the darkness at the back of hearths

the sisters were pleased to see the possibilities brimming with our happily  
going jobs

the sisters told the tales of fairies and dervishes to children

the sisters brought forests and beasts into their imagination

the sisters augmented what they had not seen

with gradual accretions of their wealth of ignorance.

"if anyone says *this fuel wood will not catch fire* we shall not take it kindly  
what for after all are we girls

how the fuel wood catches fire we know you know

we are fuel wood we girls

we shall give out smoke as long as we are wet

but what can we do about this? we are

the cooking pots of your home, brother father

"mother look we are the cooking pots

our soot will be washed off

if it is not we shall become soot and grow, stuffing flaky tatters into our bodies  
as long as wetness and taste do not go  
we shall dry only at our own pace

“we shall wither we shall make fluttering noises in the stillness of the earth  
in wind-holes on hearths during noons  
we shall beat our bowls  
do you kindly fill our bowls  
water one can drink from drains you our people know  
but grain one cannot find in cattle-dung heaps  
do please fill our bowls

“we shall be as mere spiders in your world  
we shall be spiders  
we shall lie in any forgotten corner of the house with our webs pulled over us  
we shall be spiders of dust-filled corners  
we shall be dust  
we shall be termites in the cracks of doors  
we shall manage to live at the bottoms of boxes  
we shall live on neem and lotus seeds  
we shall chirp like crickets during nights  
propping up the sleep of our people we shall be the crickets.”

we have become mere coal  
    said the sisters sinking into sand  
become mere coal  
    said beaten with shoes  
coal  
    sighing  
the sisters sigh, “we are ashes –  
ashes we are – the dust having risen shall settle on every forehead  
layers of guilt shall cake in your eyes

on your neck a film of oil shall gather,  
just see”

the sisters shall become grime one day  
one day they will be removed from memories washed out with soap  
except from knees and elbows

yet die they will not, but linger for centuries in homes

trampling on the sisters the world passes on  
across life’s creaking bridge  
trying to suppress somehow with downcast faces the screaming horns of families  
and gloating over their blisters

one day when blood will be trickling down our noses  
sinking into the earth  
the saltish bodies of the lost sisters will rise from earth’s folds  
with their anchals dirtied with the mud of toil the sisters will come to stand  
around us  
will want to save us with their dry roughened hands

many years will pass  
so many that we will not be saved.

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Asad Zaidi, born 1952, is a creative writer as well as a journalist. Has been consultant of National Literacy Mission. Recipient of Sanskriti award. Has a number of published works. To name a few– ‘behen aur anya kavitayen’ and ‘kavita ka jivan. He has also edited ‘yeh aisa samay hai’. He lives in Delhi.

Rajesh Kumar Sharma, is professor of English at Punjabi University, Patiala and has translated several important poets. He lives in Patiala.

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# Poetry

## SIX POEMS

Anamika

Trnslated by  
Usha Mishra / Arlene Zide

### Letter Writing Woman

It is said about women that they  
Pen letters ceaselessly, spread over several sessions.  
There is a world within them-  
Collected over centuries.  
Their outpourings inexhaustible, as if bewitched  
By the demon's fabled pigtail.  
And their letters extend interminably,  
Like Draupadi's saree.  
A letter-writing woman is  
Like PC Sarkar's magic.  
A woman has the blessed capacity  
To meditate amidst chaos,  
In a bus, or sitting crouching on a bench at a railway platform,  
She can suddenly shudder and squat  
And picking up a paper cone, news paper, circular  
Can write anything, as  
'I miss you lots, please come over.'

Don't know which little girl comes over and  
Rolls chapattis, so big that it hangs out of the hot plate  
And is quickly kissed by the lolling flames  
In the chest of the night thunders the solitude  
And a shiver resonates  
Of dead leaves and fluttering pages  
As if the *tehiya masan*<sup>1</sup> time says  
'Turn around'  
'Can't you hear it, stupid, turn around and see.'  
Women are not scared  
In relating anything over  
They are not ashamed to accept  
That they bear within them both water and earth  
And both these are sans all beginnings and ends.  
Women write incessantly as a result.  
Earth and water are after all a non-ending letter from God  
Addressed to all...

### **Mother tongue**

Like ancestral jewellery and antique bronze  
Mother treasures my sphinx riddles,  
A few funny moments of my early years  
And some obsolete words of mother tongue  
Mothers don't only nurse babies  
They also nurture urchin words  
Words never ensconced in a thesaurus  
Mothers make languages mother tongues  
And each mother tongue smells of mother's milk  
Mothers conserve mother tongues

Imagine my Hindi without my mum!!  
Often I resolve, to write her a letter as big as the earth  
But the computer lacks Hindi fonts  
I left Hindi in the eighth grade  
And cheerfully adopted  
A language branded with  
'my god', 'hit-shit', 'shut-up', 'yes sir-yes me lord', 'hire and fire', 'thanks',  
'held-up'  
Get out, hello, hi, sorry',  
Language apt for petitions and submissions  
Resume and applications,  
But a letter to mum,  
Needs a language of dreams and memories  
In the no-man's land fenced with yes and no  
The language stood draped in dew,  
Green and elegant  
This language for me, could only be Hindi  
Hindi? Can I handle?  
Mother worked hard on my spellings  
Would now blow her top off  
If I misspelt  
Thanks to feminism, I dare not mix genders  
But words escape me and I chase them  
Like a child chasing a butterfly!!  
Alas, words like horses need to be reared!!!

### **Women**

We were read  
like the torn pages of children's notebooks  
made into cones to hold warm *chanajorgaram*



We were looked at  
the way grumpily you squint at your wristwatch  
after the alarm goes off in the morning.

We were listened to  
distractedly  
the way filmsongs assail your ears  
spilling from cheap cassettes on a crowded bus

They sensed us  
the way you sense the sufferings of a distant relative  
One day we said  
we're human too.  
Read us carefully  
one letter at a time  
*the way after your BA, you'd read a job ad.*

Look at us  
the way, shivering,  
you'd gaze at the flames of a distant fire  
Listen to us  
as you would the unstruck music of the void  
*and understand the way you'd understand a newly-learned Language*

The moment they heard this  
from an invisible branch suspended in limbo  
like a swarm of gnats  
wild rumors went screeching  
"Women without character  
wild vines draining the sap  
from their hosts  
well-fed, bored with affluence

these women  
pointlessly on edge  
indulging in the luxury of writing  
these stories and poems –  
*not even their own*  
They said, amused.  
The rest of the stories dismissed with a wink  
Hey, blessed Fathers  
you blessed men  
spare us  
spare us  
this sort of  
*attention.*

### **Unemployed**

These days I'm reading only ancient scripts  
Can manage to make out even the Harappan script  
Every language is a language of pain  
ever since I understood  
I could read a message even  
in the most obscure of languages  
In my own infinite emptiness  
this is the only thing I've done  
I've learned the tottering notation of music  
in every tone of pain.  
There's a fire in me  
to write something on the pages of the wind  
and then crumple them up and toss them under the broken *charpoy*  
Unfolding these crumpled scraps,

my mother reads them  
and her glasses fog up.  
This is where my fire gets transformed into water.

My bound hands are restless  
they want to do something.  
There's strength in them still.  
Milk, they can draw from the breasts of the mountain  
What if only a mouse turns up  
when you've dug it all up?

My bound hands are rough and cold –  
they've never had the chance to sweep up the sweetness of the earth  
Never has a tattered *dupatta* been held spread out between these hands  
and laughingly begged those berries.

The moon is no longer that pale  
There's a layer of dirt on its yellowness  
it's as grungy as the greyed pages of a miserly *bania's* ledger  
The sunlight slowly fading,  
like the tired, dusty beauty of an unwed elder sister

Hey, butterfly, tell me  
how far is the last sigh from infinite desire.  
This 'should', what kind of a bird is this?  
Has it ever alighted in your courtyard?  
perched on your hand?  
So how can they say  
a bird in hand is worth more  
*than two in the bush?*

Wringing my hands, I often wonder  
are my hands two flints

will they ever trigger fire?  
I never get a wink of sleep  
My life is the chaos at a call-center  
that might close down any moment, who knows?

**“To Be or Not to Be”**

“*My marriage bed is above the noose*” Mirabai  
This much English I learned to understand  
the meaning of this line  
but wish I could’ve learned Englishness well enough  
to tie a knot in a noose, a tie,  
my shoelaces too,  
I can’t even tie ribbons on right  
again and again on my way to school they came undone  
the red ribbons at the end of my braids!  
Really annoyed, my poor brother  
each time he had to tie them back on  
And now when it’s my turn to tie a noose  
it comes loose, opens up  
like the amulet of folksongs.

“To be... or not to be...” Shakespeare reminds us  
It’s a whole ritual, turning your sari  
into a noose on the fan  
It’s not so easy to tie it on  
There’s a thick layer of dust on the fanblades  
Before I hang myself, should I wipe it away with my *anchal*?

“To be dust, or wipe it away, “that’s the question  
Where are Birbal and Vidushak of the Sanskrit plays

The wise fools of Shakespeare, where are they?  
Where is the sky wit of Telani Raman and Gonu Jha?

I met you in dusty folds of the stories my father told me  
Come, get up and see me off!

Come, let's giggle and gossip around the village fire  
Let's light the flames, there's a chill in here

My skin's not enough;  
will they wrap me up –  
my own warm ashes?

Inside my stiff bones burns a slow fire,  
the sweet potatoes on it, will they satisfy my hunger?  
Will lye and phenyl quench my thirst?

“To be or not to be...”

Tired out, both my kids lie sleeping

In the morning, will they be shocked?

The little one can't even comb his hair  
and the big one, even worse

can't tell the right side of a sock from the wrong.

They'll get up, try to wake me up,

“Missed the schoolbus and the milkman gone home”

Everyone has gone back home, shouldn't I?

Strange are the ways of this king's court

One *sepoy* holds me back by the wrists  
while another's ready to banish me forever

Yes, Shakespeare, I understand

Understand this whole rigmarole

of To Be or Not to Be.

### **The 17 Year old Examinee**

Child, when the milk first flows down  
From the mother's breast  
She shivers with milk fever  
That milk isn't very delicious  
But the doctors say –  
    If the child suckles  
    Then the baby will survive all diseases

The taste of first failure is like that –  
Whatever happens, it doesn't matter  
(No dead-ends)  
Whatever you lose, doesn't matter  
There's no full stop in life  
The desire to go beyond desire  
Too is a desire  
The process doesn't stop, the road doesn't break apart  
They twine  
Around your feet like a liana  
And when you come back home and take off your shoes  
There'll be traces of them clinging to your socks  
Sorry about this strange world you've inherited  
Forgive me if you can  
No one actually listens to the sound of flowers bursting open  
No one sees with what skill and patience each petal unfolds  
This is the fruit market, child –  
Fruitful and fruitless  
I wish you could have inherited a world  
Where no one would have an identity divided and torn into different rows  
Every flower is beautiful in its own way

And beauty is beyond competition  
You stay up all night in your chair  
All your work on your desk  
Watching the shrew on its catwalk  
As you doze off you have a nightmare –  
    A shrew with an ounce  
    Of jasmine oil on its head  
    And a buffalo  
Someone's playing a pipe to  
All falling on deaf ears a silk purse for sows...  
And everything out of whack  
And at break of dawn, a truck  
Loaded with bricks.  
When the bricks fall  
*The nightmare comes to an end.*

They make you sit up  
And then you ask:  
    Ma, why this sorrow  
    What is it?  
    What to do with it?

These shriveled breasts of mine are wet,  
Not with milk  
But with sweat  
I'm not Mahamaya  
Nor is he Buddha –  
But the question remains  
    As it is –  
In an old film song  
There ran a line in Italian

*Che Sara, Sara?*

'What will be, will be'

Don't ask what comes next

Whatever happens will happen for the best.

I sing out of tune and he breaks into laughter

"Enough, mama, enough

I remember the rest of it"

This free laughter

In the dead of night

Falls on the leaves like dew

His father, worried about the future

Smiles vaguely in his sleep

This half-smile of his gets the super serious house in a festive mood!

---

Anamika, born 1961, writes poetry and prose. She is recipient of numerous literary awards including the recent Kedar Samman, Saviri Bai Phule Samman, before which she already earned Bharat Bhushan Puraskar, Girija Km. Mathur Samman and Parampara Samman. She teaches English literature at a college in Delhi University.

Arlene Zide, born 1940 is a poet, linguist and translator. She edited and translated Penguin's Book of Indian Women Poets 'In Their Own Voice.' She teaches at Harold Washington College, Chicago, U.S.A.

Usha Mishra is a senior consultant with United Nations who retains her love for good poetry. She lives in London, U.K.

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## SIX POEMS

Dinesh Kumar Shukla

Trnslated by  
The Poet

### A Drum in the Sky

A drum beat  
deep in the sky

Continents adrift  
Mountains rising  
A kite churned  
the liquid of sun

At my defeat he laughed  
And became a serpent  
And crept through the spine of earth  
He hissed – now the richest man

A will of iron  
melted in its own latent-heat

A drum beat  
deep in the sky

Infinite and unfathomable

Was the high-noon  
A creation of Gods  
entangled in the web of pain  
tried to break free in vain,  
Constellations burned,  
Juices oozed from the fruits of hope  
The weaver weaved on  
unconcerned———

A drumming roared in the sky  
In the core of a tear-drop  
exploded a new universe  
The throat was on fire  
Speech in flames and yet  
The voice of water  
reverberated inside everything

The Earth sighed  
And the waves of solid rock  
rolled across mustard fields  
Yellow was the sound  
of high-noon

A drum beat  
deep in the sky

The world was flooded by  
a twilight of resonance  
And you, the half rhythm of my song  
began to form but to fade,  
You the fragrance of the great void  
seeped into everything,

Then everything vanished  
flowing back into void,  
  
As if in a protest  
A neem tree stood alive  
engraved in my memory  
The tree  
sways and sways and sways on  
without a whiff of wind,  
In its luxuriant shade  
the high-noon sweated and slept  
  
A drum beats in my heart and  
the sky reverberates.

**A surge**

Suddenly all.....  
All came to a grinding halt  
Birth  
Death  
Laughter  
The wail.....  
  
The mundane rhythm  
of routine  
drowned by a silence  
so abrupt!  
  
Oh  
  
It was you!  
Now become a moon,

rising behind the fence  
of your nuptial roof

A primordial sound  
surged  
through all the existence.

### **A Licence for Thought**

'Cause knowledge is yours  
So science is yours.....  
'Cause God is yours  
So Satan is yours

Your Ownership!

Mountains of money  
You spent on research,  
So rightly you own  
the rise and fall of sun  
and waning and waxing of moon

Now you are the owner of the air  
of all biosphere.

For sure, without your medicines  
We who commit sins  
Shall soon get our unwieldy populations  
Controlled and thrown in dustbins

The flowers now bloom  
If you please  
At your command thunder  
strikes the disobedient

The faculties of thought  
shall work not  
without a licence from you  
After all thought is also a weapon  
-a gun

Now none is allowed to clean  
his filthy teeth  
with the neem-twig anymore  
No more turmeric shall  
beautify the brides  
because you now own  
all patents  
on neem and turmeric and...so...

Your exalted Ownership!  
What should I say more  
You are now sole lord of the mornings  
with exclusive rights  
on all the nights galore!

### **Shankhapushpi\***

We,  
the two rivers in spate  
rolled towards each other,  
Effortless  
the same sentence  
rolled down from our lips,  
Even the weight of both voices  
was exactly the same  
down to a milli-milligram,

┌  
We laughed  
resigned to the spontaneous symmetries  
of love

Then  
an endless sequence called day  
kept on passing and passing  
in front of us  
Not a single bird or a cloud  
or a kite  
nothing  
nothing appeared on the sky of our hearts

The rising tide of day  
had spent its fury  
on roads of the metropolis  
and ebbed back into the veins  
of the body-politic

Gardeners finished  
first shift of the day  
Four eyes of the fawns  
living in the solitude  
of Nehru Park  
drank to their fill  
the forbidden nectar of a day  
in the life's afternoon

In the shallows of the rocks of love  
a little pool of water  
was still alive with rippling waves  
-the water from a rain of long ago



On the white petals of shankpushpi  
the blue of a clear sky  
Now reflected  
Now faded  
Now shimmered.....

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\*a wild flower

### **The Belly Dancer**

Born in the ruins  
of the city of Bamako  
to the parents  
from the line of dispossessed Kings  
I  
learnt the taste of bone-marrow  
from decaying breasts of my mom.,  
In her fading heart-beats I learnt to recognize  
foot steps of death

I became an addict to life  
while still an infant.

Brought up on royal diet  
of dried grass, cactii, roots and berries  
I learnt to roast and eat the mambas,  
Salt of my blood came from rocks  
Bones formed from the phosphates of Sahara  
O merchant of bone-manures  
Don't drill through me  
with your blind stares

Slavery was abolished  
they say  
aeons ago  
and Africa is free they say  
But I know how to count and read  
O merchants of crude!  
Why is there so much of fire  
in your eyes  
blazing through our world.  
Drowning me in the smoke of cigars  
are you not afraid of  
the revenge of my brothers.

No gazelle can beat me  
in a race of grace  
I dazzle the lightning everyday  
with flashes of my dance  
Like a tigress I can tear you apart  
And yet  
Your blind eyes keep on trying  
to disrobe me  
You perhaps don't put much price on your life  
O merchant of civilizations!

How!  
Tell me how you grew so obstinate!  
Crossing the borders  
one after another  
Ravaging the earth and women alike  
Leering at my pulsating flesh,  
the dancing muscles of a tired belly –



A belly dancing  
to fill the belly,  
My rippling muscles are fishes  
hooked by hunger of death,  
hook thrusting deep with every jerk  
blood spilling  
the dancing stage filled with gore and slush.  
With such delicacies of revulsion  
who else could have an appetite  
excepting you  
O merchant of fire and flesh!

#### **A Scrambled Nocturne**

The night, an ocean of fire-flies  
Submerged in the night we moved  
And crossed the borders of body and soul  
and jumped  
the barbed-fence hidden in a green hedge  
  
We reaped wheat of heaven  
Stole the nectar of the Gods  
Ate the forbidden fruits  
And played  
on the branches of the immortal tree  
  
In the light of the  
burning stars  
We saw 'the Dark' horse  
moving with a regal canter  
Grief wearing a golden crown  
rode the horse in- state

┌

We glimpsed the face  
of the King, the Chief, the Supreme..  
a Kaleidoscope of Deceit,  
We discovered and rediscovered  
The source of king's strength  
hidden as Fear right in our innards

A falcon perched  
On the gloved hands of Power  
tore the flesh of might  
in the night's blood we soaked

Along the wall of the horizon  
the directions scampered  
hiding in blue black cloaks  
trying to escape the marauders

We jumped the bail of time-space  
We broke through the gates of the earth  
We were joined by fellow inmates –  
Chased by a hail of bullets  
fired by guards of the invisible prison

We ran on pavements of freedom  
Along with us ran a thousand eyes  
Leaping and bounding like living marbles  
The eyes-sovereign and free  
from bonds of the body,  
The eyes- full of hopes and visions,  
Children  
ebullient as galaxies  
danced with the dynamics of that night



The milk-bowl of the celestial dome  
was upturned by a Cat  
We saw the Cat smiling  
and hiding behind the moon  
We wanted to feel the time  
there was no time but only our heart beats  
There was no night  
but only a shadow of our being

A shriek pierced the deafness of the age  
People now suffered only from  
personal pain,  
Speech was bereft of nouns  
the verbs all passive  
the language wounded by  
hyphens and dots and dashes—  
Now only the wails and cries  
filled meaning in the words

Eyelids heavy with load  
of nightmares,  
Eyes enclosed us in their cusp  
and rolled down an endless slope...  
Mothers carrying infants  
descending from terrace  
to courtyard,  
A cascade of sweet morning dreams  
A string of little blue lakes  
the eyes of mother earth sparkled  
We floated like lotuse  
In the ocean of an infinite night

A fearless innocence  
swimming in the great deluge

What a night of nights  
woven fine like a fabric of living yarn,  
In that illusive fog  
We saw the omnivorous beast  
of wealth and greed  
At the foot of mountains of grain  
Hunger was gulping down all living beings

We saw killer religions  
Celebrating massacres  
with prayers and thanks giving  
laughing and ullulating  
in orgasmic ecstasies,  
We saw the boat of Manu sinking  
We saw  
mothers praying and  
weeping in silence –  
Illusion and Reality all rolled into one

That moment of difficult truths  
was in a great hurry  
It was turning the earth  
faster and faster like a potter's wheel  
It wanted to create  
one impossible and yet immortal shape  
impossible and yet indelible colours  
impossible but eternal  
matter, life, love, language....

In a ditch nearby  
Death sharpened its knife  
on the rock of darkness  
lay in wait  
taut like a crossed bow  
ready to leap and shoot

Then,  
As if out of nowhere started  
Reverberations of  
sounds yet unheard,  
A procession of reflections of  
things yet unseen,  
A procession of the Unborn  
trying to discover the original seed,  
A wave of uncertain amplitudes -  
A huge ship thrusting ahead  
unhindered—breaking the icebergs  
A tide rose sweeping away the hallucinations  
of a false night

On the rocks in the foaming waters  
the bow was floating broken  
the broken sword  
shone dull at the bottom of the sea  
the anaconda of death  
was lying crushed all along the coast

The first rays had yet to break  
and East was yet to be red  
The first sea-bird awakened by its  
internal impulse

rose in the morning breeze  
and floated away into the east  
to accelerate the sun

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Dinesh Kumar Shukla, born 1950, is a poet and scholar with varied interests. Has published several volumes of poetry, the latest being 'akhar arath' from Bharatiya Jnanpith. Has been honoured with Kedar Samman 2008 for his poetic work 'lal-muniya ki duniya'. He is equally at home with translation. He works at IIFCO and lives in Gurgaon.

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## THE EARTHEN CUP

Asghar Wajahat

Translated by  
Dhiraj Singh

Treeless and barren hills stared at us from both sides. The desolation was so hopeless and complete that even the tufts of grass on these hills had dried up waiting in the sun. The road like an asphalt snake coursed purposefully through this barrenness. It had brought me from Isfahan to Shiraz and now 60 kilometres ahead of me lay the ancient city of Persepolis or Takht-e-Jamshed (literally, Seat of Jamshed) that I was most curious to see. At Shiraz I was told that one could take a '*savari*' (meaning 'ride'; much like the similar Hindi word) taxi to Takht-e-Jamshed. But here a *savari* taxi also meant a full vehicle where each passenger paid an individual fare. This also meant that the ride would be much cheaper than a 'private' taxi. I had come to the bus station in Shiraz in search of a *savari* but was convinced otherwise to take a private taxi by a wily taxi-driver. I was told a *savari* to Takht-e-Jamshed would cost five people 5000 rial each but since I was the only man travelling the driver was expecting to extract four other passenger fares from me. After a journey of over an hour we were at the parking lot of Takht-e-Jamshed. As far as the eye could see, spread the columns of Persepolis, as if it were one big birthday cake leftover from a party.

About 700 years before Christ a tribe that considered itself of Aryan descent laid the foundation of what was to become a mighty empire. An empire that spread from the Indus in the east to the Danube in the west and from the Aral lake in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. In history books these

people were known as the Achaemenids. Not only was their empire a force to reckon with in its own time but it has continued to fascinate generations with its extremely progressive ideas about governance. One of its most important rulers was Darius I (549 to 485 BC) whose human rights charter was in 1971 taken up by the UN to be translated into the languages of member nations and distributed among them. This document was found in the form of cylindrical baked clay tablets. Darius had issued this edit after he had conquered Babylon. It is believed that Darius' human rights charter was even more progressive than the manifesto of the French Revolution (1789-1799). It is interesting to note the personal tone of the Darius edict, one portion begins like this: "...Now I (Darius) who wears the crown of Persia, Babylon and the four directions of the winds and on whose head rests the hand of Ahura Mazda (the God of the Zoroastrians) declare that for as long as I live I and the satraps of my dominion will respect all religions, traditions and ways of life that form part of my vast empire. I will not impose my suzerainty on any kingdom. All people are free to accept my dominion or reject it. Those who reject it I promise not to go to war with them. As long as I wear the crown of Persia, Babylon and the four directions of the winds, I will not let anyone exploit anyone and if that happens I will be on the side of the wronged and punish the wrong-doer. As long as I am Emperor I will ensure that no

land or property is bought without proper remuneration. As long as I am alive I will not allow labour to be misused or go unpaid. On this day I declare that every man is free to choose his own religious path. People of my empire are free to live wherever they wish to and take up whatever profession they choose provided it does not harm another's right to such freedom. No one will be punished for crimes committed by someone related to him by blood or marriage. I also abolish slavery in my dominion and urge my satraps to ensure that the trade of men, women and children for the purpose of slavery is completely stopped... not only in the Empire but through Ahura Mazda's wide world. I also seek His blessing so that I may succeed in delivering all promises I have made in this edict."

About 500 years before the birth of Christ, Darius the Great was of course much ahead of his times running his Empire on a federal system of governance. Satraps or governorates had full rights to determine local, region-specific policy while a laissez faire centre ensured that this bigger vision of humanity and human rights was taken to the corners of earth. The biggest source of treasury income was commercial tax, a considerable part of which went into providing security to travellers on trade routes. Darius also constructed a massive 2500 mile long highway that connected the two far ends of his Empire. According to historians the postal system of that



time was so efficient that messengers would take not more than a fortnight to reach from anywhere to anywhere in the Empire.

But for centuries Darius the Great's capital city of Takht-e-Jamshed lay buried under the rubble of time. It is built on what is now known as Koh-e-Rahmat which translates as the Mountain of Mercy. Between 1931 and 1934 several American universities got together and converted this area into a huge archaeological dig bringing to light the glory of Darius' capital.

The present Iranian dispensation though not too keen about tourism has not been able to do much in reducing the glamour of Takht-e-Jamshed. There is a big tourist centre here as well as other amenities for visitors that flock here from around the world. Not surprising, because the capital of one of history's greatest leaders belongs to the world not just Iran.

Before I'd seen Takht-e-Jamshed I'd often heard how ruins tell the story of their lost greatness; after seeing it I realised I'd had a vision of an epic. One that has on one side a giant colonnade of irregular pillars and on the other equally huge statues carved out of the mountainside.

A long stretch of stairs brought me to the nucleus of this universe of stone. Surrounded by massive columns this was the court of Darius the Great. In its complete form this hall must have been

huge; in comparison the Diwan-e-Aam (Court of Commons) at Delhi's Red Fort seems like a child's playpen. If not more the columns here are at least three times the size of those at the Diwan-e-Aam. In size too the court of Darius is at least 6 to 7 times the size of Shah Jahan's court in Delhi. But what left me wondering was how the acoustics of the hall worked when thousands attended the court... how did Darius or his ministers get themselves heard!

Darius began work on Takht-e-Jamshed known in the ancient Greek world as Persepolis in about 518 BC and it took another hundred years to complete. The Emperor had not merely planned a palace or a fortress here but a seat of imperial power that the world had not seen before. He wanted this place to be a tableau of his Empire's power, glory, wealth and intellectual and aesthetic superiority: an architectural equivalent of his vast and diverse dominion. Darius' dream was only to be completed by his son Xerxes (518-465 BC) whose inscription—"I promise to complete that which my father began"—can still be seen on the walls here.

Above me was an unrelenting sun and before me was stretched a city of ruins that held within its walls many mysteries, many stories. Though the place was cramming with tourists, in the vast expanse of the city they seemed like birdfeed scattered on the ground. In the far distant, some who had scaled the heights of Koh-e-Rahmat to look at

its giant relief statues seemed like ants. Behind the court complex continued a formation of ruins, buildings that once stretched right up till the caves of Koh-e-Rahmat. It is impossible to see all this in a day, especially when the giant reliefs before you beckon with stories of imperial grandeur... of kings and the gods who helped them rule.

A few kilometres away from Takht-e-Jamshed is Naqsh-e-Rustam (literally image of Rustam). Rustam is a Persian hero who is immortalised in the 10<sup>th</sup> century epic, *Shahnameh*. Firdausi's *Shahnameh* is a work of great mythic imagination and humanity. Rustam is a brave warrior and a romantic, a dutiful father and a character in a tragedy that rivals in pathos its Greek predecessors. Naqsh-e-Rustam is a flat stretch of land on the hill. It is believed Rustam performed a dance here which is why the hill flattened to even ground. The hill of Naqsh-e-Rustam is like a gallery of kings. Not only is it a place where Achaemenian (or Hakhamanesh) rulers carved their victories in stone but also later dynasts from further north such as the Sassanids used it for the same purpose. Like the Egyptian Valley of the Kings this too is the final resting place of many rulers of the Persian peninsula. Naqsh-e-Rustam is also home to the famous stone relief portraying Roman Emperor Valerian in chains kneeling before the equestrian figure of Sassanian King Shapur I (241-272 BC). Several versions of this historic Persian victory

over Rome (260 BC) have it that Shapur I had insisted on Valerian crawling on all four all the way to his court. Whether this was true or not it had the effect of striking terror in the heart of Rome for centuries to come.

At Naqsh-e-Rustam I heard a guide point to a wall and tell his group of tourists that there was a time when it used to be so vigorously polished that people could see their reflections in it. Naqsh-e-Rustam is the place for such instant mythologising. It is also believed that another Persian mythic hero Jamshed had a magic chalice called 'Jam-e-Jamshed' in which he could see both the past and the future. Firdausi's *Shahnameh* has also talked about Jamshed and his magic cup.

About 200 years after Takht-e-Jamshed was ready, the Achaemenian dynasty (550-330 BC) saw its end at the hands of another world conqueror, Alexander the Macedon (323 BC). Not only did Alexander burn down the glorious Achaemenid capital of Persepolis but also sent home its immense wealth on the backs of over 5000 camels and 20,000 mules. Perhaps Mirza Ghalib could see in his mind's eye the scale of Persepolis' desecration when he wrote:

*"Jam-e-jum se toh mera jam-e-siphal  
accha hai,*

*Aur le ayenge bazaar se gar toot  
gaya."*

Or

My earthen cup is so much better  
than Jamshed's magic chalice,

I can always get a new one if it  
breaks to pieces.

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Asghar Wajahat, born 1946, is a remarkable author who has in his repertoire novels, short stories, plays, travelogues, essays and memoirs. This is the first chapter of Asghar's travelogue 'chhalte toh achha tha' about his journey through Iran and Azerbaijan. His most notable work is a play in hindi 'Jin Lahore nahi dekhyah woh janmya hi nahin', he has been honoured with K.K. Birla Foundation's Vyasa Samman. He is involved with cinema and painting. He lives in Delhi.

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## PREMCHAND: AS SHORT STORY WRITER

Bhishma Sahni

Nobody knows for certain the exact number of short-stories that Premchand wrote. Premchand's own account has been the least reliable on this score. His own estimate is said to have been roundabout 200 short stories. He was too prolific a writer to have kept count of all the stories that he wrote. Researches after his death have revealed that the number comes up to above 280. In the collections available today, 203 stories are found in the eight volumes of *Man Sarovar*, another 14 in another collection titled *Kafan* and other stories, and 56 more stories have been discovered through the painstaking efforts of Amritrai, Premchand's illustrious son, and published in the two volumes titled *Gupta Dhan*. This makes a total of 273 short stories, available in book-form. But scholars maintain that some stories, published in journals and periodicals have yet to be included in the anthologies. Giving all allowances, it is safe to put the figure at 280.

Of these 280 stories, the number of stories written originally in Urdu (which are found in his fifteen collections of Urdu short stories) sum up to 194. Premchand began writing stories in 1907 and it is well known, that during the first nine years he wrote exclusively in Urdu and his stories appeared in the well-known Urdu journals of the time, *Adib*, *Baharistan*, *Al Asra*, *Kahakashan Naqad*, *Sabad-i-Urdu* etc.

His contribution to both the languages has won for him the position of a pioneer in short story writing in both the languages. All discussions on the short story in Hindi and Urdu began with Premchand. The Hindi short story before the advent of Premchand was rather a juvenile affair. A good deal had been written before

him, no doubt—Kishorilal Goswami, one of Premchand's predecessors, alone had written 68 'novelettes'—but most of these stories were stories of 'magic and romance' and moved in the sphere of fantastic situations. The popular reading during the two or three decades before the appearance of Premchand on the scene, consisted of such stuff as the Arabian Nights, Tales of Sindbad the Sailor, Baital Pacisi, Singhasana Battisi, Gul Bakavli, Tota-Maina, Tilism-i-Hoshruha, etc. or stories of love-intrigue with manipulated plots and concocted situations. In such stories for instance, adopted daughters of prostitutes turned out in the end to be princesses and old door-keepers turned out to be kings. In one of the romances of Kishorilal Goswami, 'Taruna Tapasvini' by name, the body of a girl is carried away from a cremation ground by a howling lion; the lion later on turns out to be a girl in disguise, and it also turns out that the dead person was not really dead.

This kind of writing had begun to be disliked even before Premchand came on the scene, and voices had begun to be heard asking for a better and more wholesome literature. As far back as 1884, in one of his famous addresses, Bharatendu had said,

Brothers, it is time we woke up from our long sleep. Help your country progress in every way. Read the book which contributes to your moral well-being.... Do not rely on foreign articles and foreign language, make progress in

your own language.

In the same address, he exhorted the parents,

Give up the old. Do not ruin your boys by placing in their hands Mir Hasan's 'Masnavi' and 'Indra Sabha'... Adopt that which is in the interests of the country and the nation...

This was a new voice of social concern, heard at that time. Small novelettes and stories written with the conscious purpose of imparting moral instruction had begun to appear during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. They spotlighted social evils— ignorance, lethargy, sensual indulgence, prostitution and the like, and laid stress on personal integrity of character, efficiency, honesty of purpose etc. The heroes of these novelettes were presented as embodiments of good conduct. As literature, however, they were rather dull and insipid. Little effort was made to go into the complexities of human nature or of the social situations, and the plots were invariably contrived, and there was a strong tendency to sermonize in them. Nevertheless, they clearly reflected a turn towards social reality in Hindi story writing. This social orientation had been stimulated by the impact of the reform movements of the last century, notably the Arya Samaja and the Brahmo Samaja in northern India and the growing national consciousness leading to the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1880.

Premchand picked up these very threads from his predecessors—sense of concern with social reforms and growing national consciousness—but gave his stories a dynamism not known before as also range and richness. He was a crusader from the very start, and till the end of his days he wrote with missionary zeal and fervor.

The first phase of his writing which covered the years roughly between 1907 and 1920, reveals, besides intense patriotic fervor, a romantic impulse which seeks expression in imaginary situations, and plots to suit his needs, but the stress is invariably on service of the nation.

'Duniya ka sab se anmol ratan' (1907) (The Most Priceless Jewel of the World) was the first story he wrote. A lover, Dilfigar by name, is asked by his beloved, Queen Dildareb to bring to her the most valuable thing in the world, if he wants to be accepted as her lover. He first brings to her a tear-drop of a murderer about to be hanged, who sees a young child before him. But the queen declines it. He then brings to her a handful of ashes of a beautiful woman who had sacrificed her life on the funeral pyre of her husband. This too is not regarded as the most beautiful thing in the world, by the queen. At last the lover meets a dying patriot who has shed his blood for his motherland, and takes a drop of the martyr's blood to the queen and is gladly accepted as her lover.

The story is charged with patriotic

fervor, which was to inspire much of his later writing. The writer seeks to express it through the imaginative form of a parable, thereby linking intense patriotic feeling with his romantic impulse. Similar sentiments are expressed in other stories too written at that time. In a story titled 'Yehi Mera Watan Hai' a 90-year old Indian returns to his country after having lived for sixty long years in America, with the only wish that he should die in his motherland and have his ashes consigned to the Ganges.

In some other stories of the same period we find Premchand weaving an elaborate plot and contriving many incidents, some of them quite incredible, very much in the vein of his predecessors, but with a view to bringing out some idea related to national emancipation or the glorification of his country's past.

There is also a story written about Mazzini, the Italian patriot, throwing light on his privations and his platonic love for Magdeline.

'Sair-i-Darivesha', written at the same time, also highlights the fidelity of an Indian woman. A globe-trotter from Berlin, while touring the Himalayas comes upon an Indian lady, Priyamvada, whose husband, Sher Singh, has been turned into a lion, under the influence of a curse pronounced by Priyamvada's friend, Vidyadhari. The curse had been pronounced under a misconception. While helping both Priyamvada and Vidyadhari to get on to a swing, Sher

Singh's body had touched Vidyadhari, and the latter believed that it had been done intentionally with an evil motive. Priyamvada serves her lion-husband devotedly and undergoes suffering. An intricate plot follows in which Priyamvada saves her friend's husband twice from the jaws of death; she also saves a prince from the clutches of her own lion-husband, as a reward for which she inherits half the prince's kingdom, and begins to rule over it in the spirit of selfless service, helping the poor and the needy. Eventually the curse is lifted and the lion again becomes a man. In the end, the globetrotter exclaims. "Chastity is a great spiritual force and if you wish to know the miracles it can work, visit India."

Such were the stories being written by Premchand in the first phase of his writing. On the one hand, his mind was afire with national aspirations, on the other, he was groping for a form suited to the expression of these aspirations. He was having recourse to parables or weaving imaginary plots and manipulating situations. He had as yet not found his real genre.

His first collection of stories, *Soz-i-Watan* appeared in 1908-1909 and contained the five stories mentioned above. The book pointed clearly to the direction in which he was to write. As we know, the book was considered a seditious work and its young author was asked to deliver all the volumes to the government, and also to submit, whatever

he wrote afterwards, to the government for scrutiny before it was given for publication. It was then that the author adopted a pen-name of Premchand and stopped writing under his own name of Dhanpatrai. The fact that he adopted a pen-name in order to be able to continue writing in his own vein, and did not deviate from his own path, shows his deep sense of commitment to the cause of his country.

Soon enough, Premchand turned to legend and history in search of suitable plots for his stories. The impulse was the same, only he was seeking a more concrete habitation for his ideas. And Rajput history came in most handy for this purpose. Here were grand exploits in the cause of the motherland performed by heroes and heroines of Rajput history. Seized by patriotic fervor he sought illustrations for the glorification of India's past, the valour of its people who were shown to be capable of offering supreme sacrifice, its cultural values, its self-sacrificing women and the like. One of the pet themes in those days was the presentation of the contrast between western culture which was said to be acquisitive and the materialistic and Indian culture which was regarded as altruistic and spiritual and the Indian woman was presented as embodiment of this altruistic culture. Rani Sarandha was first such story, in which the Rani offers supreme sacrifice in the cause of freedom. The plot of the story is elaborate and not altogether unified, but

it is charged with intense feeling and synchronizes with the emotional temper of the times.

Soon enough, however, Premchand found his real domain which was to remain for the rest of his life, the richest inspiration of his work, viz. the life of the village. Instead of weaving stories round imaginary situations, and roving in the nebulous world of romance, Premchand turned towards the actualities of life around him. In the prevailing atmosphere of those days while on the one hand there was glorification of the past, on the other, the urge for national emancipation turned the attention of the writer towards the degradation in social life which must be removed in order that India might progress. Social evils like the caste snobbery, degraded position of women, the plight of widows, illiteracy, the question of child-brides and dowry, religious fanaticism and narrow-mindedness etc. drew his attention increasingly and became an integral part of his national perspective. Here he found the operation of a cruel social system, side by side with poverty and hunger brought about by an unjust, alien government. To castigate these evils of society was a part and parcel of the struggle for national freedom and emancipation. Here he found a fascinating gallery of characters from the life of the common people and the interplay of diverse personalities—the zamindar, the money-lender, the Brahmin-priest, the peasant, the city-folk, the clerk, the

government officer, the sadhu, the trickster etc. which were to provide endless variety and colour. And it provided him with a rich reservoir of plots for his stories.

There was thus a clear evolution towards realism in his writing. A new phase began in his creative work which covers, roughly, the decade between 1920 and 1930, and which can be called the middle period of his writing. During this phase he became very close to the national struggle led by Gandhiji, Premchand himself has mentioned that on 8th February 1921, Gandhiji visited Gorakhpur where, at that time, Premchand was working as a schoolmaster in the Gorakhpur Government Normal School. So deep was the effect of this visit on Premchand that within a week, on 16th February Premchand resigned from service in which he had worked for about twenty years and decided to devote his time to national work. For a time he set up a shop for the sale of spinning wheels which was an important part of the constructive programme initiated by Gandhiji.

It was therefore the very nature of the cause which Premchand espoused which compelled him to go closer to life and to social reality. Many of his stories deal with the immediate issues of the national struggle for freedom. There are stories relating to the picketing of liquor shops ('Dussahas') etc. to the rehabilitation of Indians who had remained faithful to the British ('Lal Fita',



'Vichitra Holi' etc.) a dozen stories on the boycott of British cloth, numerous stories relating to the much-needed social reforms. During this middle period, he wrote about 150 stories, and more than half of them dealt with the problems of women—tyranny of husbands, child-brides, dowry etc. ('Uddhar', Nairashya, Beton wali Vidhawa', 'Dhikkar', etc.). There are stories relating to the question of untouchability ('Thakur ka kuan' etc.) as also those relating to communal harmony—'Mandir aur Masjid', 'Gupta Dhan', 'Bauran', 'Kshama' etc. The social reforms were regarded as a part of the struggle for national independence.

These stories dealing with almost every aspect of social and national life constitute a social document. In the words of Robert O'Swan:

Sentence by sentence and story by story Premchand created a fictional Indian Nationalist movement so comprehensive that the reader finally feels he has seen almost as much happen in almost as many situations to almost as many individuals as happened in all of Uttar Pradesh from 1920 to 1932.

It is said that Premchand was propagating in fiction what Gandhiji was doing in politics. This is true only to the extent that he was deeply impressed by Gandhiji's teachings and his programme of action. At times he deviated from Gandhiji's line, as for instance when, in later years he lost faith in the efficacy of non-violent satyagraha and almost advocated direct

confrontation with the British Government. But still the area of agreement was large. Deep down however it was more a matter of Premchand's own vision. He had, heart and soul, identified himself with the national cause and regarded his pen as an instrument in the service of that cause.

I have only one ambition and that is that my country should become free. 'Before I die, I would like to write some good books but their aim too should be the Independence of the country.

(Letter to Banarsidas Chaturvedi)

This is the bedrock on which his entire literary output stands. His concern is social justice and national independence and his works conform to that motive.

Among the social problems, the problems of communal harmony, untouchability and the position of women, occupied his attention most.

"In the words, again, of Robert O'Swan: Premchand, during this period and to the end of his life, fought the battle of communal unity with the argument that without it there could be no national unity, and without national unity there could be no independence. Through the years he remained consistent."

Premchand himself, expressing his intense indignation at communal hatred, said in an article published in the Zamana of Kanpur:

...To-day where is the Hindu who is giving his heart and soul for Hindu-

Muslim unity, who realizes it as the most vital problem of Hindustan, who knows that unity is the fundamental stipulation of Independence.'

(Vividha Prasanga II, p.352)

There had been a wave of communal riots in India during 1922-1927, largely engineered by the British Government, of which Premchand has left vivid descriptions in many of his stories ('Mandir aur Masjid' etc.)

Likewise he castigated religious fanaticism and hypocrisy. While dealing with hypocrisy and selfishness, Premchand is sharp and ruthless. In *Dudh ka Dam* (Price of Milk) he exposes the heartlessness of a Zamindar in his treatment of his sweepers. Similarly in 'Servant of the People', an acclaimed leader proclaims equality for all, but when his own daughter wants to marry a man of low caste this 'Servant of the people' looks at her with eyes of doom and turns away'. But when Premchand is dealing with the sufferings of the down-trodden, he has all sympathy and compassion. His compassion however is not the pity that a well-placed person bestows on a poor man. Since Premchand had seen suffering himself, his compassion is full of fellow-feeling, at once stern and wholesome. Not only that, he presents them as people whom a life of suffering, has imparted understanding and wisdom, 'a wisdom of love and sacrifice, of devotion and service'.

Somewhat similar is his approach in

respect of Indian Women. Their life of suffering under the severe restrictions imposed by society, together with their selfless service, love and affection have endowed them with lofty, spiritual qualities, which make them distinctly superior to men. In many of his stories dealing with women, the women characters face the difficult situations in which they have been placed with equanimity in the spirit of self-denial and patient service, and invariably surmount them. While drawing a contrast between those women who copy western ways and those who have imbibed Indian cultural values,—a pet theme with Premchand,—the author invariably shows his preference for the latter and present them as gentle, and self-denying. Nevertheless these gentle women are not shown as weak. Premchand's women characters are invariably fearless, with a keen sense of moral values and social justice. In stories dealing with the theme of social justice, it is invariably the voice of the woman which rises in protest against tyranny.

Thus in this second phase, 'the story teller of the Independence movement', works on a very large canvas. There is hardly a facet of life which does not come in his purview. It is a big world of which he writes, teeming with characters and all kinds of situations and incidents, comic, tragic, ironical, grotesque, but rich and varied, authentic and convincing. It seems as though nothing escapes his attention, be it a

tiny little ironical incident or a major calamity. His understanding of human psychology, particularly of peasant psychology becomes deeper and surer. His ever present humour, which always enlivens the narrative, plays not only on our emotions but also taps at our minds, our thinking faculties. The saga of Mote Ram Sastri, for instance, provides fun and social comment together. Stories are written with candour and sincerity.

He was now drawing entirely from life. He saw in the incidents and characters the reflection of his cherished beliefs, and he dramatised them. He did not now have to weave imaginary plots to illustrate his beliefs. This was a big change. The order had reversed. Earlier, for the expression of his strongly felt emotions and ideas he had recourse to contrived plots and concocted situations or to legend and history. Now life itself was providing the necessary situations in rich abundance. He would now see the seed of a story in some incident or some personal experience and be stipulated to give it a story's dramatic rendering.

My stories are often based on some experience or something that touches my fancy. I try to give it a dramatic orientation. But I never write stories merely to describe incidents. I want to reveal, through a story some philosophical or emotional truth. As long as such a base does not exist, I do not pick up my pen.

In another letter, addressed to Vinoda Shankar Vyas, he wrote: What I want

is that the substance of stories should be taken from life and that they should seek to solve life's problems...

Happily enough, he had taken to writing in a language which was lively, rich with idiom and turn of phrase and close to the spoken language of the people. In his early years when Premchand had been a voracious reader he had fed himself on books like Fasana-i-Azad by Ratan Nath Sarshar, Chandrakanta Santati and so on. Under the influence of this reading he had adopted a style, which though somewhat close to rhetoric and journalistic flair, yet was very colourful and idiomatic, highly suitable for the expression of deeply felt emotions. Thus, from the very beginning Premchand was gifted with a vitality of narration, which carried the reader along even where the plot and character or even the substance of the story were not strong enough to stand on their own. In respect of language, he remarked once that those who love the people will also love the language of the people. He believed that literature can be helpful in social transformation only when it does not suffer from the problem of communicability, and the writer, through the medium of his language can put across his ideas to the maximum number of people. In one of his letters written to Ramachandra Tandon, Premchand wrote:

I believe that literary expression should go as close as possible to the spoken language of the people. At least

drama, short story and novel can be written in the ordinary spoken language. We can include with them biography and travelogue also...

And further quotes a certain scholar Garco da Tassi, who had said, "It is as futile to drag Hindi back to its old basis, as it is to force the current of a river back to its source."

Premchand continued to draw, therefore, on the inexhaustible fund of humble metaphors of spoken speech, which made his writing at once meaningful, colourful and also a source of intense delight. And with it went his humour, extremely buoyant and playful, as of one who loves humanity and is both a spectator and a participant in life's drama.

The stories of this period are still largely written in narrative style. There is plenty of sermonizing and editorial comment in them, and there is also much that can be said to be redundant. But this tendency decreases gradually and the best stories of late twenties and thirties are free from it.

Though Premchand regarded writing as an instrument for the transmission of ideas, yet he was extremely conscious of the importance of its form. He was constantly learning from others. Writing about Russian writers he once wrote:

"Chekhov is the king of short stories. There is great pathos in Turgenev's writings. Gorki is the writer of workers and peasants. But Tolstoy is above all,

like an emperor."

With the passage of time, despite his preoccupation with social problems the tone and technique of his writings becomes simpler, more austere, and what one critic has called, more 'Chekhovian'. There is less of comment, less of melodrama and moral thesis, and the reader is brought face to face with stark reality. 'With his maturing as a writer, his narration becomes increasingly dramatic, and objective (at least on the surface) and the presentation of character immeasurably subtler than in the early works.' In his range too he goes beyond the village and takes cognizance of the world at large, with all its flux and change.

The stories of the last phase of his writing, are therefore simple and direct and reflect the tragi-comedy of life without any rhetorical frills or sermonizing. Although such stories have appeared now and then in the earlier phases too, but in this last phase they become a part of his conscious style.

The reader is struck by another factor too while reading the stories of this later period. Premchand centres some of his stories round the barest necessities of life, a glass of water, in the case of one, a couple of potatoes in the case of another. And the poor are denied even this. Premchand's compassion and pain, when confronted with this stark reality, strike a note of deep anguish and tragedy.

In Thakur ka Kuan a man returns

home thirsty and asks his wife for a glass of water. The water she brings smells stale; perhaps some animal had fallen into the well and been drowned. There is only one well in the village and that belongs to the high-caste Thakur, and the couple belonging to the low caste cannot draw water from it. But the woman picks up courage and goes to the well under cover of darkness. The well is located opposite the house of the Thakur. It is when guests have departed from the Thakur's house, and the doors are shut that the woman slowly creeps up to the well, and lowers the bucket into it. All goes well till she pulls up the bucket, when suddenly the door of the Thakur's house opens and the Thakur shouts in the darkness. Terror-stricken, the woman throws the bucket and runs for her life.

Similarly in 'Kafan', Ghisu and Madhava, father and son, are sitting outside their hut, pulling out roasted potatoes from the little fire, in front of them. Inside the hut, the son's wife is in the travails of child-birth. Neither of them goes in to attend on her. Each is afraid that the other one would eat up the remaining potatoes. The woman dies. There are loud lamentations and breast-beating on the part of both the men and soon enough, both father and son are on their way to the market to beg for some money in order that they can give the woman a burial. They succeed in collecting five rupees. As they are returning home the temptation to fill

their bellies with food and drink overpowers all other considerations and they enter a drinking-shop from where they return home dead drunk, with all the money spent.

In Pus ki Rat (One Winter Night), it is the biting January wind at night, from which Halku, the chowkidar of a farmer's crop, does not have anything to protect himself. He is doing watchman's duty on the landlord's field. He does not have anything to cover his body. Both he and his dog are shivering. He clasps the dog in order to get some warmth from the dog's body, but it is of no avail. It doesn't work. At last, thinking a way out, Halku goes into the neighbouring field, gathers a heap of withered leaves and grass and lights a fire. The fire sends a glow and a warmth, unbelievably comforting. And although it does not last long, it warms his body and brings on drowsiness. And Halku goes to sleep. While he is sleeping havoc is wrought in his master's field by the intrusion of stray pigs, and no amount of shouting on the part of his wife can wake up Halku from his blissful slumber.

Hunger and cold, in their elemental ferocity, turn upon human beings and seek to destroy whatever humanity is left in them. The poorest of the poor are shown in the extremity of their condition, beyond which there are only terrors awaiting them. The stark simplicity of these stories presents their condition in all nakedness. They require no comment, no sermonizing, no

rhetorical embellishments. They speak for themselves. And they are the products not so much of the anger and resentment that the author feels about the human situation, but of deep anguish.

Thus Premchand travels a long way from his early stories of romantic evocations and concocted plots to the little master-pieces exquisite in their artistic excellence, shorn of all comment and embellishment and charged with deep emotion and meaning. His ideals and aspirations still remain the same, his heart still as full of compassion for suffering humanity and resentful of all kinds of injustice, but his art has gained a maturity and an excellence unsurpassed by anyone either during his life time or since his death. His whole career reflects constant growth and development, both as an artist and as thinker, and reveals a mind, responsive to influences, as also full of zest and eager curiosity. There was a time when he believed in the 'change of heart' of the oppressor. Later, he fell under the spell of Gandhian philosophy and stressed the need for non-violent Satyagraha and subscribed to Gandhiji's trusteeship theory. It was said that Premchand was propagating in fiction what Gandhi was doing in politics. Still later, sensing the limitations of this philosophy Premchand vouched for direct confrontation with the oppressor with the aim of establishing a just society, free from exploitation. He was an admirer of October Revolution in Russia, about which he had said, 'The

foundation of a new world is being laid there, the world of communism, the world of brotherhood, of comradeship in which nobody will fatten at the cost of the poor...the air is resonant with song of freedom! The sun of freedom is shining which gives both light and warmth. The days of oppression are over!"; and again in a letter addressed to Daya Narain Nigam, "I have almost come to believe in socialist principles." Thus, though his basic commitment to the cause of Independence remained the same, he was never rigid in his views as to how best that objective can be attained.

As in sphere of thought, so also in the sphere of his style, and in his mode of treatment of his subject matter, he was always learning, always adopting and experimenting.

He was a committed writer. He did not believe in the dictum of 'art for art's sake'.

He said in one of his presidential addresses:

I would not hesitate to say that I weigh art also, like other things on the scales of utility. We shall have to change our criterion of beauty. Art was, and still is, the name of narrow form-worship.

In another presidential address delivered on the occasion of the 1st National Conference of the Progressive Writer's Association in 1936 elaborating this very point further he says:

The literature which does not rouse our good taste, which does not

provide us spiritual and mental satisfaction, does not produce in us activity and strength, which does not awaken our love of the beautiful, which does not kindle in us the fire of resolution and the determination to surmount our difficulties—is useless today; it does not deserve to be called literature.

And in one of his letters addressed to Vinoda Shankar Vyas, he wrote:

In my view...literature has three aims viz. catharsis, entertainment and revelation but entertainment and revelation also are covered by catharsis. The entertainment provided by the writer is not like the entertainment provided by an acrobat or a mimic. Catharsis lies hidden in it. Revelation too takes place with the aim of catharsis. We do not show the inner mental states, not because we have to present a philosophical treatise but because we want to show the beautiful as more beautiful and the ugly as more ugly.

Numerous weaknesses have been pointed out by some critics in Premchand's writing, particularly his writing of the early and middle periods. The stories, it is said, are more of a social document—merely realistic documentation of events with Gandhian recommendations for their solution. Further, that the writer does not take us into the inner world of his characters.

“A good character is not so much personally good as he is socially good.

An evil character is all evil and there is no indication why. All strong human urges are sublimated to the presentation of Premchand's ideals for society. Love contains no sex. It is Gandhi's 'conquest and sublimation of the sex passion', and sex is fictionally ignored. In place of dialogue of real lovers there is an exposition of ideal love...all his characters seem to exist primarily to show love of country or communal unity of political independence or a social reform... etc. etc.”

ROBERT O'SWAN

The criticism is only partly and superficially true. It is true that a story must speak for itself that though art always communicates ideas and adds to the reader's awareness, it must not appear to have been written with the aim of putting across ideas. But when you are dealing with society as an entity and individuals appear not only in their individual roles but also as representatives of social groups, it is precisely their social role which will have pre-eminence. The aim is not to show individuals as an independent entity, exclusive of society, but as those who are an integral part of society, and are affected by what happens in society. When you are dealing with a common social problem, you cannot but show individuals in their social role. The dowry system affects the Hindu woman in a particular way. There is lot of scope for the individualization of character but the writer has to conform to the broader

framework of types in society, because his social role has greater relevance here. An individual therefore cannot be viewed as a separate, independent entity. Hence a criterion is being applied to Premchand's stories which is not warranted by the very nature of his writing. Where the actions of an individual only affect him and his destiny, going deep into the inner world of the character is all-important. But where his destiny is made by the social forces operating outside him, and he can be effective only to a limited extent in determining his destiny, and where again, the writer's aim is to highlight the dominant role of those social forces, the writer can go into the inner world of character only to the extent that is required for his subject matter.

Be it as it may, what Premchand gave to our literature is something unique. Despite all the blemishes that the critics may find in his writing, Premchand is still the most loved and most widely read writer in Hindi. He continues to stimulate and inspire a vast body of readers, and that in itself is a good enough testimony for those remarkable features of his writing which far outweigh the blemishes that are pointed out.

Premchand wrote with a heart that was full. With his deep love for humanity and faith in life, he imparted a radiance to his writing which is highly satisfying. He always wrote with an intensity of feeling, and whether it expressed itself through angry protest, satire, irony as

in his earlier stories, or through deep anguish and sadness, as in his later stories, the source was always the same, deep compassion and love for suffering humanity and a sense of total identification with it. That too gave him a range and a breadth of outlook not easy to find elsewhere. His stories are literally teeming with characters from all walks of life, rich, colourful and varied, at once authentic and true to life. With that perpetual glint of humour and compassion in his eyes, Premchand surveyed life's drama and portrayed all that he saw, sometimes underlining it with his comments, at others, leaving it to speak for itself. There is a ring of sincerity and candour in all that he wrote, which comes of the deep involvement of any author with the life and destiny of his people. His active interest in the day-to-day development of the struggle against an alien government, gave to his writing a contemporaneity and topicality, so that a vivid, graphic and expansive picture of his times emerges from his writings. And we love him for that all-pervasive human warmth that emanates from every story that he wrote.

Premchand is all of a piece. The man and the artist are one; the private and the public are inextricably fused in his personality and in his writing.

Perhaps what gave him utmost strength and released his creative energies to the utmost was his intense involvement with questions of social justice and morality. As it happened in



the case of Tolstoy, so it did with Premchand also. His preoccupation with these questions of social morality, brought him closer and still closer to life's reality, imparted all the tension to his writing, tension and drama and an all-pervading seriousness and dignity. The incidents and characters may be illustrative of the moral values in which the author believed, and here and there, they may appear to have been brought forward to prove a point, nevertheless, they are authentic and true to life. And as time passed, standing on the bedrock of reality, Premchand was able to shed off many of his earlier idealistic trappings, and he was able to go deeper into the psyche of his characters, particularly peasant characters. The stories of his maturer years are simple and direct, his narration becomes increasingly more dramatic, and the presentation of character immeasurably subtler than before.

Another fact which makes his stories read today with avid interest is their relevance to our times. The social problems which he highlighted—poverty

and hunger, illiteracy, the low position of women, the plight of the widows, the caste snobbery, rural indebtedness, untouchability and communal bigotry, all kinds of social inequalities and so on—continue to bedevil our social and political life even today. Only we do not have the pen that would deal with them in that forceful and distinguished manner in which Premchand did.

Commenting on present day writings in comparison with Premchand's work, David Rubin wrote "The present day writing tends more towards a psychological literature, more refined (and alas, more chic) in nuance and language, and consequently less vigorous... language cleansed of Premchand's inexhaustible fund of humble metaphors and proverbs, similarly the subject matter tends to be the restricted world of psyche of the writer himself, turned inward, away from the epic horizons of Premchand's multifarious world. Premchand makes many of the present generation of writers look very small."

*From The World of Premchand*

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Bhishma Sahni (1915-2003) was a prominent progressive novelist and short story writer in Hindi. Some of his famous books are Tamas, Mayyadas ki madhi, Basanti. His short stories like chief ki davat and Amritsar aa gaya hai are considered his masterpieces. He was professor of English at Zakir Hussain College, Delhi. He received many literary honours e.g. Soviet Land Nehru award, Sahitya Akademi Samman. He lived in Delhi.

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## THE SUB-ALTERN IN INDIAN LITERATURE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON PREMCHAND AND HIS GODAN

P.C. Joshi

The traumatic social upheavals accompanying the break-up of the pre-industrial society and the emergence of the industrial society stimulated creativity as much in the field of history and social science as in the field of literature. The writings, to take only a few names, of Carlyle, Marx Weber, March Bloc, E.H. Carr or Eric Hobsbawnm illuminate the objective side of this Great Social Transformation with their keen analytical powers. But the subjective side of this great Human Drama—the human torments and tragedies arising from the protracted birth pangs of the modern society—are captured with extraordinary sensitiveness and insight in the immortal European classics of, say, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky.

It must be remembered that in Western Europe the transition to the modern society necessitated as its principal condition the annihilation of the small peasant (Karl Marx), the formidable bulwark of the traditional society. In Asia this transition to modern society was thwarted. What was substituted for 'genuine' modernization, the principal victim of which was the Indian Peasant. In both West Europe and Asia the peasant was turned into a historical figure capturing the attention of social and economic thinkers as well as creative writers. But there existed a qualitative difference in the approach to the peasant in the Asian context as contrasted with West-European context.

An important distinction between European and Asian social

thinkers and creative writers on the Great Transformation lies in their sharply contrasting approach to the sub-altern to the peasant as representing a historical form of social existence and a mode of production. While the European thinkers and writers focus on the peasant as representing a historically outmoded form of social existence of production, the Asian thinkers and writers approach the peasant as representing a civilizational form which has the seed of qualitative transformation into an alternative social existence form to capitalism. The typical representative of the European world-view on the peasant is Karl Marx who in his well-known observations in the Eighteenth Brumair of Louis Bonaparts treated “the small holding peasant as a vast mass” and the French nation composing this mass being formed by “simple addition of homologous magnitudes, such as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.” In a similar way in his Articles on India Marx regarded the idyllic peasant communities as representing “an undignified, stagnatory and vegetative life” and from this perspective saw British rule “as an unconscious tool of history” in so far it was an instrument of dissolution of these communities and a promoter of “a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia.”

In this background it is perhaps not wrong to generalize that in the Western Setting we find literature of the period of industrialization, with few options, focused more and more on the town

and the city and its conditions and contradictions than on the countryside and its bulwark, the small peasant which was turning into a historical residue or anachronism.

In sharp contrast, in the disciplines of history, social science, literature and politics in colonial India there was an outburst of new creativity through “the discovery of the village and the peasant.” Not as the historical residues of an old civilization but, as the embryo of a new civilisational form having the potentiality of being an alternative to capitalism. If Gandhi was the author of this world-view in politics and if Radhakamal Mukherji, as the exponent of Asian Communalism, (in Commularianism) saw in the peasant and the artisan an agent of a new civilisational regeneration, Prem Chand’s genius flowered through the discovery of the peasant as the heroic, though tragic figure, of the new novel dealing with Indian social drama having epic dimensions. All the three— Gandhi, Mukherji and Prem Chand—were thus the true forerunners of the modern idea of the autonomy of sub-altern in politics, social science and novel as a new creative form.

Prem Chand’s greatness lies in the fact that he transcends the constraints of vision and conception characterizing Balzac, the author of *The Peasants* and Tolstoy about whom Lenin wrote as follows:-

“Tolstoy had a surpassing knowledge of rural Russia, the mode of life of the

landlords and the peasants. In his artistic productions he gave descriptions of this life that are numbered among the best productions of world literature...Tolstoy belonged to the highest landed nobility in Russia but he broke with all the customary views of his environment and in his later works attacked with fierce criticism all the contemporary State, Church, social and religious institutions which were based on the enslavement of the masses, on their poverty, on the ruin of the peasants, and the petty proprietors in general, on the coercion and hypocrisy which permeated all contemporary life from top to bottom." Tolstoy said nothing new but he expressed with "a power possessed only by the artistes of genius, the radical change in the views of the broadest masses of the people in the Russia of this period, namely rural peasant Russia". (V.I. Lenin)

In the context of this very perceptive analysis by Lenin of Tolstoy as the great artist depicting rural peasant Russia, one can understand why Tolstoy and his work had such profound influence on Prem Chand, the pioneer novelist of rural peasant India.

In this paper we discuss Prem Chand whose work has the same historic significance for India as that of Dickens for England, Balzac for France and Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky for Russia. But being the product of a historical era which looked beyond capitalism, Prem Chand surpasses all of them in his social vision in so far as for him the peasant is not

just the victim of the historical process; he is also beginning to emerge as the agent of reversing history in his favour. The novels of Prem Chand mirror no doubt the harsh realities of rural peasant India under colonial and feudal oppression. But they do much more. They capture realistically what Radhakamal Mukerjee characterized in 1933 as "the faint rumblings of peasant class consciousness" and in which he identified the seeds of challenge to the colonial and feudal regimes.

In one of his most meaningful generalizations on the colonial impact on India, Karl Marx discerned the source of India's tragedy in the fact that "England had broken down the entire framework of Indian society without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing". In Karl Marx's view" this loss of his old world, with no gain of a new, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindus and separates Hindustan, ruled by British, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history". In the works of Prem Chand is to be found the best portrayals of "this particular kind of melancholy" arising from the loss of the old world with no gain of a new one" as experienced by millions of living human beings in flesh and blood at a point of India's history. The tragedy of the Indian peasant uprooted from the age-old village system is captured by Prem Chand with poignancy, depth and intensity of feeling unequalled by any historical writing. The

colonial peasant emerges as a dramatic personae in Prem Chand's writings on account of his deep historical insight into the circumstances of colonial India on the one hand and his exceptional gifts of literary imagination on the other. These two qualities—sense of history and literary sensibility—combine to create the immortal but tragic character of Hori in Prem Chand's Godan as the living personification of the colonial peasant. Here is an unforgettable character which combines in his person the Indian peasant's tenacious will for survival with his sense of utter hopelessness within the colonial economic order.

In order to comprehend the depth of the misery of the colonial peasant it was necessary for a writer like Prem Chand to transcend the class outlook and the emotions of semi-feudal landed gentry and the colonial middle class. Thus, in order to view it in all its complexity from outside, it was necessary to outgrow the ideologies which emerged either in defence of the colonial and the semi feudal system or in reaction to it. Thus one had to outgrow the outlook of unhistorical Ruralism which idealised India's old village community. By contrasting the Ram Rajya of the past with the Satanic rule of British colonialism, this ideology called for a return to Ram Rajya. One had thus to transcend the outlook of 'paternalistic landlordism' which glorified the 'good old landlord' as an alternative to the rapacious 'now landlord' growing stronger under the

impetus of the money economy. One had also to outgrow the outlook of 'peasantism' which obscured the fast-growing trend of proletarianisation of the peasant and thus provided sustenance to the myth of the "Renewable Peasant Community". In other words, the categories of 'village community', 'good vs. bad landlord', 'village vs. the town' and the peasant vs. the worker' were formidable mental blocks hampering the full understanding of the colonial peasant who was always on the verge of total depeasantisation or pauperisation without proletarianisation. The colonial peasant would not, therefore, secure, his emancipation without identifying not the 'bad landlord' but the whole colonial and semi-feudal system as the source of his misery; and he could not become a social force capable of challenging this system without outgrowing the myths of villagism, paternal landlordism, and narrow peasantism and without merging with the forces of anti-colonial and anti-feudal social, economic and political transformation outside the village.

From Prem Chand's example one can see why literary representation by the masters of the craft goes beyond mere delineation of social reality; it develops into a critique of this reality. It is obvious that without a critical attitude to reality, Prem Chand would have failed to capture the misery of the colonial peasant who was exploited not only through economic and political means but also by means of 'false consciousness'. It is when Prem

Chand turns towards a critique of this 'false consciousness' perpetuated by the upper castes and classes privileged within the colonial and semi-feudal social order that his writing reaches a high level of social perception and of critical social consciousness as in *Godan*.

The enduring significance of the short-stories and novels of Prem Chand lies not just in the fact that they mirror the social realities of a colonial and semi-feudal India. It is the revolutionary quality which Prem Chand's novels acquire in his mature phase by imparting a critical-realist edge to literary representation that gives him the status of a pioneer of fiction as social critique and protest in India. It is Prem Chand's critique of the colonial and semi-feudal social order through the medium of the novel which makes him an epoch-making figure not only in Indian literature but also in Indian cultural history. No wonder then that generations of patriotic and revolutionary fighters against the colonial and semi-feudal regime received their critical orientation into the Indian social reality through the novels and short-stories of Munshi Prem Chand. Here is then the novel developed into an art-form which not only illumines social reality and awakens human sensibility but also arouses the conscious will to transform social reality. Such a transformation of the novel involves a creative tension between the writer's philosophical outlook and his literary sensibility.

In the case of Prem Chand we find a fuller release of his powers of social perception associated with his mental break from the outlook of early Gandhism which coloured his insight into social reality in his earlier writings like *Karmabhoomi* and *Premashram*. These novels typify the compromise effected by Prem Chand between the demands of literary sensibility and those of early Gandhian outlook on the other. The central figure in these novels is not the peasant but the reformed landlord who presides over a compassionate society where the landlord is the trustee of the peasant. In *Godan*, Prem Chand presents the fruit of an enriched and uninhabited sensibility which has been released from constraints of the early Gandhian outlook. The hero of *Godan* is the pauperized peasant, Hori whose tragic end shatters all dreams and illusions of reforming the semi-feudal system. The total hopelessness of Hori shows the limits of the system and the futility of all schemes for relief to the peasant through 'reform' of the system.

We have so far tried to formulate the thesis that Prem Chand not only reflected the consciousness of his times; he also moved towards an outlook of remoulding this consciousness and giving it a new direction. The interpretation of Prem Chand's work as the reflector of the ethos of his times finds support in his attempt to express and affirm through his writings the anti-colonial consciousness and aspirations of the

Gandhi era. Prem Chand, however, goes beyond the limits of this era insofar as transcends in his writings the constraints on perception of social reality imposed by the Gandhian social philosophy. Having put into the centre of Indian creative writing the theme of the Indian village in response to the ethos of the Gandhian era, Prem Chand did not allow himself to become a prisoner of backward-looking idealization of the village and the denigration of the town. Nor did Gandhi's non-class concepts of village community, of 'change of heart' on the part of propertied classes and of "reformed" and "good landlords" as trustees of the peasants become permanent ingredients of Prem Chand's social outlook.

With the robust sense of realities derived from his rural background on the one hand and his penetrating literary sensibility on the other, Prem Chand perceived very soon the vast gulf between Gandhi's idealistic and utopian conceptions on the one hand and the brutal realities of India's village society on the other.

Before we explain where Prem Chand's view of social reality ultimately departed from the dominant concepts of the Gandhi era, it is first necessary to recognise the contradictory and complex character of Gandhi's world view. It is also necessary to recognise the tremendous advance represented by the insights of the Gandhi era—insights which were fully imbibed and affirmed by Prem Chand in and

through his writings. It must be noted that the novels and short stories of Munshi Prem Chand achieved in the field of Indian literature the same breakthrough as Mahatma Gandhi achieved in the realm of Indian politics. *If Gandhi played an epoch-making role in Indian history through his discovery of the village as an untapped source of social energy and political power, Munshi Prem Chand initiated a renaissance in Indian literature through his discovery of the village as an untapped fountainhead of new themes, myths, and character-types.*

In this context, the emergence of Munshi Prem Chand on the Indian scene has the same significance for the history of Indian literature as the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi to the forefront as for the history processes which favoured the rise of a Gandhi on the political arena also favoured the rise of a Prem Chand on the literary firmament. The need of Indian nationalism to shift its base from the town to the village and from the town-dwelling upper middle classes to the village-dwelling peasantry finds political expression in the rise of a Gandhi while it found cultural expression in the rise of a Prem Chand. It is no wonder, therefore, that we find not only the same questions of the colonial village and the colonial peasant occupying Gandhi on the political and Prem Chand on the literary plane. We also discern in this phase that the ideological tone and character of Prem Chand's

characterization and portrayal of the village is conditioned to a very large extent by Gandhi's social philosophy in general and his perspective on the village in particular. A brief comment on the nature of the ideological impact of Gandhism on Prem Chand is very appropriate in this background.

It should be noted at the very outset that even in the earlier phases when Prem Chand was most responsive to the Gandhian perspective, Prem Chand's literary sensibility as reflected in his perceptions of social reality often rises above and goes beyond the ideological limits of Gandhism. Nevertheless, it is useful to distinguish between the Prem Chand of Karambhoomi and Premashram on the one hand and the Prem Chand of Godan on the other. The earlier novels reflect and typify the compromise effected by Prem Chand between the demands of literary sensibility on the one hand and the compulsions of adherence to a Gandhian outlook on the other. In his last and fully mature novel, Godan, Prem Chand's heightened literary sensibility is able to shake off the constraints of the Gandhian social outlook and to capture all the major contradictions of the village reality. Prem Chand's perception in Godan encompasses not merely the anti-colonial contradiction (the village vs. the town conflict) but more fundamentally the anti-feudal contradiction (the peasant vs. the landlord-money-lender-trader conflict on the one hand and the peasant vs. the

priest, the blood-sucking government officials, the exacting Biradari and the oppressive and divisive cast hierarchy conflict on the other. In Godan the focus is simultaneously on the human agents of colonial and feudal oppression as well as on their victims in the vast country side.

Before we elaborate this point concerning the shift of focus in Prem Chand's novels, it is necessary to make a few observations on the contradiction between the upper class limits of Gandhism on the one hand and the oppressed class orientation of Gandhi as a mobiliser of the vast masses on the other. If in the class limits and character of his ideology Gandhi comes close to Tolstoy, in his role as a radical mobiliser of the masses for anti-colonial movements, Gandhi comes closer to Lenin. It is significant that the Gandhian perspective at once illuminated and obscured India's colonial social reality. But the social forces released by Gandhi were instrumental in taking the peasant far beyond the limits of Gandhi's own ideology and social philosophy. In the literary sphere we find the same contradiction in Prem Chand who is closer to Tolstoy at one and to Maxim Gorky at another end.

Let us first indicate how Gandhi's thought gave an insight into the colonial society. It is important to note that Gandhi put into the centre of the stage the town-village conflict as reflecting the basic antagonism between the Indian



national and the British colonial interest, between the town as the base of the parasitic colonial economy and the village as the base of the productive national economy. The town-village conflict also epitomized for Gandhi the conflict between the Industrial and Urbanised England (which had reduced India into the agricultural hinterland of the British empire) and the Ruralised India where lay the principal victims of the colonial regime and, consequently, the major sources of anti-colonial resistance. Gandhi saw in the town-village confrontation the major expression of irreconcilable cleavage between Indian nationalism and British colonialism. His classic observations on this cleavage which left a sharp impress on all thoughtful Indians of the Gandhi era including Prem Chand are found in *Hind-Swaraj* (1908). We reproduce the following passage written in 1922 which gives a clear formulation of this ingredient of the Gandhian perspective.

“Little do town-dwellers know how the semi-starved masses of India are slowly sinking to life-lessness. Little do they know that their miserable comfort represents the brokerage they get for the work they do for the foreign exploiter, that the profits and the brokerage are sucked from the masses. Little do they realize that the government established by law in British India is carried on for the exploitation of the masses.

No sophistry, no jugglery in figures can explain away the evidence that the skeletons in many villages present to the naked eye. I have no doubt whatsoever that both England and the town-dwellers of India will have to answer if there is a God above for this crime against humanity which is perhaps unequalled in history.”

(N.K. Bose, 1957).

The Gandhian perspective had great illuminating power in so far as it gave a penetrating insight into the parasitic nature of the colonial regime; it also illuminated with the touch of a genius the nature of parasitism characteristic of the colonial system as represented by the town-village cleavage. Parasitism of the colonial type as expressed in the one-sided exploitation of the village by the town thus emerged as the central theme not only in the politics of Gandhi era but also in the Creative writing of this period. Perhaps all of Prem Chand's outstanding novels like Rangabhoomi, Karmbhoomi, Premashram and Godan and many of his short stories revolve round the theme of the town-village cleavage and round the question of the conflict between urban parasites and rural producers which was central to the colonial system in the British period. In most of his creative writing Prem Chand is at his best when he sharply portrays the glaring contrast between the affluence of urban upper classes

whose wealth and property have originated through various forms of economic parasitism like speculation, trade, usury and absentee landlordism. He also portrays very effectively the parasitism of the "hard-hearted" (a la Gandhi) educated classes who as officials of the government or the Zamindars, as lawyers, doctors, politicians and other types of professionals, thrive on the ignorance, illiteracy, and socio-cultural backwardness of the rural masses.

The following passage in Premashram presents a classical portrayal of the peasant masses by hordes of urban exploiters who descend on the village every now and then exactly like natural disasters and calamities:

"Just as after sunset special types of living beings which are neither birds nor animals cover the entire sky."

With their long rows in search of their livelihood, in the same manner with the onset of the month of Kartik another type of creatures descend on the countryside and with their tents spreading far and wide stir up the entire rural area. Before the onset of rains there is an overgrowth of royal kites and insects and after the close of rains there is the overgrowth of commercial kites and insects, there is a virtual earthquake in the villages and the village people rush hither and thither to save their lives.

"Is there any doubt that these tours by the officials of the countryside are

inspired by good wishes and intentions. Their purpose is to ascertain information on the real condition of the people, to take justice to the very door of the persons seeking justice, to assess their needs and their hardships, and to know their real feelings and thoughts. If these purposes were realized, these tours would have been more life giving than the spring, and people would have welcomed them with Veena and Pakhawaj and with Dhol and Majeera. But just as the rays of the Sun get refracted and twisted when they pass through water, in the same manner good intentions also turn into evil when they come into touch with human frailties. Truth and justice are trampled underfoot, Greed and selfishness triumph over kindness and goodness. The officials and their servants wait for these tours of the village as the beloved waits for union with the lover. They are ineffective in the towns or are less effective in realising their selfish aims. In the towns they have to spend from their own pockets for everything they want. But in the village their hands are not in their pockets but on their canes with which they terrorise the village folk and then wring their necks. The ghee, milk, vegetables, meat and fish for which they long in vain in the towns, they have these in abundance only for the asking in the villages. They eat as much as they want and what they can't consume is sent for their families in the towns. Tins overflowing with ghee, pitchers

overflowing with milk, fuel and cowdung, carts overladen with grass and fodder can be seen being shifted from the village to the towns. The family members of these officials are full of joy and thank their stars for all these windfalls which denote the end of scarcity and the coming of prosperity. For the village greenery comes after the rains. But for these fortunate townsmen, greenery comes before the rains. For the village folk these are hard days. They are under constant anxiety and tension. They are, however, bullied, beaten and bruised. The bullies from the towns not only take out the food from their mouths but also the last vestige of dignity from their souls through forced labour, bondage and serfdom". (Premashram, pp. 54-55).

This description of the plight of the Indian village under colonial rule echoes the same sentiments and feelings as depicted by Gandhi in the passage quoted earlier which has become immortal.

There is thus an unmistakable identity of outlook here between Gandhi's view of the parasitic role of the urban classes and Prem Chand's insight into their exploitative character. It is also important to note that in the earlier novels like Premashram, Prem Chand presents feudal exploitation by the landed class as an extension of the town-village conflict insofar as the focus is on semi-feudal, absentee landlordism rather than on the differentiation between the land-owning and landless peasants themselves.

Moreover, in depicting and evaluating the role of the landed gentry Prem Chand like Gandhi is inclined to treat them as victims of colonialism themselves than as exclusive lords of the countryside and principal agents of exploitation. Both Gandhi and Prem Chand focus attention on the colonial rulers who have corrupted the native aristocracy, who have reduced the native ruling class to a position of impotence and created vast hiatus and tension between the landed elite and the peasant masses. This interpretation derives support from the self-indictment of the landed class as articulated by Gyanshankar's father-in-law, Rai Saheb Kamlanand in Premashram. In Rai Sahab's words Zamindari is "neither property nor an estate in the strict sense of the term. It is mere brokerage... The Zamindars have been created by the British merely to act as agents of revenue collection or as Karindas of the British Empire. To call us the masters of land is a travesty of facts. If it is all a fraud, then why don't we renounce it? This is a legitimate question. But the Zamindari has condemned us to indolence, self-indulgence and social impotence. We have been crippled for ever by a parasitic existence."

The same type of self-indictment is articulated by Rai Saheb Amar Pal Singh in Godan. He remarks: "People imagine that we (Zamindars) are in great comfort. But he who has neither pride nor respect is doomed...He who licks the boots of masters above him and oppresses the

masses below him has lost all manhood...Parasitism has crippled us. We are only adept in the art of flattering our British masters and terrorizing our subjects...This Zamindari has become a noose round our neck, (Godan, 15).

It is clear that in his works like Premashram and Rangbhoomi, Prem Chand perceives the dominant feature of the social reality in terms of the cleavage between the parasitic and aggressive town-dwellers on the one hand and the passive and toiling rural masses on the other. We give below a few more illustrations from Prem Chand's earlier novels to confirm this generalisation:

In the novel, Rangabhoomi, we are introduced at the very beginning to the town-village cleavage in the following words:

"The town is the abode of the rich and the centre of buying and selling. The outlying area of the town is the place for their recreation and relaxation. In its central part are located the institutions for the education of their children and the seats of litigation where in the name of justice the poor are continually harassed and persecuted. On remote outskirts of the towns are the dwelling places of the poverty-stricken masses. Here we have neither the light of the urban lamps nor the urban sanitation nor the rush of urban crowds."  
(p.31)

Sharp contrast to this picture of the town to which gravitate the affluent upper and middle classes is provided by the picture of the village where live mostly the impoverished masses. The following descriptions of the village by Prem Chand in one of his early writings called Jalwaye Issar (1912) reminds one of the classical description of the ruined colonial village by Mahatma Gandhi. The heroine of the story conveys here feelings about the conditions of the village in words as follows:

"Oh God! What I had been told about the village and what I see with my own eyes! Thatched huts, mud walls, and mountains of garbage lying uncovered before the huts, buffaloes sunk deep in mud and filth and emaciated cows— I feel like running away from here. Look at the pitiable condition of men and women who have been reduced to mere skeletons. These are the embodiments of misfortune and pauperisation. Not one has garments which are not torn:

Not one of the unfortunate beings gets a full meal after sweating for day and night...Here we have in plenty neither gods nor goddesses but only ghosts"  
(Amritrai 1976: 113-114).

In the following moving words of Kadir, a typical working peasant, we have an articulation of what the peasants think of their own pitiable condition:

“Oh, if the Almighty wishes to make us respectable, why should he have made us Kashtkars? Would not he have made us a Zamindar or a peon or a constable in the police station issuing orders for others to carry out, while comfortably reclining on his chair? Consider our plight. We eat what we have earned with our own labour. Why should then we be harassed by whosoever passes our way. We have to slave for everyone: The zamindar, the government and its officials—all frown on us and even God above is not sympathetic to us. Otherwise are not we human beings or is everyone superior to us in intelligence? But what is the use of crying? Who listens to us?  
(Premashram: 187)

This acute self-pity of the colonial peasant is presented in much bolder strokes in Prem Chand’s Godan. Its immortal character Hori, personifying the hopelessness of the colonial peasant, expresses this sentiment of self-pity in ringing words as follows:

“Who says you and I both are also humans. Where is our humanness? He alone is human who has wealth, power and skills. We are like bullocks who have been born only to be yoked to the plough and to slave for others”, (p.22).

Prem Chand depicts very poignantly how the Kisan whose tiny holding keeps him perennially starving is close to the ill-paid majoor constituting the toiling masses. He is kept in poverty and bondage by a minority of exploiters living on the fruits of labour of this voiceless mass.

The unenviable conditions of both the kisan and the majoor are captured by Prem Chand in the following dialogue between them in Karmabhoomi.

Payag who is a poor peasant tells Kashi who is a poor majoor:

“O brother, never take up cultivation which is nothing but a great botheration. Whether your fields yield anything or not, you must meet the rental demand of the landlord. It is flood now and drought later. One misfortune or the other is always on your head. On top of it if your bullock dies, or your harvest catches fire, then everything is lost. Majoori is the best. Take your khurpi in the morning for cutting the grass and return by the afternoon”, (p.153)

In reply to this Kashi tells his own tale:

“How can Kisani be compared to majoori. Majoori may earn more but he will be called majoor. He carries loads of grass bundles on his head. Someone shouts from this side and someone from that side: O grass seller! If you happen to cut grass from the boundary of someone, he will offer nothing but abuses to you. Kisani after all is a respectable occupation, not like Majoori!” (p. 153).

It is clear from the bunch of quotations that in Prem Chand’s novels we find an intensely humanised portrayal of some of the basic insights of Gandhi into the colonial village. As an illustration of this convergence of Gandhi’s intuitive

insight with Prem Chand's artistic perception of the basic conflicts of the colonial situation, we reproduce below another key passage from Gandhi. It confirms Gandhi's view on the oppressive urban stranglehold over rural life:

"We may not be deceived by the wealth to be seen in the cities of India. It does not come from England or America. It comes from the blood of the poorest. There are said to be seven lakhs of village in India. No one has any record of these thousands who have died of starvation and disease in Bengal, Karnataka and elsewhere. The government registers can give no idea of what the village folk are going through. But being a villager myself, I know the condition in the villages. I know village economics. I tell you that the pressure from the top crushes those at the bottom. All that is necessary is to get off their backs", (N.K. Bose 1957:48).

In Karmabhoomi and Premashram Prem Chand as a true disciple of Gandhi contrasts the benevolent landlords of the old type like Prabhashankar with the greedy and rapacious landlords of the new type like Gyanshankar. While the former respect the demands of custom and Maryada (aristocrate tradition), the latter regard custom as a departure from economic rationality and assert the legitimacy of the pursuit of naked self-interest. Both in Rangbhoomi and

Premashram Prem Chand depicts how the commercial motivation of the new class created by Pax Britanica comes into sharp conflict with community rights of the masses. In Rangbhoomi the conflict erupts over Soordas's land used for grazing cattle by the people and being acquired by John Sevak, a Christian businessman, for setting up a cigarette factory. In Premashram also violent conflict erupts and leads to the murder of the village officials by one of the peasants as a sequel to the ban on the use of the community grazing ground for grazing cattle by the peasants. In these novels, however, Prem Chand does not treat these conflicts as irreconcilable within the given system. He shows a way out by throwing up, as an enlightened landlord of the new type who lives in peace and harmony with his tanants. Moreover, Prem Chand also highlights the futility of peasant resistance especially in the form of individual terrorism by depicting the suicide of Manohar, the assassin of Gaus Khan, who personifies the oppressive Karinda of the new type of landlord. This path of reform rather than of resistance presented approvingly by Prem Chand as the way out has much in common with Gandhi's social outlook.

This bring us finally to Prem Chand's classic, Godan, in which Prem Chand makes no ideological compromise in portrayal of realities; he gives up the attempt to provide a way out of the peasant problem within the given system

through change of heart of the propertied and power-wielding classes. The focus shifts here from the enlightened landlord to the peasant awakening to a higher level of consciousness. It may be remembered that during his last days Gandhi himself was trying to move beyond the constraints of early Gandhism and placing more emphasis on building the toilers' will for resistance than on the "change of heart" of the propertied classes. He even envisaged "seizure of land" by the peasants after freedom was won as revealed by his famous interview with Louis Fisher.

Coming back to Prem Chand, *Godan* is the story of Hori, a peasant cultivating five bighas of land and perennially oscillating between kisan and major status on account of unbearable burdens of rent, interest, taxes and Begar. Hori's only ambition is to possess a small plot of land and a cow and he makes all the compromises necessary to realize his 'Small Peasant Utopia'. But his Utopia remains unrealized; nay it is shattered by the brute forces of a colonial system and a class society:

Prem Chand is no longer satisfied with the focus on the 'enemy outside' the village—the absentee landlord, the trader, the lawyer and the government official invading the village like locusts from time to time. In *Godan* Prem Chand puts in the centre of the picture the 'enemy inside—the Gram Panchayat, the Biradari and the priests operating on behalf of the rich peasants, the village

moneylender and the village-based *Karindas* of the landlord and the *Karmacharis* of the government. Prem Chand also puts in the centre of the stage the peasant's own fatalism, his submissiveness and his proneness to compromise and to make peace with his oppressors. *Godan* epitomizes the tragic finale of the path of compromise and submission as depicted in the last outburst of Hori, the hero of *Godan*, in the following words:

"Hori could not utter even a single word. He felt as if he was sinking deep in the bottom-less pit of unbearable humiliation. Today after fighting tenaciously for thirty years for life, he felt totally defeated and crushed. He felt he had been made to stand on the gate of the town and whoever passed that way spat on his face. He felt as if he was screaming aloud saying: "Brothers! Have pity on me. I did not care for the scorching sun of Jeth nor for the heavy showers of Magh. If you pierce this body—you will find it injured beyond repair and crushed and debilitated. Ask it whether it has a moment's rest.' On top of it then this humiliation. Oh you are still alive, O coward, O wretched being"!

Hori's faith which having become deep had rendered him blind and blunted his sensibilities for all these years, had been shattered

today and destroyed for ever”.  
(Godan: 295).

The death of Hori symbolises the total collapse of the Peasant Utopia and of the path of submissiveness and compromise. The ousting of Hori's family from the peasant way of life and the exit of his son Gobar to the town for livelihood are also symbolic of the inherent vulnerability of the small producers, of the ultimate fate of villagism and peasantism and of the ultimate triumph of the cash nexus over the old society. The death of the peasant of the old type is, in other words, symbolic of the death of the old society which could not be reformed from within.

The penetrating and moving insight into the deep and insoluble crisis of the small peasant producer within the colonial framework which Prem Chand offers in Godan written in 1935-36 broadly corresponds with the diagnosis which Radhakamal Mukerjee presented in his monumental work, Land Problems in India, in 1933. What the writer captures through his intuition and imagination, in fact, far excels in intensity and depth of perception what the social scientist is able to grasp through painstaking investigation and analysis. Summing up the crisis of the small peasant in early thirties Radhakamal Mukerjee wrote as follows:

“The economic position of the small holder has deteriorated, while the contrast between the increasing class of rent-receivers

and the toiling agricultural serfs, betokens a critical stage in our agricultural history” (p.4).

Mukerjee also discerned “the faint rumblings of class consciousness” among peasants condemned so far to a life of “one single meal, thin gruel and a loin cloth”. The implications of this grim economic situation of the peasant in terms of human tragedy of vast proportions are to be found not in the elegant treatises of the economists but in the novels of writers of the stature of Prem Chand.

Commenting on the fate of the poor peasant in England under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, Eric Hobsbawm in his The Age of Revolution (1973) writes as follows:

“Three possibilities were therefore open to such of the poor as found themselves in the path of bourgeois society, and no longer effectively sheltered in inaccessible regions of traditional society. They could strive to become bourgeois; they could allow themselves to be ground down or they could rebel”, (p.245)

Within the colonial framework the first possibility of upward mobility was open to only a small and thin stratum of the peasantry. The small peasant producer, the dominant force of the colonial agrarian structure, had only the latter two possibilities open and not the first; he could either allow himself to be ground down or he could rebel. The



Hori of Godan epitomizes the great tragedy inherent in the second possibility of annihilation as a peasant producer and of total alienation from land. Being a realist, however, Prem Chand does not miss the “faint rumblings of class consciousness” among colonial peasants, though this consciousness does not yet hold promise of fructifying into a full-blown peasant revolution. The demand of literary realism itself, therefore, compels Prem Chand to conclude Godan on a note of despair and defeat and not of Hope and Triumph.

In Godan Prem Chand rises to heights of creative achievement from the point of view of critical realism. He emerges as a great writer of the stature of Balzac and Tolstoy. Godan in this respect is comparable to Balzac’s classic, The Peasants (1844). Commenting on this novel which reveals the sources of Balzac’s greatness as a writer, George Lukacs aptly observes:

“In this novel, the most important of his maturity, Balzac wanted to write the tragedy of the landed aristocracy of France. It was intended to be the keystone of the series in which Balzac described the destruction of French aristocratic culture by the growth of capitalism...Yet for all his painstaking preparation and careful planning, what Balzac really did in his novel was the exact opposite of what he had set out to : What he depicted

was not the tragedy of the aristocratic estate but of peasant small landholding. It is precisely this discrepancy between intention and performance, between Balzac the political thinker and Balzac the author of La Comedie Humaine that constitutes Balzac’s historical greatness... What makes Balzac a great man is the inexorable veracity with which he depicted reality even if that reality ran counter to his own personal opinions, hopes and wishes”.

The greatness of Tolstoy as a writer of world stature is derived from the same source—the ruthless objectivity, the deep insight and intensity of feeling with which Tolstoy captures the social contradictions and realities of “rural peasant Russia”, and the merciless manner in which, while depicting social realities relating to the landlord and the Mujhik. Tolstoy was able to transcend his own aristocratic social background, and his philosophical beliefs. His trenchant social critique of patriarchal Russia caught in the throes of transition to capitalism became a valuable legacy for later revolutionaries as well as writers working for Russia’s socialist future.

Prem Chand’s works immortalize the agonies and torments of the Indian peasant, who is crushed by the colonial system and the human agents of colonial exploitation and oppression. They

represent a most precious heritage and an unfailling source of insight and inspiration for writers and socio-political workers of post-independence India who are looking for a new future for the

Indian peasant. Today's awakened peasant can himself turn to Prem Chand for deeper insights into the historical and structural roots of his exploitation and oppression.

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P.C. Joshi, an eminent scholar and intellectual of twentieth century who is still contributing to the cause of art, culture, literature and political idelogy, has translated Gandhiji's works into English. His memoirs in 'Tadbhav' have been widely read and appreciated.

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## **GODAN: THE BACK STORY**

Kamal Kishore Goyanka

Translated by  
Dhiraj Singh

Even though *Godan* is counted among the classics ever to be written in any language anywhere in the world, its 'story of creation' has yet to evoke interest among literary critics in India. Those among Premchand's fans, especially those eager to claim him as a leftist thinker have given little thought to the processes that made the man and his work. Perhaps it stems from a certain arrogance of having understood him completely. But there are several things still unknown about the process of Premchand's creativity. Such is the import of these unknown facts that they could immensely benefit our understanding of the writer to a great extent. One such fact is that before getting down to writing a novel or a short story or even an essay Premchand would write its brief outline in English. After the outline he would get down to writing the piece in either Hindi or Urdu. The final work he would then translate into Hindi or Urdu depending on the language of the original. Such an example of a writer's ease with three different languages is indeed rare among writers of Hindi literature. In the light of this fact it is rather unfortunate that Premchand's creativity has not been adequately admired or even assessed in the years gone by.

*Godan*, like his other works, was also first outlined in English. But only the last two pages of this three-page document survive today. These two pages contain the outlines of chapters beginning from 3 through to 12. The first two chapters are now lost to us with the missing first page. The highlights of the remaining

eight chapters: the characterisation and a summary of the plot is found in the two surviving pages. The following is what has survived as the outline of chapters 3 to 12 of the famous novel:

### **Chapter 3**

Hori buys a cow. The whole village turns up to see it. Soma is sad but Hira is mad with jealousy. He tries to poison the cow. Hori sees him doing that but does not report the matter to the police.

### **Chapter 4**

The whole village comes to the Zamindar's place to celebrate Dussehra. Hori sells off his barley crop to make his contribution (*shagun*). He can barely face other people (especially the Zamindar—Goyanka) and there are rumours (started by the Zamindar—Goyanka) to increase land taxes. Hence, it is important that the Zamindar is impressed enough to change his mind. The party at the Zamindar's include a play, a demonstration (?) and a fire offering (*dharti yajna*). The Zamindar is a kind and generous man. He tells his story. He is also a member of the District Board. (He is also a candidate for the Chairman's post, this part is missing—Goyanka). He is known to throw parties and do a lot of charity to impress the District Board officials. The villagers return home satisfied. Jhunia also goes to the demonstration. Gobar proposes to her. He is not married. He needs money to get married. Jhunia is disarmed by his frankness and agrees to marry him.

156 :: July-September 2009

### **Chapter 5**

Jhunia gives birth to a daughter (son). Gobar runs away to Calcutta. The village panchayat imposes a heavy penalty on him. Hori is ordered to go away on a pilgrimage. His ancestral land is mortgaged. He is unable to pay the interest. Gobar does not return. Sona is to get married but he has no land. He is a daily wage labourer where women work shoulder to shoulder with him. This has a big impact on his way of thinking.

### **Chapter 6**

The property has to be recovered from the mortgage. The daughter (is sold off, this part is missing—Goyanka) is married off. The property is recovered. Things (income from land especially) improve. Hori fights with his brothers because of Mahua. Hori is beaten up. He files a case against his brothers in court. Hori wins and the brothers face punishment. Hori (has to get it back, this part is missing—Goyanka) finds happiness but in the end takes on the responsibilities of his family.

### **Chapter 7**

Bhola's sons go their separate ways. Jhunia dies. She is survived by her daughter. Bhola begins to take care of Jhunia's daughter. He gives his share to his sons (and becomes a *sannyasi*, this part is missing—Goyanka). Jhunia's daughter is now under the care of the Zamindar.

### **Chapter 8**

The Zamindar's elder son is a lawyer, a member of the Council. He has been

excommunicated from the caste by his family. He is a social worker whom the farmers greatly respect.

### **Chapter 9**

Hori's youngest daughter is sold off. The harvest is only enough to pay the taxes. Whatever's left goes to feed the livestock, the family and himself. What is he to do? He is also physically weak. Jhinki also works hard to earn a living. So Hori decides to sell off his daughter without telling his wife. He makes up a story to cover his shame.

### **Chapter 10**

Gobar returns a changed man. He shares his experiences of city life with everyone. He has forgotten Jhunina. He has earned a lot of money through questionable means and has suddenly developed an interest in spiritual matters. His father is on his death bed but he doesn't allow Gobar to come back home. Gobar starts living with Jhunina again.

### **Chapter 11**

Bhola returns with a very young bride who's already been a widow. He wants to live with Hori. A separate hut is erected for him. He starts to indulge in petty stealing because he is unable to get a job. Jungi is attracted to his wife and they start meeting on the sly. Finally one day Bhola's wife leaves him and runs away with Jungi. (Bhola is filled with sadness, this part is missing—Goyanka) but his wife is shameless and continues to live with Jungi. One day his wife (not clear which one—Goyanka)

has an argument with him and beats him up with a broomstick. Bhola dies.

### **Chapter 12**

A tired and defeated Hori continues to fight for survival. Gobar tries to help him through his mother, who remains a devoted wife to Hori. But in the end Hori dies. Gobar does the *godan* (cow donation) on his behalf. \*\*\* Also to be included: agricultural fairs, development, literary movements, sugar mills, cooperative movements.

This outline of *Godan* brings to light many aspects of the creative process of the writer. It also provides a glimpse of the plot of the novel that was taking shape in Premchand's mind. What's more, it tells of the strands within the story that the author decides to build upon as well as those that he decides to discard during the writing of the actual novel. This is a significant revelation because there is a near consensus among scholars that Premchand was a stickler for his outlines and that he made them a foundation for the standing structure of his works. But *Godan's* outline not only rubbishes this theory it also portrays a truer picture of Premchand's creativity: that he was no slave to the outline but gave enough leeway to the story to have its own natural progression. It is indeed rare for a literary work to assume the mantle of greatness following a set formulaic recipe. A comparative study of this outline and the final work that it was to become later proves this point without a doubt. However to further

elucidate this claim it is important to see how much of the outline plot and characterisation was retained by the author and how much of it was given a new twist in the final work.

3. Chapter 3 in the outline closely resembles the final chapter 3 of the novel. Hori buys a cow and the whole village turns up to see it. However his two brothers—Soma and Hira—have different reactions. They don't come to see the cow. In *Godan*, the novel, Premchand reports this tension thus: "The whole village came to see the cow. The only ones who don't are Soma and Hira, his brothers..." Hira who is filled with jealousy finally poisons the cow. In both the outline and the novel Hori sees Hira give poison to his cow but does not report the matter to the police. This is an example of where the author makes no changes in the outlined plot and characterisation and the final chapter.

4. In chapter 4 Premchand uses certain plot strands while leaving out some others from the final chapter in the novel. According to the outline the chapter has a Dussehra celebration at the Zamindar's place where Hori comes with his contribution (*shagun*) for a fire-sacrifice (*dharti-yajna*). Where in the outline Hori gets this money from selling his barley crop in the novel he gets it by selling his bamboo stock. Again, where in the outline the Zamindar addresses the whole village collected at his place, in the novel he confides in Hori alone, telling him about his financial

difficulties. Secondly, what's also missing in the novel is the issue of increased taxes and Hori's shamefacedness over it. Besides this Jhunia and Gobar's meeting is also missing from the novel. In fact Jhunia and Gobar are not even present at the Zamindar's celebrations. This part of the chapter is totally changed in the novel. Gobar and Jhunia meet for the first time while getting the cow. This is where he proposes to her and she agrees.

5. In chapter 5 most of the plot outlines have been left out. Neither does Jhunia have a daughter (she has a son who is named Mangal—Goyanka) nor does Gobar leave for Calcutta after the panchayat verdict. Instead, Hori is faced with excommunication from his caste for keeping Jhunia at his place. Unlike the outline, Hori neither goes away on a pilgrimage nor mortgages his ancestral land. However, he does become a daily-wage labourer though not at the time he does in the outline but towards the end of the novel. In the novel Gobar flees to Lucknow instead of Calcutta. Sona's marriage finds mention in both the outline and the novel.

6. The story of chapter 6 is also missing from the final chapter 6 of the novel. In fact it seems the entire chapter outline is stillborn, hence missing from the chapter as it finally appears. In the novel Hori doesn't make enough money to get his land out of mortgage. He also doesn't fight with his brothers because of Mahua. It seems the author thought

otherwise than to include in the novel parts where Hori gets beaten up, fights his brothers in court, sees them lose the case and then experiences an uncharacteristic triumph at his victory. Perhaps Premchand thought the events too 'out of character' for the kind of man he wanted to portray. Or maybe he didn't want to show Hori in such a realist (yatharthvadi) light.

7. The story of Jhunias death and the subsequent adoption of her daughter by the Zamindar are also missing from the final chapter 7 of the novel. In Godan, the novel, Jhunias neither dies nor is her daughter (son) taken up by the Zamindar. In the novel Jhunias is alive till the end and her son, Mangal, is brought up by both his father and his grandfather. These changes are in no way cosmetic shifts but go on to affect the entire character of the novel.

8. Chapter 8 of the outline also comes out rather different in the final form. In the novel the Zamindar does not have two sons and neither does his son marry Jhunias daughter. Instead his only son Rudrapal marries Maltis younger sister, Saroj, and goes to England. This is where Rudrapals character like in the outline is excluded from further development. He is neither a municipal employee, nor a nationalist leader nor a social worker admired by the farmers. Instead he slaps a case of Rs 10 lakh against his father. This is actually a total departure from the outlined character of the Zamindars son.

9. Where in chapter 9 Hori decides to sell off his youngest daughter without the consent or knowledge of his wife he doesnt do so in the novel. Both Hori and his wife, Dhania, agree to sell their daughter, Rupa, for Rs 200 in the novel. The final chapter 9 also reveals Premchand's change of heart about Hori's wife's name. In the outline she's called Jhinki but in the novel Jhinki becomes Dhania.

10. Chapter 10 actually includes a lot from the authors original outline. Like the return of Gobar, who comes back a changed man! Though unlike the outline he doesnt come back spiritually-inclined but as a cunning man about town. The novel doesnt even mention his spiritual side and curiously enough neither does it mention his questionable accumulation of wealth. Hori, too is not shown as a man on his deathbed.

11. Chapter 11 does in fact tell Bhola's story but not in the way it's been outlined. Like in the outline, Bhola does get married a second time and faces the consequences of the marriage. But he does not live with Hori and does not resort to stealing in the absence of a job. The scandalous relationship between Bhola's young wife, Nohri, and his son, Jungi, is also missing from the novel. This change is attributed to the illicit relationship that in the novel develops between Nokheram and Nohri. This interesting shift from a scandalous step-mother-son relationship to an out-of-the-family extra-marital affair could be because of Premchand's natural

resistance to portraying base realism (yatharthvad). In both the outline and the novel Bhola is beaten up by his wife but his final end is missing from the novel.

12. Chapter 12 witnesses the death of Hori. In the outline Hori is a tired and defeated old man waiting for the end of his sad life. But what the outline does not mention is Hori becoming a daily wage labourer and finally dying of a heat-stroke. The novel on the other hand doesn't mention Gobar trying to help his father through his mother. In the outline at the death of his father Gobar carries out the *godan* but in the novel it is his mother, Dhaniam, who does it for her husband with a mere 20 *annas*. And it is with this act, which is both revolutionary and sacreligious, that the author creates a powerful sense of tragedy and irony in the novel. If on the other hand had the *godan* been carried out by Gobar the novel would have lacked

its revolutionary appeal and the towering position it now occupies in world literature.

Ideas such as agricultural fairs, development, literary movements, sugar mills and cooperative movements that Premchand mentions in the outline are also missing from the final novel. Perhaps with the not-so-notable exception of sugar mills which are mentioned in passing in the novel.

**Conclusion:** The original outline of *Godan*, the novel, opens up an awesome window to the hitherto unknown creative processes of Premchand, the writer. It not only has an historical significance as a documentary proof of the writer's facility with languages it also opens up aspects of the Hindi novel-in-progress that would be of immense interest to researchers and scholars. From this point of view the English outline of the Hindi novel, *Godan*, is an important and invaluable document in time.

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Kamal Kishore Goyanka, a scholar and academician who has done extensive research on Prem Chand. He has documented some findings that were hitherto unknown to readers of Prem Chand. He lives in Delhi.

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## **TEXT AND CONTEXT: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF DALIT CHARACTERS IN PREMCHAND AND OTHERS**

Subhash Sharma

Translated by  
The Author

Any literary piece is to be seen in terms of both text and context as it is set in a specific time, place and social background and has a purpose. Unlike the post-modernists who propound that there is no universal truth, no grand narrative, no one meaning and, therefore, they 'deconstruct' the text, it is imperative to relate the text in a specific context and to 'reconstruct' it in order to grasp the real meaning. Hence, for a social-cultural understanding of a literature one is required to sociologically analyse a literary piece. Here we select four Hindi novels – first two written in pre-independence period and the latter two written in post-independence period, viz., Rangbhumi by Premchand, Budhua Ki Beti by Pandeya Bechan Sharma 'Ugra', Parishishta by Giriraj Kishor, and Dharati Dhan Na Apna by Jagdish Chandra.

This sociological analysis of characterization of 'dalits' in Hindi novels is carried out in terms of following parameters:

- a) Socio-cultural base of Dalit characters.
- b) Dalit and non-Dalit interaction.
- c) Do Dalits protest or not?
- d) Novelist's background and vision.
- e) Which sort of realism works in the mind of the author?

The message conveyed by each novel.

## [I] Rangbhumi (Premchand)

**A. Socio-cultural Base:** The socio-cultural base of the novel 'Rangbhumi' is rural. Its theme is the beginning of the process of industrialization during British period-establishment of a factory in a village Pandepur (near Benaras, eastern U.P.) by acquiring the house sites as well as the entire land of the village. Different castes such as *Brahman* (Naik Ram Panda) and Rajput (K. Bharat Singh, Mahendra Kumar, etc.) as Upper Castes, *Ahir* (Bajrangi), Bania (Jagdhar) and *Tamoli* (Thakurdin) as backward castes, Chamar (Surdas, Mithua) and Pasi (Bhairo, Subhagi) as lower castes (dalits) are depicted in this novel. In terms of religion, three major religions of India: Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are well represented here. In terms of racial background, English officials (Mr. Clark) and Indians are depicted in this novel. As far as gender is concerned, both male and female characters are portrayed. The range of the novel expands from a village, namely Pandepur, to the city of Benaras and then to Rajputana (Rajasthan), Punjab, Garhwal and Poona.

**B. Interaction:** There are both intra-dalit and dalit-non-dalit interactions in this novel. On the one hand, within the Dalit community there is both co-operation and conflict. For example, Surdas (belonging to a Chamar-dalit-Caste) is harassed by another dalit, Bhairo, belonging to Pasi caste, by committing theft in the hut of the former and, by accusing him of having illicit

relationship with his (latter's) wife, Subhagi and eventually getting him punished by the Honorary Magistrate. On the contrary, despite such attempts for his character assassination, Surdas gives shelter to the ousted Subhagi as his sister. There is an inter-caste conflict in terms of attempting to outrage the modesty of Subhagi by two youths belonging to backward community (Vidyadhar and Ghisu). On this issue, Surdas does not compromise despite the pressure from the society. He gets them punished, so that nobody would dare to outrage the modesty of women. Further, unlike the traditional rural social structure in India, in Pandepur there are no separate settlements for different castes, especially for dalits. Moreover, all the villagers of different castes take part in social and religious functions like singing of devotional songs (bhajans) wherein the role of blind Surdas is very significant. Another dalit Bhairo also participates in such functions. Surdas is appreciated by all the village persons including Naik Ram Panda, belonging to the highest Brahmin caste. Surdas also takes milk, etc. from different villagers (especially from Bajrangi) free of cost for his nephew, Mithua. Here caste divisions exist but without conflict. Thus, Surdas even though he belongs to dalit community, does not face caste prejudices. Therefore, socially he is in the core group of the society, not on the margin. In reality, on the basis of 'achievement' of qualities like sacrifice, truthfulness, helpfulness, etc. (instead

of ascription), Surdas gets more respect from one and all. Even John Sewak, capitalist-industrialist, against whom Surdas had fought a long-drawn struggle due to the acquisition of his land by him by force, goes to the hospital (where Surdas is admitted) and begs pardon for his inhuman conduct. Not only this, Sophia, daughter of John Sewak, appreciated Surdas from the very beginning because of his many moral qualities. Even the tough and dictator-like district Collector, Mr. Clark, is also afraid of good persons like Surdas and repents that he had taken coercive action against such persons whose European counterparts commanded his respect. At the death of Surdas, Mr Clark says to Mahendra Kumar: "I fear not persons like you, but such persons (as Surdas) who rule people's hearts. It is a repentance of ruling here that in this country (India) we kill those persons whom we would have thought as god-like" (P.523). Thus, non-dalits respect him more than even dalits do.

**C. Protest:** Dalits have protested in this novel against their exploitation. The central dalit character, Surdas, has protested time and again when his land as well as house site were acquired by a capitalist, namely, John Sevak, through the district administration. There in the protest itself, he is killed by the bullet of the Collector. Surdas protested the land acquisition by force and without due payment on following grounds:

a) It is his ancestral property to

be preserved, not to be disposed off;

b) It is an open land used as pasture for the village animals;

c) It cannot be disposed off without the consent of the villagers;

d) He also wanted to construct a drinking well there for the use of passers-by and villagers.

Secondly, Subhagi, another dalit character, and Surdas caught hold of two village youths (Vidyadhar and Ghisu) when the latter tried to outrage her modesty at night in the house of Surdas, where she had taken shelter. Further despite request by the villagers to excuse the two accused boys, Surdas refused outright and got them punished under the rule of law. Thirdly, Bhairo accuses Surdas of having illicit relationship with his wife Subhagi and complains to the Honorary Magistrate, Raja Mahendra Kumar, who without making an impartial inquiry punishes both Surdas and Subhagi by fining them. But Surdas protest against this injustice before the court itself. Then a large number of people gather over there and they support Surdas economically and morally. They collect subscription voluntarily and make payment of the fine imposed.

However, in these three events though the victims are from the dalit community, the fact remains that they are victimized not simply because they are dalits. In the first event, Surdas's land is forcibly acquired along with other villagers' lands for industrialization—especially for

construction of a cigarette factory. Second event takes place when the two youths, from backward community, find it easy to exploit Subhagi when she was alone because Surdas, being a blind man, was not perceived to be a real obstruction. In the third event, Bhairo himself is a dalit and accuses another dalit for allegedly exploiting his wife. Further it is notable that Surdas is himself a leader, not a follower. He is capable of organizing a strong movement against the land acquisition and also against the partial judgement of the honorary magistrate, due to his strong will power. This firm determination is seen when his hut is burnt by some anti-social elements and his nephew Mithua asks repeatedly as to what will happen if such elements burnt his hut one lakh times, Surdas coolly replies that he would rebuild the hut one lakh times. Thus, his protest is organized, articulate and firmly determined due to his strong desire to protest against the injustice in a constructive Gandhian way of non-violence.

#### **D. Novelist's Background and**

**Vision:** Premchand was born in a lower-middle class family of Kayastha caste (an upper caste in Hindu caste system) in a village called Lamahi in Benaras in 1880. He was educated upto graduate level (B.A.) and was working as a teacher and Deputy Inspector of Schools under the British Government. This novel was written by him during 1922-1924. This was the period when

Indian National Congress had the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who turned the one-dimensional movement, limited to urban areas and the educated class only, to the masses in the vast rural areas. He also introduced new techniques of protest —non-violence, civil disobedience, demonstration, boycott of foreign goods, government jobs and government organizations like schools. He visited different parts of the country for actively involving the people at large. One such visit was to Gorakhpur (U.P.) on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, 1921, where Gandhiji delivered a passionate patriotic speech which impressed the writer Prem Chand very much. Therefore, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 1921, he resigned from the government job after serving for about 21 years under the British rule. Before this, his one collection of stories namely "Soz-e-watan", published in Urdu, was seized by the British Collector alleging it to be anti-government in spirit. Since then Prem Chand started writing in Hindi and changed his name from Nawab Rai to Prem Chand to avoid government's wrath. To him, literature always had a purpose (social, economic, cultural, political).

As far as his vision is concerned, he had a clear vision about the liberation of India from the British rule in general and that of masses from Zamindars and capitalists in particular. In this novel '*Rangbhumi*' the central character, Surdas, seems to be inspired and influenced by Mahatma Gandhi who stood

for the common people of the villages and was against the British Government. Surdas is one of the most common characters who is economically poor, a peasant by occupation, belonging to the lower caste of chamar (dalit), physically handicapped (blind), illiterate and a beggar. However, despite being weak he has extra-ordinary qualities such as having consideration for others, strong willpower, moral values, etc. He applies non-violence as a legitimate means for legitimate ends, does not tell a lie, and has a lot of self-confidence and courage.

On analysis of the novel, following points regarding his vision emerge:

a) Prem Chand is not bound by the middle class syndrome. Therefore, he transcends his social, cultural and economic background and makes a man from lower caste and class as the central character of then novel.

b) His vision goes beyond the limited area of town to the vast areas of villages.

c) He takes the side of women like Subhagi who are exploited by their husband under patriarchy. Thus, he stands for women's rights.

d) Through Surdas, Prem Chand has depicted the then national freedom struggle against the British rule. Like in Indian National Congress there are both liberals and radicals in this novel who oppose the British policy of Industrialisation at the cost of displacement and eviction of the villagers.

e) Prem Chand has shown the nexus between the capitalist class (John Sevak), Zamindar class (Kunwar Bharat Singh, Mahendra Kumar) and the colonial power (Mr. Clark). Prem Chand has also been successful in presenting instances of transcendence of class; for example, Sophia moves herself from the capitalist class and Vinay from the zamindar class. Thus, they 'declass' themselves. Further, Sophia, A Christian, shows her liking for freedom to choose one of many gods in Hinduism.

#### **E. Type of Realism and Message:**

Here the realism depicted by Prem Chand is neither 'socialist realism' nor a pure 'critical realism'. He was impressed by Gandhiji and Arya Samaj in his real life and in this novel Prem Chand appears with his voice of a true nationalist and a true writer of India's national freedom struggle. He has not depicted realism in status quo and naked form, i.e., naturalism because he found different shades of reality existing side by side as well as the potentialities of change. He brought authenticity by depicting different dimensions of different characters in 'Rangbhumi'. He has not made Surdas an absolute hero deliberately by showing some of his weaknesses also though his strength is more highlighted than his weaknesses. For instance, Surdas owns 10 bighas of land and can get sufficient food for his living by giving this land on adhiya to someone in the village but he is not shown to do so, rather he earns his

living by begging. Secondly, though his nephew Mithua is in bad company, he has burnt Bhairo's shop and also does not care for Surdas, yet while admitted in the hospital and lying on his death bed, he asked Mithua whether he would perform all the rituals for him or not because he was the only heir from his family and caste. Thus, he is till conscious of his family and caste ties. Thirdly, Surdas is very much anxious to go to Gaya for "tarpan" (salvation) of his ancestors. This concern for the dead, the past, that is, history, of an element of Indian tradition which has been quite realistically presented by Prem Chand.

Prem Chand's realism seems to be close to critical realism. Prem Chand's '*Rangbhumi*' has peasants, untouchables and women as groups. Therefore, group character is significant but at the same time the character of Surdas is prominently depicted with various positive qualities of a hero (though he may not be called a hero, he is certainly a central character). Surdas rallies groups and individuals against the colonial design. Therefore, Prem Chand's realism may be called 'humanistic critical realism'.

One finds following messages from '*Rangbhumi*':

a) Industrialisation is not the panacea for all problems like poverty, unemployment, etc. because the promoters of industrialization intend to open only those factories (like a cigarette factory here) which are more and more

profit-oriented irrespective of the fact whether they generate enough employment or not.

b) One finds a struggle for protecting women's dignity from the clutches of wicked persons. It is not women's liberation of western type where women are in total opposition to the males. Rather here Prem Chand depicts women's emancipation through male (Surdas)-female (Subhagi) partnership. This incisive insight is very appreciable, especially during the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

c) National freedom struggle (depicted in the activities of Seva Samiti) is the most important for all the castes and communities and though the novel's main focus is centered in Benaras, the struggle extends to Rajputana, Punjab, Garhwal and Poona.

d) One finds a broad representation of Indian social reality in this novel in terms of a large number of characters from different backgrounds—social, economic, educational, political, religious, etc.

e) Though hero is not very essential in a novel, yet the central character matters in terms of his or her qualities of achievement and especially his or her vision of the society.

f) The novel depicts social life in a complicated and complex way, therefore, realism of this novel is also complicated, complex and multi-dimensional. In short, a novel cannot

be a short-cut genre of realism as human life is never short-cut. In terms of both range and depth, therefore, *'Rangbhumi'* is a major novel. However, to be more specific, its range also covers some insignificant events such as Tahir Ali's family affairs, closeness of Sophia and Clark leading to their visit to Udaipur without being married. Similarly, in order to show his patriotism, events such as suicide by Vinay Singh, coincidence of the meeting of Vinay and Sophia in the railway compartment while returning from Udaipur, Vinay and Sophia staying in a tribal village in Rajputana maintaining chastity despite the use of some indigenous medicines for hypnotizing Sophia by Vinay seem to be unrealistic.

g) Prem Chand seems to stand for the liberation of all deprived sections like peasants, women, untouchables (dalits), and illiterates in their fight against the nexus of the capitalists, zamindars and imperialists.

h) Finally, Prem Chand stands for a progressive and scientific vision by opposing superstitions, communal prejudices, caste biases and other parochial and primordial ties.

## [II] BUDHUA KI BETI

**A. Socio-cultural Base:** The novel *'Budhua Ki beti'* is based on the urban society of Benaras in U.P. Different castes like Brahman (Aghori), Rajput (Ghanshyam), Kayastha as well as dalits (Bhangis like Budhua) figure in this novel. As far as religions are concerned, three

major religions of India—Hinduism, Islam and Christianity — are very well depicted there. Even in terms of race, English officials like Mr. Young (District Judge) and his wife, Mrs. Young, as well as other European characters are depicted. Similarly, both male and female characters, literate and illiterate, young and old ones are depicted. Though the novel begins and centres around Benaras city, it ends with the departure of one main female character, Radha, to Europe along with Mr. Young as his heiress.

**B. Interaction:** There are both intra-dalit and dalit-non-dalit interactions in the novel. Radha, being a dalit girl, is sexually exploited by an upper caste man, Ghanshyam (Rajput) while Aghori Manushyanand, belonging to another higher caste (Brahman), is wholeheartedly helping the untouchables' liberation as a catalyst agent. He openly defies old traditional customs and sanctions against the untouchables. The messiah of the dalits, B.R. Ambedkar, became active on the national scene for launching a movement of dalits' temple entry in 1930 for the first time in Indian history. But, before that in 1928 itself novelist 'Ugra' allowed dalits' entry to Vishwanath temple in Benaras in his novel *'Budhua Ki beti'* under the inspiration of a central character Aghori Manushyanand. That shows that as an author, 'Ugra' was much ahead of his times. Further, about fifty volunteers inspired by Aghori Baba worked tirelessly for the emancipation of dalits though



they hailed from upper caste and middle class background. Furthermore, there is close interaction between Hindus and Christians as shown in the characters such as Aghori Baba and the priest of the Church, Father Johnson, Aghori Baba and Mr. Young (District Judge). Further, Liakat Hussain and Rahman from Muslim community have negative interaction and they sexually exploit Budhua's wife, Sukli, on the pretext of blessing her with a son through the angels. But interestingly, Budhua's daughter helps and cares when Liakat Hussain suffers from illness and starvation later in advanced age. She and Aghori Baba give him shelter in Ashram. Further within dalits themselves, there are different opinions—old generation of dalits, more often, want a peaceful compromise while the young generation is in a mood to revolt against the system itself. While the old generation of non-dalits is more status quoists, the young generation of their volunteers is ready to give a better space for dalits in the prevailing relationship.

**C. Protest:** In this novel, sweepers were organized by the inspiration of Aghori Baba and under the leadership of Budhua from amongst themselves to fight against the social, economic and cultural oppression by the upper castes. First they make symbolic protest and later they go on strike and do not clean individual and public latrines, drains, roads, etc. The administration—both civil and police—fails in negotiation with them. They later return to work only when

their demands of building new houses, enhancement of wages, construction of a new temple, opening of a new school, and imparting new technical skills to their youth are accepted with dignity. Thus, their demands are multi-dimensional; social, economic and cultural. But, it is interesting to note that in the beginning when a Vaidya and allopathic doctors refused to treat Budhua's first wife on the ground of untouchability (social cause) and also because of his poverty (economic cause), Budhua decided to make individual protest by declaring not to clean the latrines of any Vaidya or doctor even if he has to clean the excreta of dogs. This individual protest later gets more organized and collective mobilization takes the form of social protest that is inspired and organized by Aghori Baba but led by Budhua himself. The dalit masses join in it. The success of their collective strike, a direct conflict, clearly shows the way for future action.

#### **D. Novelist's Background and**

**Vision:** Ugra was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, 1900, in Mirzapur (U.P.) and died in 1967. He was born in a Brahman family with lower middle class background in a rural area. While studying he had composed a poem on Mahatma Gandhi. Further, he wrote a story '*Gandhi Ashram*'. That shows the influence of Gandhism on him. He also joined national freedom struggle and went to jail. However, later he became disillusioned with Gandhian liberalism

in 1923-1924 and talked of even violent means for nation's liberation. His stories '*Swadesh Ke Liye*' (1923), '*Woh Din*' and '*Sundari Hinsai*' (1924) were in this spirit, and these were a critique of Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. He used to write revolutionary stories as he was very much impressed by the Soviet Revolution of 1917. However, he did not join any socialist political organization. He joined 'Matwala' group of non-conformist writers in Kolkata. His first anthology of revolutionary stories, namely '*Chingariyan*', was published in 1926. Out of twelve stories of this collection, six were concerned with the background of Soviet Revolution while the remaining six were based on Indian freedom struggle. But because of its revolutionary appeal, it was seized by the British Government on 26 May, 1928<sup>1</sup>. Ugra remained unmarried and, therefore, believed in unrestricted sexuality, even to the extent of prostitution. In childhood, he used to take part in *Ramlila* both as *Lakshman* and *Sita*.

Ugra was moderately educated and he gave due space to poverty, sexual exploitation and untouchability in his writings. When he edited '*Vijaya*' issue of '*Swadesh*' in October, 1924, it was seized and a case was instituted against him and others for waging a war against the State and then he was punished with 9 months' imprisonment<sup>2</sup>. Ugra had joined active journalism and his ideal was V.V. Paradkar, the editor of *Aaj*. He did not believe in the theory of 'art for art sake'

rather his literature had a revolutionary ethos against British rulers, exploiters of women and the caste system. His multi-dimensional vision is reflected in '*Budhua Ki Beti*' which is a creative work of both dalits' discourse and women's discourse. Though Premchand had written '*Rangbhumi*' earlier in 1925 depicting a dalit blind man, namely Surdas, as central character, yet dalits' discourse per se was not the theme of that novel. On the other hand, '*Budhua Ki Beti*' is purely a dalit discourse, by a non-dalit writer who, despite having no self-experience, has been successful in depicting dalits' and women's exploitation simultaneously by having 'empathy', in word and deed. One of his main characters, Aghori Baba transcends his middle class and upper caste (Brahman) background while inspiring the exploited dalit masses as a catalyst. Ugra sincerely realized that caste system was very complex, therefore, to break it he created the character of Aghori Baba who, being *Aghori*, did not believe in untouchability. Thus, Ugra through Aghori Baba, has been successful in his novel to liberate the lowest sweeper caste in the hierarchised Hindu social order.

**E. Type of Realism and Message:** Ugra has been accused of naturalism and naked depiction by many critics in Hindi literature like Banarsidas Chaturvedi<sup>3</sup>, Nalin V. Sharma<sup>4</sup> and others. However, it is not true at least in the novel of '*Budhua Ki Beti*' because he has just not photographed the social

reality as it exists in naked form rather he also shows the potentialities and possibilities of the down-trodden untouchables and women. In fact, he was an activist writer who participated in the movement of freedom struggle as well as literary movement for social change. His novel is explosive and ahead of his time and, therefore, many of his colleagues and contemporary critics could not digest his rebel writings like 'Budhua Ki Beti'. During 1920's, national movement of freedom struggle had two streams of action-liberal and radical. Ugra highlighted the radical side of social reality in order to bring structural social changes in the system. He had creative energy to diagnose the existing social problems vividly and minutely. Therefore, he has gone into the depth of social situation of untouchability. His novel's range is not very large, but its depth is certainly considerable. Therefore, his novel 'Budhua Ki Beti', and other writings had a large number of readers and his writing had many editions. He transcended his high caste background and captured the delicate and minute shades of reality by empathizing with the untouchables and women. Though he had no direct self-experience, he had a forward-looking vision. The type of realism depicted there is 'subaltern realism'. The messages of the novel are as following:

(a) The upper castes have to give due space to the down-trodden dalits in a dignified way.

(b) Dalits' liberation demands a multi-dimensional strategy (social, economic, political and cultural) simultaneously so that the exploiters may not take undue advantage of their subordinate position in a society in one way or other.

(c) Women are as much down-trodden as untouchables; therefore, they deserve a similar kind of liberation. Further, dalit women suffer from social, economic and gender discrimination— thus a triple curse becomes the destiny of dalit women.

(d) Christianity does not believe in untouchability as Hinduism and Islam do in practice in India. Though, according to the novelist, Christian Missionaries may be appreciated for having a positive view towards untouchables as far as appropriate interaction is concerned, yet they have also a narrow motive of conversion of the down-trodden untouchables. Therefore, in the ultimate analysis, they are also not true and genuine friends of dalits.

(e) Dalits are so much oppressed that the leadership for social change does not automatically emerge on its own rather it requires a catalyst agent from outside in order to inspire and mobilize them in such a way that after sometime when the movement gets momentum a genuine leadership may emerge from amongst themselves.

### [III] Parishishta

**A. Socio-cultural Base:** The novel 'Parishishta' was published in 1984. It is based in a village in western U.P.

but extends to an urban area in western U.P. where Bawan Ram is working in a factory. Later, it extends to Delhi where there is an I.I.T. wherein central character, Anukul Ram, takes his admission to Engineering course of study. In this novel there are several dalits—Anukul Ram, his father Bawan Ram, Parvati (mother of Anukul), Ram Ujagir, his father Suvaran Choudhary and Baburam and upper castes like Rajendra Singh (M.P.), Khanna, Nilamma, Prof. Malkani as well as backwards like Mr. Chaudhary (Member of Parliament). Bawan Ram is educated only upto eighth standard but Parvati is illiterate.

**B. Interaction:** The novelist has depicted intra-dalit and dalit-non-dalit interaction very vividly. Dalit characters such as Ram Ujagir and Anukul fight for the cause of dalit whole-heartedly but another dalit, a Balmiki boy, (Baburam) is unable to fight the exploitation and ultimately escapes. Though Nilamma and Prof. Malkani belong to upper castes, they have true empathy for dalits. However, Bawan Ram, because of less education and rural socialization, suspects Nilamma of influencing his son Anukul for making love. Similarly, Ram Ujagir's mother, sister-in-law and other family members as well as villagers also suspect her of influencing him for making love. But the truth is otherwise. Therefore, Nilamma clarifies her position strongly at both places. She represents women's category as far as exploitation under patriarchy (where a dalit male thinks

himself superior to an upper caste female) is concerned but at the same time she transcends her caste background (Brahmin) and takes the side of dalits Ram Ujagir and Anukul. She fights for the accommodation for Anukul's father with the establishment. Thus she identifies her cause of women with that of dalits for a united struggle against the exploitation of caste and patriarchy. Similarly, Prof. Malkani, a non-dalit, supports Ram Ujagir. On the other hand, upper caste students like Khanna and authorities discriminate against dalits.

**C. Protest:** In this novel dalit students protest when they are taunted— in the hostel and campus— by the upper caste students who remind them of their forefathers' traditional dirty occupations of leather works, etc. Further, they also protest when they are abused and assaulted by Khanna and his team. When the administration of the Institute tries to ignore the death of Ram Ujagir, a dalit student, the dalit students and their parents, with the support of some non-dalit students like Nilamma and non-dalit teachers like Prof. Malkani, protest against them and declare it as a death forced by society against its system. Ram Ujagir protests with a zeal against the exploitative system in his daily life but ultimately he surrenders due to the pressure of adverse circumstances imposed by the Institute in terms of not allowing his readmission. Difference between the protest by Anukul and Ram Ujagir is expressed in the letter that

Ram Ujagir wrote before his death; "I was struggling with enthusiasm while you are struggling with an understanding... You have restlessness to change, not hatred against your circumstances. You have within yourself a longdrawn struggle, not a revolt of a spark. By change you mean to change from within while I thought only the outer change is change<sup>5</sup>". Thus it is clear that Ram Ujagir was the first dalit to sacrifice for the cause of the entire community and that cause is still pursued by Anukul in a more sustained struggle.

#### **D. Novelist's Background and**

**Vision:** The novelist Giriraj Kishor was born in an Agrawal (trader) family in Muzaffarnagar (U.P.). He took higher education and got a job at I.I.T. Kanpur (as Director, Creative Writing and Publication Centre). He hailed from a middle caste and class. He believes: "There is nothing like Scheduled Caste, rather there is a scheduled mentality, whosoever is pushed aside by the elite class which has hegemony, becomes the scheduled one<sup>6</sup>. He transcends his middle caste and class background and empathises with the dalits. According to him, it is not necessary that for writing on dalits' consciousness, one has necessarily to be a dalit by birth, rather it is enough if one puts oneself in that situation and realises the pangs of the system minutely. The novelist has a futuristic vision to highlight the exploitation of the students from the down-trodden class, especially from rural

areas. They have not only monetary problems in purchasing costly books and instruments but also social problems of interaction with higher caste and class students. They cannot speak alien language, namely English, which is the medium of instruction in the technical institutions in India. Thus the novelist does not merely depict the social reality from caste angle but also from class and cultural angles. Further, the author has been a keen observer while depicting the subordinate status of women in society in general and educational institutions in particular. Actually, women face similar kinds of obstacles as dalits do because both issues (caste and gender) are decided by the local society— upper caste hegemony and patriarchy respectively.

#### **E. Type of Realism and Message:**

The novelist has succeeded in realistically depicting various shades of realism at individual, group and society levels. For instance, Bawan Ram and his Chamar community has faced discrimination from non-dalits who considered them low. However, dalits also have intra-dalit hierarchy of discrimination and the Chamar community looks down Balmiki (Sweeper) community. After taking admission in the I.I.T., Anukul finds there on Balmiki student (Baburam) with whom nobody is ready to share a room in the hostel, therefore Anukul decides to share the room with him. But when he discloses all these fact to his parents in a letter,

his mother reacts strongly because, in her view, her caste is higher in the caste hierarchy and her family will be outcast by the entire Chamar community and, therefore, she requests her husband to write to Anukul to change the room somehow. Secondly, when Bawan Ram goes to Delhi for taking admission of his son through the help of the local Member of Parliament. Mr. Chaudhary, both father and son face disrespect from the upper caste visitors there on the one hand and M.P.'s wife on the other. While M.P.'s wife tries to keep a distance from Bawan Ram and Anukul on the basis of caste, the M.P., Mr. Chaudhary, does not maintain that distance, rather he openly admits that he won the previous election with the help of Bawan Ram and his community's votes. Moreover, the M.P. stands for the unity of backwards and dalits as, in his view, in the exploitation of dalits and backwards, there is a difference only of degree. While backwards are given food in different utensils of upper caste, dalits are not given utensils. But both realise the pangs of wounds, though the wound of dalits is deeper than that of the backwards. Thus in this novel, the class, caste and cultural (language) exploitation go hand in hand. Therefore, realism depicted here is close to Marxist realism, but it is an Indianised Marxist realism wherein caste exploitation exists in addition to class exploitation. We get following messages from this novel:

(a) As existing in the society neither

all upper castes are bad nor are all dalits good, hence a broader viewpoint needs to be taken.

(b) Dalits and backwards should unite to overthrow the feudal power of the upper castes.

(c) The hegemony of English language should be broken and Hindi should be given due place and recognition in all the streams of life including the higher educational institutes.

(d) Class differentiation/division is more important than caste differentiation/division.

(e) Despite the provision of reservation for the Scheduled Castes in educational institutions, the upper castes' mentality of looking down upon them still exists in society at large though upper castes do not mind any kind of reservation for foreign students who speak English.

(f) The Bureaucratism of higher educational institutions has badly damaged the budding talents in different ways but unfortunately the power-that-be of such institutions does not make any kind of introspection about its malfunctioning, rather it more often blames the students and their parents who are the victims of the system, for not coping with the requirements of the educational system.

#### (IV) Dharti Dhan Na Apna

**A. Socio-cultural Base:** The socio-cultural base of this novel is a village of Punjab. This village is divided into

several settlements, especially those of the upper castes/middle castes, on the one hand and the harijans, on the other. The settlement of Harijans is known as "Chamadari". This reflects socio-cultural background of the village. However, the central character of the novel, Kali, had worked in Kanpur town and returned to his village after working there for six years. When he was away in the city, he had nostalgia for his village life but when he reached there, he was disillusioned with the hard reality of casteism and various types of exploitations in village life. There are upper castes, middle castes like Jats, Bania and Kumbhkar and lower castes like Chamar. There are Hindu characters in majority and Christian and Sikh characters in minority.

**B. Interaction:** There are both intra-dalit and dalit-non-dalit interactions, the latter leading to conflicts. Significant conflict is between Jats and Chamars wherein Chhajju Shah takes the side of jats and does not provide money and material to Chamars who are struggling against the Jats in terms of boycotting their work due to non-payment of due wages. However, there are also intra-dalit conflicts. Two Chamar families of Mangu, who is the semi-bonded labour of Choudhary Harnam Singh, and of Nikku and Prito are on one side, supporting the landowners (because they are also benefited from Choudhary harnam Singh's family through Mangu) and Kali and other Chamars are on the other side. Further,

there is an interaction of the village Chamars under the leadership of Kali with communist leaders of the region (Dr. Bishan Das and Tahal Singh) and also with priests of the local Church and temple. While the Hindu priest does not allow Chamars to take water from his drinking well at the time of crisis (when the drinking wells of Chamardari are sunk due to floods), the Church priest allows them to use his hand pump in the beginning but due to filth, the Church priest's wife refuses them to use that later. The communist leaders do not help them in crisis despite their preachings because in their view class antagonism is not ripe and small help will lacerate the rebellion spirit. Similarly, Church priest does not solemnise the marriage of Kali and Gyano when she is pregnant and there is a fear of ex-communication by the community. This shows that though he preaches for conversion of dalits in normal time, he does not help them in a crisis. In this novel, there is no major conflict between upper caste and lower caste; rather one between middle caste of Jats and lower caste of Chamars at both social and economic levels.

**C. Protest:** In this novel, there are two types of protest:

(i) Social protest because of disrespect shown by Jats to Chamars; and

(ii) Economic protest because of non-payment of due wages to dalit labourers for their work.

However, it is a fact that economic protest is more prominent because it is directly concerned with the question of survival of the chamars and if they do not get wages due to them, they would starve. On the other hand, Choudhary Harnam Singh (landlord) starts beating Santu and Jitu (dalits) simply on the basis of his suspicion that the latter had damaged his maize crops. He abuses chamars on several occasions, hence Kali protests.

#### **D. Novelist's Background and**

**Vision:** The novelist was born in a middle class and caste family in a village in Punjab and got higher education. He spent most of his adolescent days in Ralhan, a village of his maternal uncle, in Punjab. There he found a Harijan settlement 'Chamadari' on the outskirts of the village. The upper/middle castes had to obey certain social sanctions and traditions while going to Harijans' settlement. But the author broke those sanctions by eating with a Chamar family. He was a student of Economics, therefore he used to see economic causes behind those social sanctions. Chamars did not have any right over the land they cultivated, and not even on the house-sites they lived on. He admits that he did not experience himself the cruel realities of a Harijan's life, yet he was successful in seeing them closely. He has empathised with the relevant references of the Harijans' life objectively and has not imposed his opinion or ideology on the story, as he admits so

in the Introduction of the novel. His vision is very deep indeed as he was the first Hindi novelist to depict Harijans' life so vividly in multi-dimensional ways. He has not been a slave of any ideology, political party or caste lobby. However, it may be said that the author's vision is limited to protest only, not to a full-fledged movement.

#### **E. Type of Realism and Message:**

The author has depicted various shades of social reality and the realism depicted here is close to the dialectics of Marxist realism wherein social, political and economic forces complement each other in a dialectical way. Here class exploitation is supplemented by caste exploitation, hence it is an Indianised Marxist realism. But his realism is not of an orthodox marxist nature because he has not praised uncritically the communist leaders like Tahal Singh and Dr. Bishan Das, who do not help Kali and his fellows who are struggling against the feudal landlords socially and economically. While most of the Chamar families are on the verge of starvation, Comrade Bishan Das does not give them food grains or cash. Similarly on the religious front, the Church priest also does not help them by giving something in cash or kind because he is more interested in their conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. However, the Chamar community did not agree to the suggestion for conversion. Finally, on inter-personal front, a gentleman of understanding like Lallu Pahalwan also



does not help Kali because his caste men (Jats) would get annoyed with him. Further, it is true that in the village life there is also village kinship under which girls and boys of even the same caste in the village cannot marry each other since they are treated like brothers and sisters. This social fact prevailing in North India restricts Kali and Gyano to marry. Then Kali goes to Church priest and wants to adopt Christianity in case his marriage is allowed but the priest refuses to solemnise their marriage because the girl is simply a minor. Next alternative before Kali and Gyano was to leave the village. But Kali is mentally not prepared to do so, hence when Gyano becomes pregnant, her mother and brother give her poison in order to avoid insult to the community. This depiction of the fear of the sanctions from community and society in rural Indian context is very realistic.

The message of the novel is that village customs and traditions are deep-rooted and it is very difficult to challenge them and live in the village at the same time. On the other hand, the poverty of chamars, due to not holding any piece of land as well as having no alternative occupation, makes them subordinate to the land-holding Jats of the village in more than one respect. Therefore, an urgent need, to solve the problem, is land reforms and it is seriously conveyed through this novel from beginning to the end.

**Conclusion:** From the above

sociological analysis of text and context of four Hindi novels, especially their characterisation of dalits (the oppressed) we come to following points of conclusion:

First, all four novels are social documentary novels wherein various aspects of the life, as it is lived, are realistically depicted.

Second, dalit characters, more often than not, belong to a peripheral group in society.

Third, dalits face both inter-group and intra-group conflicts in their daily life.

Fourth, dalits protest generally on their own (Rangbhumi, Parishishta, Dharti Dhan Na Apna) and also when guided by some catalyst agent (Budhua Ki Beti). In all these novels, dalits react to and challenge the existing social, political and economic structures in varying degrees.

Fifth, to realistically depict dalit characters in a novel, it does not seem to be necessary for the writer to be a born dalit. Rather his world-vision and the capacity to empathise with dalits by transcending his social (caste) and economic (class) background can prove to be helpful for enabling him in carrying out his mission. The creative writers have to both 'declass' and 'decaste' themselves. That is, they should move forward from mere 'sympathy' to 'empathy', then the non-dalits' writing would be relevant and successful despite their lack of 'self-experience' (which only

a born dalit has). But this empathy also requires a high level of creative imaginativeness, artistry, intellectual vigour and minute observation of contemporary social reality. These four novelists have succeeded in this regard.

Sixth, every novel has a message of some kind-social, economic, political or cultural-connected with a particular time and place.

Seventh the relationship between literature and society is indirect, associational, multi-dimensional and complex; i.e., there are several mediations between the two.

Eighth, political, social and economic levels of reality are competing with one another in India, therefore it is often difficult for any novelist to decide as to which level is dominant.

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**Note:** The word 'chamar' occurs, as used by the authors– editor.

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## THE TRUTH ABOUT 1857

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### Background

Was the revolt of 1857 the first war of independence a spontaneous revolt of soldiers or a religious war? Or was it a war between two civilizations – Christianity and Islam – as it is understood in India today? If it was the first war of independence, what would we call earlier, similar rebellions led by tribals that erupted against the British empire? Why have these rebellions been ignored while the soldiers' revolt of 1857 has been called the first war of Independence? These are a few questions to consider about the 1857 revolt.

It's true, today there is a lot of debate about 1857 but there was no doubt there was a rebellion against British rule. In spite of all this debate, we have to accept that this rebellion, however inspired by various vested interests, created an atmosphere of hatred against the British.

After a few years, if not immediately, this atmosphere of hatred developed into the specific goal of freedom for India. Immediately after the end of this war in 1858 a fearful silence descended that was not broken either by the intellectuals, literary figures, warriors, rajas, or nawabs. Rather, it was the tribal warriors who broke this silence and continued armed attacks on the British army up to the beginning of the next century. The center of the controversy is on the very intention of this so-called freedom struggle. Hence the following questions:

1. If 1857 was the first war of independence then why were the earlier rebellions not called wars of independence? Is there some conspiracy or ill intention behind this?

2. The second debate concerns whether it was really a freedom struggle fought against the British empire. Was it merely a soldiers' revolt prompted by injured religious sentiments? Was it a clash of two cultures? Or rather was it triggered by the clashes of personal or political interests of the rajas or nawabs?

Thus the debate is around two major issues: first, why does history ignore the long history of rebellions before 1857 to declare this soldiers' revolt the first war of independence? Second, the definition of it as a war of independence is itself questionable. In what follows, I will analyze these points.

While there is no doubt that these rebellions were fought against the British rulers before 1857, they were waged not by the rajas and maharajas, but rather by the tribals. These rebellions were not organized to gain any power or territory. They were against the English, who had imposed a new, exploitative social system on tribal communities. The tribals fought against the British army with confidence, relying completely upon their own strength and indigenous weapons. In fact, the tribals had their own collective community life and political system based on equality, freedom, and brotherhood. They also

had their own elected administrative system at both the village and state levels. They wanted to retain their own systems.

It is an unquestionable fact that before 1857 tribal communities of both Jharkhand and Khandesh (Maharashtra) had offered a clarion call of revolt. Before the so-called first war of independence various tribal communities were fighting very bravely against the British in many distant reaches of India. They did not allow the British to grow their roots in those areas.

Ninety years before 1857, in 1766, the Pahadias of Jharkhand took up arms against the British. The war continued until 1778. After that a chain of revolts took place in Jharkhand.

At that time in these tribal areas the forest and village lands belonged to the people and not the nawabs, rajas, or the British. Though it is true that these rajas and nawabs were plundering the people, it is also a fact that they never disturbed or interfered in their cultural life and administrative systems. Initially, even the British could not reach these far-flung areas inhabited by the tribals.

The trouble started when the British started cutting the old forests of Manbhum and Damini-e-koh (the present Santal Pargana) for the extension of the railways. This dislocated the tribals on a large scale.

At the same time the British

introduced the zamindari system, a new system of collecting revenue. Under this system village lands where tribals had previously been doing collective farming were distributed among zamindars and brokers. As a result, people revolted on a large scale against this revenue system. The tribals considered both the British and the zamindars, as well as their brokers, their enemies because they were forcing this system upon them. Their struggle was thus against all those who were agents of British rule, both English and Indian: police, commissioners, darogas, officials, bailiffs, zamindars, or moneylenders. This was the real people's war. It was neither for religion nor greed for power. Rather, they were adamant to continue their own administrative system, their way of life, culture, and language. They wanted to retain their land rights over the forests, and their human rights of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. Their aim was never to acquire estates, kingdoms, or power.

It was thus a conspiracy of historians who intentionally did not record these rebellions in history. In fact, tribal rebellions were fought for political rights. They were fought to continue their own native system in the face of the new foreign system that was being forced upon them. The prevalent native system that was practiced by the tribals was a collective decision-making process based on consensus. All lands belonged to the village, and they cultivated them

collectively. They had no notion of property. The whole village and its land and forests were owned by the people who lived in it.

Thus these revolts took the shape of class wars because they were fought between the poor people of India and their exploiters, both foreign and Indian.

### **Jharkhand**

These rebellions were steps towards the greater struggle for independence. The first was the Pahadia rebellion of 1766 in Jharkhand fought under the leadership of Ramana Ahladi. Soon after in 1781 Rani Sarveshari raised the flag of rebellion.

In the first week of January, 1784, Tilka Manjhi, along with a group of tribal warriors, captured Bhagalpur, Munger, and Santal, Pargana District. Tilka killed Augustus Cleveland, the Commissioner of Bhagalpur, with his arrow after seeing him rape a tribal girl. To avenge this the British then arrested him and tied him to the legs of four horse-carts and dragged him from Sultanpur to Bhagalpur. Yet he did not die until finally he was hanged from a tree at the crossroad of Bhagalpur.

- Vishnu Manki took command of the Bundu rebellion in 1797-98.
- A struggle started in 1800 in Tamad under the leadership of Dukhan Manki, soon erupting into a full-fledged rebellion and lasting until 1808.
- Another Munda revolt of Tamad took place in 1819-20.

- At the same time, Rugdev and Konta Munda started the Kol rebellion.
- In the same year the 'Ho' rebellion also took place.
- Again in 1828 and 1832 Bindrai and Singhrai revived the Kol rebellion, and the Kols captured the royal fort. Thus the tribal rebels constituted independent government well before 1857.
- Throughout this period, the administration, police, zamindars, and moneylenders – in connivance with the local Darogas – continued committing barbaric atrocities against tribals. This led people to revolt in 1853-56. With the slogans "Hul Bahar Zitkar" and "Hul Zegal Zitkar" the Santal-Hool revolt began under the leadership of Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav. Ten thousand tribals were killed in this revolt and thousands were arrested or forcefully driven away. People supported this revolution with their hearts and souls, but also with money, weapons, clothes, and food for the rebels. All the poor people, both Adivasi and non-Adivasi, joined in the Santal Hool.
- The tribal revolt of 1766 had reached its peak in the Santal Hool of 1856, but the fire of revolt kept quietly smouldering until 1895. In that year Birsa Munda led another big rebellion known as "Ulgulan." This war was fought against the new revenue system and in an effort to recapture their

lands and forests from the British, zamindars, and moneylenders who had usurped their lands unscrupulously. This continued well past 1900.

- The Santal revolt burst forth for the last time in 1902. This was taken forth by the Kharwars, Manjhis, Korwas, Kokhas, Talangars, Khadias, Gonds and Mundas.

### **Maharashtra**

- In the lap of the Satpura Mountains the tribal-inhabited Khandesh revolted against the British in 1825. Their rebellion continued until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British could not establish peace in those areas even with their wealth of money, swords, and guns. The credit of the first rebellion against the British also goes to Khandesh and the tribal communities of Puna, Nasik, and Thane in Maharashtra.
- In 1876 thousands of Bhils in Madhya Pradesh got together to fight against the British. The British rounded up thousands of them and put them to the gallows on trees.

### **Karnataka**

- Rani Chenamma waged war against the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, around 1824. Thus Rani Chenamma revolted against the British 33 years before the Rani of Jhansi. Chenamma also fought against the British to make her adopted son heir to the throne, but the British court did not agree. After the arrest of the Rani, this war turned into a people's war. The revolt was

led by the brave Rayanna, a Dhangar tribal of Sangoli, who worked as the revenue collector in the court. Rayanna was hanged on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1831.

### **Kerala**

- "Neeli," the great woman warrior, with Talakkar Chandu and Kurchia tribals in Kerala stood bravely against the British forces. They were hanged.

### **Andhra Pradesh**

- On 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1922, Alluray Sitaram Raju openly established a front against British forces. Dozens of British soldiers and officers were killed. This war was also against the moneylenders and drinking establishments run by both the government and private people. Sitaram Raju also fought for decentralization of power through the Panchayati Raj. By this time people had realized what colonization meant. By then Gandhi had also stepped into the politics of the country. It is strange that Gandhi condemned Alluray for revolting against the British. But it was even more surprising that the same Gandhi and his Congress Party praised Alluray after he was killed. In India this kind of double talk has existed for ages. It is because of this double talk that tribal revolts were never considered as freedom struggles.
- Bhima Gond fought against the Nizam on the question of land and was hanged.

### **Rajasthan**

- Govind Guru revolted in Rajasthan against the barbaric rule of the Rajas

and the British government. At the behest of Rajput Rajas of Rajasthan, the British army killed 1500 tribals overnight while they were on their way to offer coconuts as a symbol of worship to Govind Guru in Bansvada of Manbhurn District.

### **NORTH EAST**

#### **Meghalaya**

- The revolt against the East India Company started as early as 1774 by elected tribal sardars called Ciams and by some rajas. In some areas of the northeastern state now called Meghalaya the British attacked the Khasis but were defeated. The first battle of Jayantia Raja against Major Hanikar was fought from 1774-1821.
- There were ripples of discontent even against the East India Company's officials who forcefully entered Meghalaya and started constructing roads and invading their territory indiscriminately. The British attacked Tirot Singh on 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1829 because he did not accept the agreement they offered. This rebellion lasted for three long years. Though they considered abandoning the struggle, eventually the British convinced some of the associates of Tirot Singh to accept the agreement, and Tirot Singh was put into solitary confinement when the battle ended.
- After a few years the British issued an order preventing people from burying their dead in their graveyards

and carrying weapons on festival days. They also imposed punitive taxes. They even went so far as to forcefully collect their weapons and burn them in front of their eyes. This triggered the revolt.

- Nangbah, who had participated in the Tirok Singh battle as a young man took the leadership of this revolt and wonderfully organized this long-drawn battle. The British deployed many battalions to put him down. But he could not be cowed. Rather, a full-fledged army base was completely destroyed by Khasi and Jaintia rebels in which two officers and many British soldiers were killed. British historians called it genocide. Ultimately after a long war Nangbah was arrested on the sly when he was sick. Thousands of people were forced to witness his public hanging from a tree.

#### **Nagaland**

- In Nagaland the battle with the British lasted for five months, and continued periodically for a period of 19 years.

#### **Mizoram**

- Rani Rupliani declared in 1889 that she would throw the British out of Mizoram. She was arrested in 1893. Two years later, in 1895, she died in prison.

Freedom, a dream and a feeling, was always there in the heart and eyes of the tortured and suffering people. It was their dream to be free from both their foreign and local Indian rulers. The leaders of the 1857 revolt wanted

to see these dreams of expansion and freedom materialize. Let us now turn to the other issues.

As far as the British are concerned this soldiers' revolt was only a mutiny against British rule perpetrated by the British Indian army. This is what we have read in our schoolbooks. Apparently this was a spontaneous self-ignited revolt by the Indians in the British army, for fear of the pollution of their religion.

There have been many reasons cited for this revolt. One reason soldiers decided to revolt is that soldiers were forced to break open bullet cartridges greased with cow and pig fat with their teeth. In Indian tradition, cow and pig fat is associated with religion. This is why they considered it a religious issue and raised their arms to protect their religion. Since this issue concerned both Muslims and Hindus, they joined hands against the third power, even though they had often been fighting among themselves. Religious leaders from both sides issued appeals in support of this war. The appeal of Nana Saheb and Ghode Pant to the Hindus and the appeal of Shahjada Mohammad Firozshah to the Muslims are enough evidence to prove this point. In these appeals words like "religious war," "jihad," and "kafir" were used profusely. The "third power" were the Englishmen of the East India Company. They were their common enemy. Though this cannot be called a religious war, it certainly started



because of hurt religious sentiments.

Another faction asserts that the revolt was caused by the conflict of two cultures: the Christians and the Muslims. It is true that many Christians were massacred in Delhi during the revolt of 1857, but the soldiers were not concerned about Christianity, but rather about protecting their own religion, which the British were bent on destroying. The issues before the soldiers were neither Christianity, nor nation, nor kingly power. They did not have any idea about the extent of the colonial power that had enslaved their country. Rather, if there was anything that concerned them it was their religion and the rulers who were out to destroy their religion. They thought of their rulers as "English," not "Christian." This is why folk songs that record the revolt of 1857 use the word "Firangi" (foreigner) to refer to the English. In Rajasthan they used the word "Bhuretia" (white man). Nowhere is the word "Christian" used in any song or legend and for this reason William Dalrymple's theory that the revolt was due to the clash of two cultures seems to be wrong.

Another suggestion is that the rajas, maharajas, and nawabs joined the revolt for their personal interest. There is no dispute about this contention. The real dispute is over the intention behind the revolt. True, in the beginning the confrontation was between the soldiers and British rulers over a religious issue. But later the common people, farmers,

and some intellectuals also joined this revolt. Thus grabbing the opportunity, the nawabs and rajas also jumped in to settle their longstanding grudges against the British regarding their jagirs, kingdoms, estates, rights of succession, and opposition to the impingement of their freedom. In the name of saving their religion, the kings and nawabs took full advantage of this unorganized soldiers' revolt. They cashed in on the religious sentiments and issued appeals to join the "jehad."

How can we call it a war of independence? Was this revolt against imperialism? The logic given for declaring it was a war of independence is the great political awakening in the country that followed. This awakening also triggered the large-scale revolt in which both kings and subjects joined hands. This can only prove it not to be a war of independence or a struggle against imperial powers. There are several reasons behind this.

- The leadership of the spontaneous revolt was taken over by the people who were fighting for their own personal interests. Thus it is not proper to call it a revolt to wrest freedom from the British.
- True, while it was a large-scale unified revolt throughout India, we should not ignore the fact that the kings and the nawabs were already organized. They had their own standing army. That is why they had no problem cooperating and spreading the revolt

throughout the country. It was easy for them to overcome distance and time.

- In fact, the soldiers who revolted were the same persons who had been suppressing and robbing the people at the behest of the British. Before 1857 the same unit of soldiers at Chatra (Jharkhand) had brutally crushed the tribal revolt. It was these very soldiers who crushed the Santal rebellion of Hazaribagh and Sidho Kanho's Santal Hool of 1855-56. Hence we cannot suggest that their aim was freedom from the British. If they had any interest at all, it was either religion or the right to forcefully collect taxes from the people for their own profit.
- It was only in 1870 when Indians understood the meaning of colonialism. The idea of freedom understood these days did not exist then. If the people had no understanding of colonialism, how could they pursue political freedom?

Thus the struggle of 1857 was a mixture of unorganized, half-organized, and organized powers. In this struggle powers that were at variance ideologically joined hands for their own vested interests and came together on the platform of religion. In short, it was the revolt of self-interested forces that were captured by unorganized feudal powers. Hence the motive behind the revolt was a bundle of individual interests and nothing else.

There are two important factors regarding the participation and association of tribal and low caste communities in the 1857 rebellion. First, wherever the tribals joined the 1857 revolt, they had already revolted earlier. In those places, even after the ceasefire of 1859, the tribals continued their struggle against the British who were committing atrocities against the people in revenge. Wherever the tribals and low caste people fought, they fought bravely and often died while fighting. They did not surrender, and the British sword, salary, or position could not buy them. Khwaja Bhil of Khandesh did not surrender even after British assurance that he would not be hanged. This, in fact, was the real freedom struggle.

The second point that needs attention is that though inspired by religious sentiments, some backward people joined the rebels. It is also true, however, that it was these very soldiers who were committing atrocities upon them, acting as bailiffs of the rajas, nawabs, and the British. It was quite possible that when the upper class residents of villages took up with the rebels the weaker majority of the village was also forced to follow them.

The most astonishing thing about this revolt was that once the weaker section jumped into the battle, they never looked back out of fear or personal benefit. They stood firmly, faithfully, and bravely, and fearlessly fought in this battle. It is also likely that the weaker section—

whether Hindu, Muslim, or other – were brainwashed by their rulers and followed the upper classes into the fray. They may have been convinced that the word of the rajas and landlords was pious and that it would be a sin to deny their order. In India, kings have always been considered representatives of God.

Thus it is likely that the common men jumped into the war and sacrificed themselves in the name of loyalty towards their landlords, rajas, and masters. Still, their sacrifice was more valuable than that of the rajas and nawabs. It is a well-known fact now that it was not Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi who fought the battle of Jhansi. It was her maid Jhalkari Bai (who looked like Rani Laxmibai) who fought the battle and died, and she did so out of loyalty to the Rani. But wasn't Rani Laxmi Bai's motive to win back her kingdom? Most of the rajas, maharajas, and nawabs were fighting to get back their territories or to get unbridled rights to freely collect revenues from the people. This cannot be called patriotism. Basically, this revolt was in the name of religion in which all the rights and privileges of the upper castes were protected. They were fighting to keep them intact, just as they were, prior to British rule.

Mangal Pandey once had an angry encounter with Matadeen, a sweeper, because his tumbler had touched Pandey's. Matadeen then taunted him about biting the cartridges laced with cow and pig fat everyday. If that did

not pollute his religion, then why was he making such a fuss about a tumbler? It was this that instigated Mangal Pandey to revolt. Yet everyone agrees that even if Mangal Pandey had won the battle, he still would not have allowed Matadeen to touch his tumbler, nor ever would have considered him his equal. He would have always looked at him as an untouchable. Thus how can we call this a common man's revolt or war for freedom?

What would have happened if these rebels had won the battle? Would Peshwa's Raj in Maharashtra have continued and would untouchables have still had to tie a broom around their waist and a small pitcher around their neck? Would it have made any difference in the status of the people who fought against the Marathas in Patiala and were forced to run away to Madhya Pradesh because of Maratha atrocities? These people, who took shelter under Guru Ghasi Das, are still living in Madhya Pradesh under the cover of a false identity.

People had been singing songs in praise of the British until the times of Bhartendu Harishchandra. There was no concept of India as one nation. It was a land of separate rajwadas and kingdoms. There had been a longstanding tradition of surrendering before foreign enemies. But it was only the Moguls who then settled in India after defeating and mining the wealth of Indian states. Rajput kings then gave their daughters to Mogul emperors in order to attain

higher status in their courts. Mogul officials also enjoyed elite status in Rajput courts.

All these questions need to be addressed. For these rebels to get freedom from the British did not mean getting freedom for the country or its people. Rather, it was to get freedom to do as they liked and to exploit the people for their own luxurious pursuits.

Now, one could also ask whether the British freed the common man from the feudal cruelties of the kings and nawabs. But whether the British freed the common Indian from the clutches of Indian rulers is not the question. It is a fact, however, that the British curbed the rights of these unscrupulous rulers. The people were given the right to appeal against the atrocities of Indian rulers and if their appeal was approved, the raja's territory could be confiscated. Kings and nawabs wanted relief from this law, so that their rule could continue unimpeded. Indian rulers had no vision for the welfare of the Indian people. For the common man, both British colonizers and Indian kings were rulers, not friends. But there is no question the Indian people had undiluted loyalty toward their kings and nawabs. This sense of loyalty did not exist among the Indian masses for the British.

Vir Savarkar called the soldiers' revolt of 1857 the first war of independence in his book, "1857, the First Indian War of Independence." Without reading it, the British banned the book in 1909,

leading to book's fame across the country. Savarkar, who believed in the theory of a Hindu Nation, used the revolt as a symbol of Indian valor because it was led by opposing Hindu and Muslim powers. He particularly favored rulers such as the Peshwas. It is likely he created this myth to inspire other Indians, particularly Hindus. In this same way, historians aligned with liberal and progressive powers propelled this as an anti-imperialist war. It was quite obvious that the powers fighting against the British – the kings and the people – supported kingship, itself an imperialist system. Thus was one imperialist power fighting another and cannot be called a people's war against imperialism as was being fought in other countries in the same period.

If we analyze the results of the 1857 war, we must recognize the fear and dread it left in the minds of the people. And, as it has already been suggested, it also created a feeling of hatred toward the British. The British also became more harsh and strict in their governance. They no longer gave any concessions to the Indians, but rather increased their suppression of the masses. Wherever the tribals had revolted prior to 1857, however, they found some relief. The British were forced to make special laws which to some extent allowed tribals all over India to lead their lives the way they wanted. This was because they had realized they could not wage drawn-out battles with tribals. Tribals

were experts in guerilla warfare which made it impossible for the British to rule them peacefully. The British thus made different laws in different lands to protect their land rights. The truth is that tribals were more exploited by their local rulers than by the British. It is more accurate to suggest that the British learned to use Indian agents like the rajas, landlords, and moneylenders to exploit them instead of confronting them directly. In spite of this, the tribals continued fighting against the British to rescue their culture and indigenous systems of governance.

It was strange that the rulers and the upper class people who were supposed to protect the people were

either selling out or surrendering themselves. They were selling out the country for their own greed. It was these very rulers who had driven away the tribals to forests, the Aryan kings and feudal lords who had conspired to keep them away from civilization. In spite of all of this injustice, the tribals continued fighting until the end. They embraced death but were not lured by greed. There were innumerable brave men and women who died for the country. The names of many of these people have been erased. There are those brave fighters who were not considered fit to be recorded in history, though they initiated and inspired the first war of freedom. Let us salute them.

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## PREMCHAND: GHAR MEIN

Shivrani Devi

Translated by  
Dhiraj Singh

It was around 1928, we were in Allahabad for a working committee meeting of the Hindustani Akademi. We had heard Mahatma Gandhi was also going to be there at that time. My husband had for a long time been very keen on meeting him. Pandit Sunderlal knew about this. Soon we received a letter from him asking my husband to come to Allahabad two days ahead of the committee meeting and meet Mahatma Gandhi.

“I have to leave today,” he told me.

“But don’t you have to go four days later,” I asked him.

“I am going two days ahead to meet the Mahatma.”

“I am sure he’d be there still when you go for the Akademi meeting,” I said.

“It’s possible that he might not stay there longer. He’s not known to stay in one place for long.”

“Okay, then go.”

“People are surprised when they find out that I haven’t ever met the Mahatma,” he said.

And so my husband left two days ahead of the meeting and stayed on two days after the meeting but still couldn’t meet the man. When he came home I asked him what had happened. “The poor man doesn’t have the time. There were hundreds of people waiting to meet and he was so busy. He reads hundreds of letters every day.”

“But then how do people ever meet him,” I objected, “it’s not as if he’s ever not busy. His whole life is like that.”

“Well, these are very persistent people. And anyway I didn’t just want to say ‘hello and goodbye’ I would’ve liked to spend some time with him. Whatever he writes one gets to read so I thought it would be nice to talk to him. He’s known to be a great conversationalist, just as he is great at anything else he does. I thought a face-to-face meeting would be good.”

“It’s a pity... you spent four extra days and for what.”

“Yes, it was my bad luck.”

Then in 1934 they had a Hindi Parishad meeting in Wardha. This time he went to Wardha to speak about his story, *Hans* (The Swan). He had to submit the story to the Parishad as well as discuss some things about the state of Hindi and Hindustani in the country. This time Mahatma Gandhi had invited him personally. He went and stayed in Wardha for four days. On returning he exclaimed: “The Mahatma is even greater than I had expected. There must hardly be a person who met him and didn’t come back transformed by him. Such is his personality that people are pulled towards him. There is something about his face and the way he speaks that people just forget about everything else. In fact, I think even the vilest man would not be able to resist him. His presence alone is enough to make even the most consummate liars tell the truth.”

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“But why doesn’t he have the same effect on Jinnah? Does it mean Jinnah is the stronger of the two?”

“I think it will happen in time. The Mahatma is a man of many talents.”

“So, have you also become a fan?”

“A fan? I have become his disciple. In fact, I think I’d become his disciple when he had come to Gorakhpur.”

“Oh, you became his follower first and met him later,” I said.

“To be a follower doesn’t mean worshipping a person, it means trying to emulate him.”

“And have you begun emulating him?”

“What do you think? I wrote ‘Premashram’ after he came to Gorakhpur and then it was published in 1922.”

“But wasn’t that already a work in progress?”

“Which further proves my point... that I’d become his disciple without having met him.”

“So how does that prove his greatness?” I asked.

“It means that his greatness made such a good disciple out of me that I can now anticipate what he’s going to say next.”

“But this is hardly logical.”

“Well, it’s not about logic as much as it is about faith. In my mind he is the greatest person living in the world today. He is also trying to work towards the upliftment of the poor, the labourers

and so am I. My writing is actually inspired by him. He is also trying to bring together Hindus and Muslims. I too am trying to bring Hindi and Urdu together as Hindustani.”

“And how do you do that?”

“I do it through my writing.”

“So just because you write in Hindustani you think it will bring people together?”

“Well, it is a language that’s agreeable to both Hindus and Muslims, and the common man. In fact, whenever we do have a national language it will be a child born of both Hindi and Urdu.”

“But shouldn’t our national language be Hindi instead of Hindustani?” I asked.

“Do you know how the word ‘Hindustan’ came into being? When Muslims came here and settled down they began calling the land, Hindustan. Now the name Hindustan has stuck but we’re still fighting over the language. And I think it will only end when both Hindus and Muslims think things out without getting all charged up. They should think about co-existing, co-mingling... beginning with the language they speak. As long as they keep fighting about language there is little hope for a solution.”

“So should we just drag in Farsi words into Hindi and Sanskrit words into Urdu?”

“No one’s talking about dragging any words anywhere. The common language should be the language spoken by most

people, and it shouldn’t matter whether it is Hindi with a Farsi flavour or Urdu with a touch of Sanskrit. After all we are not a country of a single people. When there are so many different people and faiths why should we go around looking for purity in language.”

“It’s all fine in theory,” I said, “this mixing doesn’t work when it happens in your own family.”

“And who says it doesn’t? In the olden days many a Hindu king would gladly marry off a sister or a daughter to a Muslim Emperor. In fact, it was supposed to be a big thing for them. I’d agree it didn’t happen both ways. But it happens today also. All those women who are thrown out of your Hindu households find a place among Muslims. Or they end up at the brothels. Just remember that all the Muslims in the country didn’t come from Persia and Arabia. When they throw their women out on the streets why don’t your Hindu brethren think about purity.”

“So now you’re a Muslim sympathiser.”

“I am no one’s sympathiser, nor anyone’s enemy.”

“Who do you believe in then? Ram or Rahim?”

“For me Ram, Rahim, Buddha, Christ all are worthy of worship. I consider them all great.”

“No but tell me what are you?”

“I am a human being and I believe



in humanity, being helpful to my fellow men. That is who I am and those are the kind of people I respect and admire. I have friends who are Hindus and those that are Muslims and I don't consider one better than the other."

"How are they the same?" I was getting angry now, "Muslims kill cows and that is the reason behind so many Hindu-Muslim riots in which so many people die."

"So how does that make Muslims singularly responsible? Why is it that a Muslim using an old and milk-less cow for sacrifice boils so much Hindu blood but not a whimper when the British slaughter thousands of cows and calves for their dinner table? This isn't really so much about cow sacrifice as it is about a competitive hatred between the two. Tell me which Devi temple does not sacrifice rams? Is the ram not a living creature? So why is it okay to sacrifice a ram and not a cow? After all everyone seems to love a good mutton dish. You make Hindus sound like the only people with compassion and mercy. Do you know which community has the highest rate of crime against women? It is Hindus. They seem to have made it a custom of throwing their women out on the streets. Sometimes you don't even need an excuse. Why then does it surprise them when someone becomes a Muslim? Don't they think of these things when they're showing their women the door? Do they leave them any choice? And why is only the character of a woman

judged so harshly? Why is the man not held responsible? In my mind men are more, if not doubly, guilty whenever the character of a woman is put in doubt. Why then is the poor woman only thrown out of the house? Why is she the one always responsible for all the misfortune that comes knocking at her door?

"Men have for ages made victims out of women. In fact, it is the men who make the laws. Laws that suit them. It is the men who have many wives, who marry women younger than their daughters. To me this seems like an unfair distribution of guilt. Women have all the guilt and men, all the freedom. All the laws have been made to maintain this *status quo*. What is the poor woman to do then? She has very little choice but to change her religion. Because the men in her life would rather that she killed herself. That is what it seems like to me. I don't really know what or how we expect our women to be."

"And the prostitutes who are being pushed out of the cities," I had kept quiet for too long, "what do you have to say about them?"

"Maybe that is a reflection of our society. A society that wants to brush women under the carpet. I am in fact very grateful to Dayanand. It was thanks to his Arya Samaj movement that women earned some amount of respectability in Hindu society. All women should be eternally grateful to him for getting the Sharda Bill passed."

“Why should we all be eternally grateful to him?”

“It would be shame if you’re not. Even the Mahatma has done a lot for getting women some equality in our society. In fact, if our society doesn’t realise its folly then the day is not far when Hindu girls will leave their houses and find themselves husbands of their own choice.”

“That would not be a pity. Because when boys and girls choose their own life partners at a young age they’re usually not wise in the ways of the world. And often they put themselves up for disappointment and deceit. Such marriages may seem very attractive but they’re anything like that.”

“But the fact is no matter how much you or I or the world tries to put an end to it, it is not going to stop. The day is not far when such marriages would be the norm. The more we try to distance ourselves from Western influences the tighter we get into their grip.”

“God save me from seeing that day,” I said.

“Why do you say that? Don’t you yourself try to run away from all that is old and regressive in our society?”

“Yes but I don’t want to completely give up my traditions. I only want to bring about change and reform where it is necessary.”

“But why is this so surprising? Where you want some reform your future generations would simply like to wipe

the slate clean. Laws and traditions have a way of changing with the times. You can’t expect to live like the ancients in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Things change and they should. Why should anyone have the right to exploit another?”

“Yes, you are right. We should be grateful to all the great men who have helped our cause. In fact we should also be grateful to you.”

“What have I done to deserve that? I am merely someone trying to atone for the sins of his forefathers.”

“Who can claim to know sinners from saints... isn’t everyone a victim in the end?”

“And why not? After all, what one does, does come back to him or her... that’s what we call the Theory of Karma.”

“But now there’s not even time to apportion blame... who’s done what, who’s responsible for what.”

“Well, we can try. First our forefathers suppressed their women and then we their children found ourselves suppressed by a foreign power. But now that we’re strong and grown up we will have to fight both kinds of suppressions together.”

“How can the women fight when they’re still being suppressed?”

“Well, that is something that’s changing gradually. I don’t know why we end up arguing about that again and again.”

“What do you think about women’s emancipation?” I asked.

“I think both men and women are born equal.”

“Then you should do more for the cause of women.”

“I do my bit through my writing, through literature.”

“But how does it help? Most of us can't even read.”

“One doesn't stop writing because there is illiteracy. It is always a gradual process. Do you know that the condition of present-day Russia was already foretold 200 years ago by its writers?”

“Well, who has lived to be 200.”

“You want instant results, don't you? Well, you just might live to see them. Things have changed by leaps and bounds in the last 25 years alone.”

“But our society is riddled with the same problems.”

“How can you say that? Your mother may have considered going to jail for the freedom struggle but you actually went to jail. And you were not alone, more than 20,000 women volunteered arrest alongside their men. Isn't that a sign of growing equality? These are very positive signs for our society.”

Once, when the Sahitya Sabha meeting was to be held in Delhi he came back from the press at about 4 pm and said: “I have to leave today at 5 for Delhi... please keep my luggage ready.”

“What is the hurry?” I protested, “our daughter is here...”

“She is going to stay for some time.”

“But tell me what is the urgency?”

“Jainendra has written...”

“When will you come back?”

“I think I should be back in 3-4 days. This will be my first time in Delhi!”

“What if you give it a miss this time?”

“No, Jainendra will feel very bad.”

I packed his bags for 3-4 days but he finally came back after a week. I was worried because he didn't usually stay on like this. I was thinking maybe he's fallen ill or something. I called the manager so that he could send him a telegram.

“Don't worry,” the manager said, “he should be back in a day or so.” I also thought, this is his first time in Delhi that's why he's decided to stay on. I didn't send the telegram but my worry was growing.

When he returned on the seventh day I was very angry. “You have no concern for us. You didn't even think what we would be going through... You said you were going for four days and you come back after a week.”

He looked at me with patient eyes. “First hear my side of the story... then you'd probably not be as angry with me as you now are. I think you'd have done the same thing if you were in my place.”

“Well, you are the story-teller and everything's a story to you...”

“Now that is not fair. Do I not care about you?”

“I’ve just seen how much.”

This time he smiled. “Okay, first listen to my story.”

“Am listening...”

He held my hand and began his story. “When I reached Jainendra’s house I realised Pandit Sunderlal was already there. The meeting started the day I reached and we got busy for the next three days. During the meeting I met a gentleman from Punjab who insisted I go to his house. In fact, he had earlier tried to meet me twice when I was in Lucknow and once in Benaras. He was my big fan and insisted that I stay at his place. And believe me it was not easy to convince him otherwise. Both he and his wife were insistent that I stay with them at their house. Even if I tried I couldn’t wiggle my way out of their hospitality. So I went with them and stayed at their place for a few days. That is my story and I am ready to face your punishment.”

“What is their name?” I asked instead.

“Well, I really don’t know. This was the first time I met them. They said they had read my story, ‘Mantra’, and been deeply touched by it. It also inspired them to start their business. Since reading the story they had been very eager to meet me. And they wouldn’t take no for an answer. They, in fact, hosted a dinner for everyone at the meeting just to get my attention.”

“So while you were having fun, here I was worried sick thinking you had taken ill or something. Did you know I was going to send a telegram? Thankfully, the manager was hesitant. Otherwise I’d have wasted one and a half rupee and also been the fool.”

“Believe me my dear, I was worried about you worrying too much. But what was I to do, I was almost held hostage.”

My anger had by then subsided, I said: “Yes, what were you to do...”

“I am telling you the truth, they were totally crazy about me. In fact, at first he couldn’t even collect the courage to approach me. Then during a break in the meeting he came up to me and briefly told me about his invitation. I was really helpless before his love and his great desire to host me. Even his wife, who was bed-ridden, was insistent. And I didn’t have the heart to disappoint them.”

“That is the bane of a writer’s wife. Her husband belongs to everyone and that is her curse.”

“Left to me I’d just stay home and do the thing that gives me the greatest joy: writing.”

“Please don’t do this to me again.”

“I won’t. In fact, what would be better than you coming along with me. That way neither of us would worry about the other.”

“And what about the kids?”

“Phew. You have the knack of

inventing newer problems every time we have a solution.”

That was some day when I put my husband in the dock. And for what... for spending a week away from us. I was angry and hurt especially at the fact that he'd had me worried. Today, I am neither ever worried nor angry, nor do I think of ever sending him a message or a telegram. He was after all a writer, a person who understood love, understood its nuances and depths. Why then did he leave me and go? I know I was blind and I was crazy. Because

I failed to recognise the love and beauty of his being. I guess, most people are like that... they wouldn't recognise God even if he appeared before them. My husband was like that too, and I was too blind to recognise him. He was a lot of things to a lot of people. And now that he is no more I spend my days and nights thinking about what I've lost. I think I shall never find my peace as long as I live. For without him my life seems empty and meaningless. I guess that is what is called the Theory of Karma.

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Shivrani Devi (1890-1976) was Premchand's wife and a creative writer in her own way. She wrote some short stories and a literary memoir about her husband 'Premchand: Ghar Mein'. The book is a mirror to know Premchand in all his dynamism as a thinker, intellectual and a householder. She passed away in 1976 in Allahabad.

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# Interview

## PREMCHAND: INTERVIEWD BY

Pandit Banarasidas Chaturvedi

Translated by  
Sanjay Dev

Writing a letter on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1930 from Calcutta, Pandit Banarasidas Chaturvedi had sent seven questions to Premchand which were answered by Premchand through his letter dated June 3, 1930. Here they go:

**Chaturvedi:** When did you start writing stories?

**Premchand:** I started writing stories in 1907. My first story collection 'Soze Vatan' comprising five stories was brought out by Zamana Press in 1908. But the collector of Hameerpur had it burnt down. He felt it was seditious. Though its translation has been since then, published in several collections and magazines.

**Chaturvedi:** Which of your stories you like best?

**Premchand:** It's difficult to answer this one. From more than two hundred stories it is difficult to pick the best one, but would still hazard writing names of a few from memory (1) Bade Ghar Ki Beti, (2) Rani Sarandha, (3) Namak Ka Daroga, (4) Saut, (5) Aabhushan, (6) Prayashchit, (7) Kamana-Taru, (8) Mandir aur Masjid, (9) Ghaswali, (10) Mahatirth, (11) Satyagrah, (12) Laanchhan, (13) Sati, (14) Laila, (15) Mantra.

An Urdu story titled 'Manzile Maqsood' was a beauty. Umpteen of my Muslim friends have praised it, but could not be translated yet. Felicity of the language will be lost in translation.

**Chaturvedi:** Name national and foreign writers whose works have influenced your writing style?

**Premchand:** None in particular influenced mine. To a large extent Pandit Ratannath dar Lakhnavi and to some extent Pandit Rabindra Nath Thakur.

**Chaturvedi:** How much you make a month from your books and articles?

**Premchand:** Better not ask of income. Rights of all earlier books were given to publishers. 'Prem Pachisi', 'Seva Sadan', 'Sapta Saroj', 'Premashram', 'Sangram' and so on fetched three thousand rupees in one instalment from Hindi Pustak Agency. Maybe two hundred rupees for 'Nav Nidhi' as yet. Dularelal gave rupees eighteen hundred for 'Rangbhoomi.' And for other collections got hundred-two hundred. Myself published 'Kayakalpa', 'Azad Katha', 'Prem Tirtha', 'Prem Pratibha', 'Pratigya' but have barely recovered six hundred rupees, so far. And am left with unsold printed copies. A sundry income of rupees twenty five a month from articles, but it is hardly enough. I now write for none except 'Hans' and 'Madhuri'. Occasionally I write for 'Vishal Bharat' and 'Saraswati', that's all! And yes, translations may have brought in not more than rupees two thousand. Submitted translations for 'Rangbhoomi' and 'Premashram' both for a meagre rupees eight hundred. Alas! no publisher was to be found.

**Chaturvedi:** Your take on contemporary progress in literary stories in Hindi?

**Premchand:** The world of literary stories in Hindi is in very early stage. Among the story writers Sudarshan Kaushik,

Jainendra Kumar, 'Ugra', Prasad, Rajeshwari are the only conspicuous ones. I find signs of originality and diversity in Jainendra and 'Ugra'. Prasadji's stories are emotional, but not realistic. Rajeshwari writes well, but very little. Sudarshanji's compositions are beautiful, but are very wanting in depth. And Kaushikji tends to stretch a thing a bit too far. None seems to have studied certain organs of society in particular, yet. 'Ugra' did but strayed. I took up farming community. But there are numerous communities which need to be highlighted. Nobody has touched a bit upon Sadhu communities. Imagination and not experience dominated in our part of the world. The point is that we have not yet adopted literature as a business. My life has been a failure from economic viewpoint and will remain so. By bringing out Hans, I've forfeited the savings from my books. Maybe otherwise, would have made four-six hundred, but have no such hope now.

**Chaturvedi:** Name the language your works have been translated into?

**Premchand:** Some of my works have been translated into Marathi, Gujrati, Urdu, Tamil, but not all. Most have been translated into Urdu followed by Marathi. Many Telugu gentlemen asked translation permission of me, which I gave readily. I can't say whether translation happened, or not. Three or four stories have been translated into Japanese whose publisher Mr. Sabharwal has made a remittance

of rupees fifty not long back. I am grateful to him. Two-three stories have been translated into English, that's all!

**Chaturvedi:** What are your wishes?

**Premchand:** I have no wishes. My fondest wish at the moment is that we win the freedom struggle! I have never hankered after money and fame. Make enough for food and all. Have never lusted for motor and bungalow. Oh yes,

I definitely want to write two-four quality books, also aimed at victory in freedom struggle. I have no big desires in terms of my two sons. Want this much only that they are honest, true and of firm resolve. I hate indulgent, rich and fawning children. I don't want to sit back either. Want to do something or other for literature and country. And yes, I continue to get my bread and an ounce of ghee and a few clothes.

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Pt. Banarsidas Chaturvedi (1892-1985) was a prominent journalist, editor and writer. In 1914 he wrote about immigrant Indians' problems. He was editor Vishal Bharat and Madhukar. In 1919 he wrote Rashtrabhasha. He wrote Rekhachitra (1952), Sahitya aur Jivan (1954).

Sanjay Dev, born 1964 hails from Jaipur. Has a master's in English literature and a bachelor's in journalism. As a free-lancer, published in various national dailies. Has 20 years experience in translation. Works as Editor for Parliament of India. Resides in Delhi.

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## **A CELLULOID JOURNEY TO INDIA: ABDOLHOSSEIN SEPANTA AND THE EARLY IRANIAN TALKIES**

Lalit Joshi

This essay deals with the early history of the Iranian talkies and how one of its founders – Abdolhossein Sepanta, pioneered the first Indo-Iranian project in filmmaking in 1931. I briefly examine Sepanta's transition from the academic world to the film industry. Sepanta desired to establish a full-fledged film industry in Iran and India became the testing ground of his cinematic skills. When Himanshu Rai, the founder of the Bombay Talkies (1934-54), hired the German cinematographer Frantz Osten, the films and the audiences in mind he had, were primarily based in India. But Sepanta's projects represent the only instance in the history of Indian cinema when films for a foreign audience were shot and processed by an Indian film company. However, as I shall demonstrate in the concluding section of this essay, filmmaking for Sepanta ended abruptly as, an unfinished project of cultural nationalism.

National cinemas across the world have generally displayed a tendency to draw upon the diverse traditions of their performing and visual arts. Iranian cinema is no exception. Perhaps an early example of Iran's visual history is the appearance of bas-reliefs in Persepolis around 500 B.C., an art which reached its creative peak during the reign of the Sassanian kings. This tradition continued in the form of miniature paintings during the early and later medieval periods. According to Shahin Parami, a "deliberate lack of perspective enabled the artist to have different plots and sub-plots within the same space of the picture."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Iranians

were the only cultural community in the region, to have perfected the art of integrating storytelling with painting (*pardeh-khani*). In *pardeh-khani*, as the oral narrative progressed, the *Pardeh-khan* or the narrator, unveiled a series of paintings pertinent to a particular stage of the narrative. A similar audiovisual mode was the *Nagali*, in which a *Nagal* or the storyteller, would enact scenes from a story and interlace it with songs and dances. *Nagal* performances were generally organized in a *qahava-khana* or a coffee-house. Other art forms that embellished the visual culture of Iran included the *Khaymeshab-bazi* (puppetry), *Saye-bazi* (shadow plays), *Rouhhozi* (comical plays) and *Tazieh* (passion plays), depicting the martyrdom of the Shia leader Imam Hossein in the century.<sup>2</sup>

The advent of cinema in Iran marked a difficult transition not only into a new performative mode, but also to the creation of new spaces for cultural consumption. Furthermore, the adoption of the new mode of storytelling meant selectively drawing upon Hollywood films and diverse styles of European cinema, while at the same time appropriating elements from traditional performing arts and finally relocating them into new diegetic spaces. Cinema also created new sodalities of viewers who interrogated prevailing public discourses about the nation, politics, morality and everyday life and their representations in art.<sup>3</sup>

As in the case of other national

cinemas, early attempts at filmmaking, exhibition and viewing in Iran were confined to the aristocracy and the upper classes. Many of the pioneers of Iranian cinema were foreign-returned technicians, belonging to the ruling elite.<sup>4</sup> Also, in many upper class homes, weddings, childbirths, circumcisions and other family events were filmed or films were screened during such occasions. Early film exhibitions were confined to European imports. However, around the second decade of the twentieth century, small investments began to trickle into indigenous film production. Rare footages of this period reveal a *mélange* of “news, events, actualities and spectacles involving royalty usually filmed in long shot.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the first among these was the short film documenting the visit of the Shah of Iran to Belgium. The event was captured by Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi, the official photographer at the royal court.<sup>6</sup> Later, Akkasbashi also filmed national festivals such as Moharram as well as scenes from the royal zoo in Tehran.

In the absence of proper exhibiting space, a select audience sat on carpeted floors to watch films, somewhat in the same way as they did during the *Ta'zieh* shows. Because of the restricted nature of its exhibition and because of the prejudices held against it, early Iranian cinema was far from being a popular art form. Films were thought to be morally corrupting; the clergy counseled men to restrain women from visiting

theatres. Such biases were not uncommon in other cultures.<sup>7</sup> In neighboring India, the nationalist leadership, with notable exceptions, preferred to distance itself from the irresistible charms of the silver screen. However, cinema's entry into the public domain was only a matter of time. Business communities were quick to seize the initiative. The lead was taken by Mirza Ebrahim Khan Sahaf Bashi in 1904, who arranged a public screening of a short film inside the premises of his antique shop in Tehran. The response was so overwhelming that he was enthused to build a movie theatre of modest dimensions in the Cheragh Gaz avenue.<sup>8</sup> Sahaf Bashi's foray into the world of cinema could have been an enduring enterprise had it not been for his avowedly public support for constitutional politics in Iran. His fulminations against the monarchical form of government in Iran as well as the role of the clergy, earned him two powerful enemies. Pitted against two foremost forces, Sahaf Bashi soon realized that he was fighting a losing battle. His enemies ensured that he was arrested and his theatre vandalized and shut down permanently. Soon after this incident, Russi Khan – Sahaf Bashi's contemporary and an entrepreneur of Russian descent - was granted permission to open another theatre in Tehran(1906). Unlike Sahaf Bashi, Russi Khan had powerful patrons at the royal court. Besides, the Russian army which was then stationed close to Tehran, assured him complete protection and support.

Khan's theatre enjoyed undiminished popularity until 1909, which year a constitutional government dislodged the monarchy and his theatre sealed forever.<sup>9</sup>

When monarchy was restored again in 1912, the former patrons of cinema began to work towards its revival. With adequate support from the royal court pouring in, Ebrahim Khan Sahnafbashi-i-Tehrani built the first commercial movie theatre of Iran, while Khan-baba Khan Mo'tazeidi - the royal photographer - announced the opening of a string of exhibition houses in the country. Another young entrepreneur – Ali Vakili – decided to hold exclusive screening for women inside a Zoroastrian school. An advertisement appearing in a local newspaper in 1926 gives us a foretaste of Vakili's marketing skills:

The famous series by Ruth Roland, the renowned world artist will be presented at the Zoroastrian school from May 10, 1928. Watching the incredible acrobatics of this international prodigy is a must for all respectable ladies. Get two tickets for the price of one.<sup>10</sup>

In another announcement, the owner of the Grand Cinema in Tehran went as far as stating that the management would filter unclean women as well as immoral youth from its audience so that only respectable men and women could watch films separately:

As a service to the public, the Grand Cinema Management has demarcated parts of its hall for the ladies and from

tonight, parts one and two of the series "The Copper Ball", will be presented together. Thus all citizens, including the ladies may enjoy the entire series. Measures will be taken with the cooperation of the honorable police officers to bar unchaste women and dissolute youth with no principle.<sup>11</sup>

In yet another innovative experiment, it was decided to hold screenings between two o' clock in the afternoon and sunset as this coincided with the time earmarked for Ta'zieh shows. Indeed, cinema cast such a magical spell on the audience that the proprietors of the Ta'zieh shows were steadily driven out of business.<sup>12</sup>

Two more names in Iran's fledgling film industry deserve mention. The first among these is Ovannes Ohanian and his contemporary Ebrahim Moradi. Of Armenian-Iranian descent, Ohanian had studied cinema at the Cinema academy in Moscow. When he returned to Iran in 1925, albeit he wanted to lay the foundations of a full-fledged film industry, he struggled to remain content with a film school in Tehran. In 1929, Ohanian and with help from some of his graduate students and financial assistance from a theater owner, directed his first film – *Abi va Rab*, which was a remake of Danish comedy serials already popular among Iranian audience.<sup>13</sup> Ohanian also directed *Haji Agha Aktor-i-cinema* (1933) - his second and last film. To his dismay, *Haji* turned out to be a commercial failure. Not much is known about his career thereafter except that he sought refuge

in other pursuits for some time before sailing to India, where he remained until 1947. Like Ohanian, Moradi also learnt the craft of filmmaking in Russia, where he lived as a political exile in the early 1920s. Moradi returned to Iran in 1929, established his own studio (Jahan Namaan) and shot *Enteqham-e-Baradar* (A Brother's Revenge) in 1930. The film could not be completed as Moradi overshot his budget. He continued to make other films, the last being *Bolhavas* (The Lustful Man) in 1934. The film was received well at the box-office but not well enough to sustain his enterprise.<sup>14</sup>

Thus by the mid 30s, the Iranian film industry was in a state of disarray. Filmmakers grappled with inadequate finances, low end technology, poor production and exhibition facilities and above all unflinching opposition from the clergy. It would however be misleading to suggest that Abdolhossein Sepanta embarked upon a career in filmmaking in India precisely because of these reasons. In fact, Sepanta's voyage into the world of films can be termed serendipitous; perhaps when he arrived in Bombay in 1927, all he must have had in his mind was to become a person of great erudition.

Abdolhossein Sepanta (1907-69) was born in Tehran. He went to St. Louis and Zorosatrian colleges, where he developed a profound interest in the early pre-Islamic history and culture of Iran. Sepanta's intellectual pursuits brought him to India in 1927. In Bombay

he met Bahram Gour Anklesaria – a scholar of ancient Iranian languages and who was to become Sepanta's mentor later. He also met Dinshah Irani, Director of the Iranian and Zoroastrian society. A direct descendant of a refugee family who had fled Iran in the 1790s, Irani, a lawyer by profession, was a distinguished member of the Iranian diaspora in India. He had founded the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjuman as early as 1918 and the Iranian League in 1922. Sepanta's interactions with the Parsi families in Bombay brought him in touch with Ardeshir Irani, an event which was to change the lives of the two great men completely.

Born in Pune, Ardeshir Irani (1886-1969), studied at the J.J. School of Arts in Bombay. He initially joined his businessman father who dealt with phonograph equipment but quit it to carve out an independent career in film exhibition. For this purpose he entered into partnership with another Parsi entrepreneur – Abdullah Esoofally. The two acquired the Alexander and Majestic Theatres of Bombay in 1914. Six years later, Irani launched Star Films in partnership with Bhogilal K.M.Dave. Their first production –Veer Abhimanyu – was released in 1922. In 1926 he realigned his business to form the Imperial Film Company. The result was a series of films such as Anarkali (1928), The lives of a Mughal Prince (1928), Indira B.A. (1929), Alamara (1931), Bambai Ki Billi (1937) and Kisan Kanya (1937). Irani

was a pioneer in two significant ways. He is credited not only for making the first talkie in India (Alamara) but also for producing the first color film (Kisan Kanya) in the country. So animated was Irani at the prospect of being associated with the first Iranian talkie that he agreed to finance and co-direct the film as well.

The first Irani talkie *Dukhtar-i-Lor* or the *Lor Girl* was produced jointly by Sepanta and Irani under the banner of the Imperial Film Company. The film had a prominent Iranian (Abdolhossein Sepanta, Ruhangiz Sami-Nehzad, Hadi Shirazi) and a small Indian (Sohrab Puri and other junior artists) cast. Sepanta wrote the entire script and played the lead role as well. The *Lor Girl* took seven months to be completed. It created quite a sensation in the Iranian press as a Muslim girl had been cast in a film for the first time in the history of Iranian cinema. The film opened at Mayak and Sepah in Tehran in 1933 and became an instant box-office success. It ran successfully for two years, a feat that could not be replicated by any other film for a long time altogether.

The *Lor Girl* is a political film not only because it is set in the turbulent 20s but also because it also marks for the first time, the appearance of a woman in an Iranian film. Ziba Mir Hosseini has recently argued that the clergy was unequivocal in its rejection of cinema because for the first time an art form had made women visible (*haram*) in society.<sup>15</sup> The managers of Ta'zieh shows

for example, never showed women on stage, women's roles being always played by men. It has also been suggested that poets were careful in overtly representing women as 'beloved' in Persian verse; rather, they chose to work within ambiguities (*iham*).<sup>16</sup> Iranian cinema was not alone in preventing such transgressions. Japanese cinema, inspired by local theatrical traditions such as the *kabuki* and *shipna*, deployed the *onnagata* (male actor in female role) throughout the 1920s and the early 30s. In the case of India, *Raja Harishchandra*, one of the first Indian feature films and directed by Phalke, had Salunke- a teahouse waiter- playing the female lead.

The story of *Lor Girl* revolves around a tribal village girl-Golnar (Ruhangiz), who earned her livelihood by singing and dancing in teahouses. Jafar (Sepanta) is a government agent. The two fall in love and escape to India. They return to Iran after the restoration of political stability. The film is emblematic of the fate of ordinary lives during a period of political turbulence. What Sepanta might have had in mind when he was doing the script could have been the political situation in the Lorestan-Khuzistan region, where the government had mounted a limited military offensive against the recalcitrant tribal population. Finally, the film narrative suffered from the problems of continuity and editing. The audience however, fell in love with the beautiful and innocent Golnar who is

shown wearing a partial hejab in the film.<sup>17</sup>

Except for its Parsi background, there is no explanation for what might have attracted Sepanta to the Imperial Film Company. Around the late 20s, production houses and studios had started mushrooming in Bombay, Pune and Kolhapur. The Indian Cinematograph Yearbook of 1938 lists 34 production companies in Bombay, 6 in Kolhapur and 4 in Pune.<sup>18</sup> Besides, Irani had shown little evidence of making sound films. In fact when Wilfred Deming – an American engineer representing the Tanar Recording Company in India – visited the Imperial Studios, he expressed consternation at the prevailing conditions:

Film was successfully exposed in light that would result in blank film at home, stages consisted of flimsy uprights supporting a glass roof or covering. The French Debrie camera with a few Bell and Howell and German makes completed the rest of photographic equipment. Throughout, the blindest groping for fundamental facts was evident. The laboratory processing methods, with sound in view...were most distressing and obviously the greatest problem.<sup>19</sup>

Poor sound and lip synchronization in films produced by the Imperial Studios, was also reported in the Bombay Chronicle and the Times of India.<sup>20</sup> Irani's testimony however, reveals another side of the story. He accused the Tanar Company of selling him "junk" equipment based on the single system process that did

not allow sound to be edited later as it was directly transferred to the negative plate.<sup>21</sup> Such contestations notwithstanding, Sepanta pitched for the Imperial Studios where the *Lor Girl* was finally born.

Buoyed by the success of its maiden Iranian venture, the Imperial Film Company offered Sepanta production control over other films. Sepanta subsequently directed four more films for the company, all shot on Indian locations. The first among these was *Ferdousi* (1933), based on the life of the famous sixteenth century Persian poet. This was followed by *Shireen va Farhad* (1934), an adaptation of the classical Persian romance that became popular during the reign of the Sassanian king Khusrau I. In 1935, Sepanta directed *Chashmaye Siah* depicting the impact of Nadir Shah's invasion on the lives of two young lovers. It is noteworthy that Sepanta cast a new girl in each film.<sup>22</sup> This was a daunting task indeed. In the 20s and 30s, even Indian filmmakers were compelled to hire European or Anglo-Indian women, cinema being looked down upon as a disreputable profession by the society at large. It has been suggested that the songs in Sepanta's films were not favorably received by the audience.<sup>23</sup> From the point of view of the Iranian state, this was certainly not problematic. In fact the idea of making films purely for entertainment had never found favor with the state. Nonetheless, this should

not lead us to the conclusion that because entertainment was a matter of low priority, Sepanta's films included subtle political subtexts. Stating his position on the *Lor Girl* several years after its release Sepanta observed, "As it was the first Iranian sound film to be presented abroad, I felt it should present a bright picture of Iran...I have to admit that the film was a great boost for the nationalistic pride of expatriate Iranians."<sup>24</sup>

In 1935 Sepanta quit Bombay to seek new opportunities in Calcutta. There he came in contact with Debaki Bose, the founder of the New Theatres and Abid Basravi, a merchant of Iranian descent. Basravi demonstrated extraordinary interest in Sepanta's plans to direct *Laila-va-Majnun* under the banner of the East Indian Company. Sepanta cast Basravi, his two sons and select members of Indian Iranian families in this film. The film was completed in 1936, with the Basravi family providing necessary assistance in the various stages of the scripting, shooting and editing of the film. A triumphant Sepanta set sail for Iran hoping to screen it for Iranian audiences. But how hope quickly turned into despair was vividly recalled by him during an interview:

In September 1936, I arrived in Bushehr...with a print of *Laila-o-Majnoon*. Due to bureaucratic complications, the film print could not be immediately released to screen, and I had to leave for Tehran without it. Government

officials' attitude was inexplicably hostile from the beginning and I almost was sorry that I returned home. The authorities did not value cinema as an art form or even as a means of mass communication, and I soon realized that I had to forget about my dream of establishing a film studio in Iran. I even had difficulty getting permission to screen this film, and in the end the movie theatre owners forced us to turn over the film to them almost for nothing.<sup>25</sup>

Sepanta was convinced that vested interests in Iran and elsewhere had colluded to undermine his enterprise:

Representation of foreign companies, who brought in second-hand vulgar films from Iraq or Lebanon, joined forces with the Iranian authorities in charge of cinematic and theatrical affairs to defeat me. This unfair campaign left a lasting and grave impact on my life.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the odds arrayed against him, Sepanta planned to return to India to resume shooting his forthcoming productions *Black Owl* and *Omar Khayyam*. However, his mother's failing health prevented him from leaving Iran. The late 30s witnessed a distraught Sepanta doing odd jobs including working in a wool factory in Ispahan. A newspaper that he started in 1943 remained short lived. In the mid-50s he became associated with the United States aid program for some time. Finally in 1965, he shot a few documentaries, which do not reflect the epic style, details and the grandness of scale, Sepanta was

known for. Four years later, on March 28, 1969, Sepanta's eventful life came to a tragic end when died of a cardiac arrest in Esafan, where he had spent his last days virtually as a recluse. In addition to more than a dozen films, Sepanta left behind a legacy of eighteen translations and numerous files of the newspaper that he once edited. An Iranian film historian has observed that albeit Sepanta was the only filmmaker who was able to define the aesthetic contours of future Iranian cinema, his contribution remained far from being enduring.

If Sepanta had not faced the obstacles he did and if Iranian cinema had been allowed to develop on a national course, vulgarity would not have prevailed in our cinema for three decades from the 1950s to the 1970s.<sup>27</sup>

This brings us to a crucial question – the relationship between the State and entrepreneurship. In the case of most national cinemas, the State has regulated and directed the motion picture industry both by institutionalizing the mechanisms of finance as well as through censorship. What should be represented on-screen and how has always remained a contentious issue between filmmakers on the one hand and the custodians of public morality and order on the other. The screen thus becomes the battleground for rival ideologies and discourses. There always exists a formidable yet flexible alliance between capitalism (institutional finance, market access, a defined system of arbitration) and the cinematic form



(prevailing performative practices, censorship regulations). This is why the State has always viewed the screen as a subversive site.

Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, filmmakers in Iran were working under serious constraints. Though monarchs like Mozaffar al-Din Shah and Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-41) encouraged the use of the cinematograph, the real problem with cinema was not technology but the question of dealing with modernity. Cinema's negotiations with modernity were fraught with unexpected possibilities. For example, by a frontal positioning of the women, cinema could subvert what Ferzaneh Milani has referred to in another context as the "aesthetics of immobility."<sup>28</sup> Cinema also posed the danger of undermining the institutional basis of Iran's feudal monarchy. Instead of providing it with a regulatory

framework and bringing cinema into the public sphere, the Iranian state chose the path of disavowal. This situation continued until the Islamic Revolution (1979), by which time the State decided to take on cinema frontally and finally.

Why did success eventually elude Sepanta? His celluloid journey had begun at a time when the import of Iranian films into Iran was comparatively low<sup>29</sup> and attendance in cinema halls constantly rising.<sup>30</sup> One explanation for Sepanta's failure could be that he launched his grandiose project at a time when Iran had haltingly begun its transition toward modernity. Nonetheless, the short-lived Indo-Iranian collaboration revealed the potential that such projects carried for the benefit of both the countries. Had successive Iranian and Indian filmmakers continued to collaborate further, the history of the two national cinemas would have been written quite differently.

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3. Such borrowings have been observed in other cinemas. As one film scholar has observed: "Cinema as a medium was informed by what one may term 'intertextual excess' whereby it could borrow from high and low cultural universes at the same time and recombine them in unexpected ways" (M.S.S. Pandian, Tamil Cultural Elites and Cinema: Outline of an Argument, *Economic and Political Weekly of India*, April 13, 1996, p.950).
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6. The transition of Akkasbashi from a photographer to a cinematographer is evident from a significant entry of king Mozaffar al-Din Shah's travelogue diary:
- "[A]t 9:00 p.m. we went to the Exposition and the Festival Hall where they were showing cinematographer, which consists of still and motion pictures. Then we went to Illusion building ...in this Hall they were showing cinematographer. They erected a very large screen in the centre of the Hall, turned off all electric lights and projected the picture of cinematography on that large screen. It was very interesting to watch. Among the pictures were Africans and Arabians traveling with camels in the African desert which was very interesting. Other pictures were of the Exposition, the moving street, the Seine river and ships crossing the river, people swimming and playing in the water and many others which were all very interesting. We instructed Akkas Bashi to purchase all kinds of it [cinematographic equipment] and bring to Teheran so God willing he can make some there and show them to our servants."
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29. NUMBER OF MOTION PICTURE FILMS IMPORTED INTO IRAN (1928-30)
- | Country of Origin | 1928       | 1929       | 1930       |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| United States     | 133        | 227        | 145        |
| France            | 100        | 110        | 94         |
| Germany           | 30         | 47         | 60         |
| Russia            | 32         | 57         | 42         |
| Other Countries   | 10         | 19         | 6          |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>305</b> | <b>460</b> | <b>347</b> |
- (Source: <http://www.lib.washington.edu/neareast/cinemaofiran/intro.html#foot14>.)
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## HINDI IN GUYANA

Satishkumar Rohra

Translated by  
Ravindra Narayan Mishra

The word Guyana Amerindian (This word is made of America-Indian) is language of the race and its meaning is land of many sources of water. There is abundance of water in Guyana. The Atlantic Ocean touches a very large area of Guyana. Besides there are four great rivers here – Acikibo, Demrara, Berbis and Kortin. In the mountainous region of Guyana there are many gulfs, rivulets and waterfalls.

Guyana is situated between 1to 9 northern latitude and 57to 61 western longitude. North to it is Atlantic Ocean. Surinam is in its east. Towards the south and south- west is Brazil and in the west is Venezuela. Guyana's area is 83000 square miles and its population is 800000 (Eight Lakh). Guyana's climate is temperate and this place receives annual rainfall of 100 inches. The main crop of this place is sugarcane (from which sugar is made here) and rice. There is a huge stock of Bauxite here. Gold and diamonds are also found here in huge quantity. Guyana is situated on Caribbean ocean which is a branch of Atlantic Ocean in the south of America.

### Historical Background

The story of Guyana is oft repeated story of imperialistic tendencies. After an intense struggle among imperialistic powers - French, Dutch and British Guyana was divided in three parts around 1930. These parts were French Guyana (This part is called Kayan now-a-days and this part is still under French control), Dutch Guyana (This part is now called Surinam and it is an independent country)

and British Guyana. The British Guyana came to be known as Guyana. Around 1950 it was given limited freedom and Chedi Jagan, the leader of the Peoples Progressive Party was given the reigns of power. In 1960 Guyana got complete independence and Forbes Burnham, the leader of National Peoples Party got the reigns of power. Since then the state power of Guyana has been in the hands of the National Peoples Party with its leader Forbes Burnham. In 1970 Guyana was declared a Cooperative Republic. Guyana is a member of the Commonwealth and the Non- aligned Movement.

### **Guyana's society and linguistic condition**

Guyana is a multi racial country. Normally Guyana is called the country of six races. These races are- Amerindian, African, East Indian (people of Indian origin), Chinese, Whites and Mixed (the cross of white and other races). Out of these there are two main races – East Indian or the people of the Indian origin who constitute 50-55% of the population and Africans who make up for 35 to 40% of the population. The remaining races are under 10-15%. Amerindians are the oldest race inhabiting this place.

The common colloquial language of Guyana is 'creole' which is simplified form of English which has words from Hindi, African and many other languages. The medium of education and administration is English and in all the formal situations English is used. The people of Amerindian race still speak

their languages. Among the languages are- Aravack, Karib, Baraus and Vepisiana. The Chinese use Chinese language in their family life. Aged people of Indian origin sometimes talk to their contemporaries in Hindi (Bhojpuri). The Africans had brought Congo, Vorba etc languages but the present generation of Africans doesn't have any special knowledge of these.

### **The Advent of Indians in Guyana**

The Indians came here 140 years ago as bonded labour. These immigrant Indians had come as indentured labour after making agreement. So they were called Girmitiya in many other countries. In Guyana they were called coolies. Even today people of other races call the people of Indian origin cooliemens. But these days cooliemens is not a derogatory word, in fact it means hard working and frugal. The main crop of Guyana is sugarcane. When it used to be British Guyana the sugarcane farming was done by slaves bought by the white Zamindars. In 1938 the system of slaves came to an end. The symptoms of this system coming to an end had started appearing even earlier. Because of the slave system coming to an end the African slaves working on sugarcane farms became free. After becoming free these African people continued to live in Guyana only but most of them refused to work on the farms of their ex-white masters. Now the white Zamindars of these farms were looking for such labour that may not be called slave but could work like slaves.

For this purpose there could have been no country better than India. The then white government of India (East India Company) also helped these white Zamindars. The poor Indians got trapped in the promises of greener pastures by the agents of the white Zamindars who were called Arakati at that time. On May 5, 1838 the first shipment of bonded labor reached Guyana. This practice of bringing bonded labour to Guyana continued till 1905. In the period of three fourth of a century 2.25 Lakh people were brought to Guyana from India. Normally these labour from India used to come after accepting the condition of working in Guyana for 5-7 years. They had permission to return to India at government expenditure after the period of term was over. According to the evidences gathered after the expiry of the term 75000 people had returned to India. Rest of the people settled in Guyana even after expiry of their term and started living like free farmers. The descendents of these Indians are known today as East Indian or Indo- Guyanese. The descendents of those Indians are not only farmers but also doctors, engineers, lecturers, officers and successful businessmen in large numbers.

#### **Immigrant Indians– a cultural community**

The Indians settled in Guyana appeared different not only in their appearance color and clothing but their cultural specialties established them as a special cultural community. Their speciality is

maintained even today. It is true that due to influence of time they have been affected by western civilization. In the long period of one and half century their interaction with other races has also increased but even today due to their food habits, family relations, social system, social belief and cultural assumptions they are Indians. One is pained for just one thing that the inheritance of language has slipped away from their hands. That is why while walking in many parts of Guyana one realizes that it is an India outside India at the same time it pains to learn that from the point of view of language Guyana is a dumb India. In Guyana there are many places where people of Indian origin constitute 90-95% of the population but even at these places people converse in creole and one rarely hears Hindi sentences from the mouth of some very old person.

#### **Immigrant Indians and Hindi– a historical background**

The immigrant Indians who had come from India they had come from three main ports- Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Among these immigrant Indians the largest number was of people who had come from western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (Bhojpuri area). The mother tongue of these people was Hindi (Bhojpuri). People speaking Bangla, Marathi and south Indian languages had also come but they were small in numbers. So, soon Hindi (Bhojpuri) became the language of communication and social interaction of the Indians.

With the passage of time Hindi became a device to maintain their social identity and cultural tradition.

The unfavourable conditions in which the immigrant Indians had to live can only be imagined today. Away from their country, relatives, a completely strange country and no way to return, living amidst different and hostile races, miserable material conditions and a painful and humiliating life. In such a situation it had become crucial that the entire immigrant Indian population should establish themselves as a social group and maintain their cultural tradition. For both these things Hindi became the medium. By making Hindi their language of communication they established themselves as Hindi speaking social group. This way Hindi became a source of their social identity and social organization. Even their contact with the works of Medieval Bhakti poets was only through Hindi. The Ramayan of Tulsī was life giving for them. Those who were Hindi speaking had memorized the works of saints and devotional poets like Mira, Kabir and Surdas. Their words gave them hope and confidence in those difficult conditions. This is why in those days, to be connected with Indian cultural tradition and to preserve it meant being attached to Hindi. This way Hindi had a three dimensional role. Hindi was the language for mutual communication and social interaction for the immigrant Indians, Hindi for them was a symbol of social identity and Hindi was the device

to preserve and maintain the cultural tradition.

### **Decline and Resurgence of Hindi**

After coming to Guyana the immigrant Indians kept using Hindi language in their daily lives for a hundred years. But since last fifty years the use of Hindi has been gradually declining. Today the situation is such that except for some old people in day to day life no body uses Hindi. The main reason for the decline of Hindi was the policy of the British government according to which English was made pivot for education and administration. As a result only people with special proficiency in English could get opportunity for higher education and good jobs. The result of this English policy was that the descendents of immigrant Indians gravitated towards English and away from Hindi. This way not only in formal conditions but also in family lives the use of Hindi declined. In spite of decline in use of Hindi in daily lives Hindi continued to be the device for social recognition and maintaining cultural tradition of the immigrant Indians.

After the independence of Guyana people were attracted towards their cultural progress. With this new consciousness the age of renaissance in Hindi also started. The credit of this renaissance goes to their religious and social organizations. These days there is big enthusiasm for Hindi in Guyana. Not only people of old generation but also people of new generation have started

thinking of Hindi as their own language and they consider it necessary to learn this language. This author conducted a scientific survey of sample social language. On the basis of that survey one finds that 70% of the people above 50 years of age think of Hindi as their mother tongue and 80% of them think learning Hindi is essential for every Indian. It is very surprising to see that almost the same percentage of new generation (16 to 25 age group) thinks learning Hindi is necessary for people of Indian origin. Yes, regarding the period of language there are differences among these sufferers. Among the people of the old generation (above 50 years of age) Hindi speaking people are very large in number. The number of such people who can speak Hindi easily is meagre in the younger generation. But there is no doubt that among the youth of today there is big enthusiasm for learning Hindi. And their views about Hindi are the same as those of older generation.

### **The Present Position of Hindi Learning in Guyana**

There are two kinds of Hindi studies- formal and informal. In Guyana the whole of formal education is nationalized. This education has three levels – primary education, secondary education and higher education. At the primary level there is no arrangement for teaching Hindi. On the request of different social and religious institutions the government gave permission to teach Hindi in those schools in which any of the already

working teachers had the ability to teach Hindi and the head master of the school had no objection to this. At the same time the society for promotion of Hindi of Guyana would arrange reading materials/books etc for the students. On the basis of this permission in 5-6 secondary schools in form 1,2,3, (class 6,7,8) there is arrangement for study of Hindi. At two schools (Tagore school and Hindu College) in form 5 (equal to high school) there is arrangement to teach Hindi. For higher education there is Guyana University in Guyana. With the teachers provided by the help of Indian government institutions, Indian Cultural Relation Council in 1976 a syllabus of Hindi was started. In the beginning it was only a 'Reading Course' which was for students studying Indian History. Presently Hindi is a subject of B.A. (Honours) as a foreign language.

The university organizes summer syllabus and short term courses of 4-6 weeks. Many aged people also participate in these courses.

Besides formal Hindi education 100 Hindi schools are run in the whole of Guyana by different religious and social organizations. These schools are generally run in temples. The classes are held for two or three days per week. The students studying at these schools take Junior, Senior, and Advanced examinations conducted by Guyana Hindi Prachar Sabha. Every year 600 to 800 students participate in these examinations. A cultural centre is being



run by the Indian Cultural Relation Council. A Hindi Professor is appointed there. Hindi classes are run by this centre as well. There is new enthusiasm for Hindi in Guyana these days. But to restore a language which has become out of use is a difficult task that cannot be accomplished without support of government. Maintaining Hindi as a cultural language is not a very difficult work. Although when it comes to be judged in its practical use in Guyana, Hindi has been reduced to zero yet one can realize very naturally the atmosphere for Hindi. All around Hindi songs are blaring, there is unique attraction for

Hindi films, the establishment of many devotional and Ramayana groups, on every religious occasion arrangement for general Hindi songs and devotional songs, use of Hindi in religious ceremonies and Hindi schools running in villages after villages are some such tendencies. These things give rise to this feeling that for the people of Indian origin in Guyana, Hindi is even now their own language. Apart from their social and cultural identity Hindi is such a 'link language' which not only binds them on the cultural plane but also links them with India and Indianness.

*Courtesy: ICCR, Delhi*

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## **THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE AND HINDI-TEACHING: MY JAPANESE EXPERIENCE**

Harjendra Chaudhary

It was on first April, 1994 , that I joined erstwhile Osaka University of Foreign Studies as Visiting Professor in the Department of Indology/ South Asian Studies. One and a half decade has passed since then. In my view, this duration is sufficient for retrospecting the work done during my tenure at that University. (The Osaka University of Foreign Studies is now an integral part of Osaka University in the form of Research Institute for World Languages.)

Before leaving New Delhi for Japan, I had some clear plans and some vague ideas of the techniques likely to be adopted by me for teaching Hindi to Japanese students. One of these was to select (for M.A. course) Hindi texts, or parts thereof, dealing with the 'exclusive Indian reality' and 'typical Indian mentality', which a common foreign student was/is generally not aware of – the communal tensions between communities sharing almost the same culture ('Tamas' by Bhisham Sahni), our habitual tendency to talk even to strangers, the menace of hunger (some poems by Nagarjun), the Indian 'sense and interpretation of history' (some poems from 'Magadh' by Srikant Verma) along with the texts dealing with the problems being faced by the contemporary world like 'old age problem' ('Chief ki dawat' by Bhisham Sahni and 'Ardra' by Mohan Rakesh) etc.

Other than the above, I had an idea and desire to adopt dramatics as an effective tool of language-teaching. To my satisfaction, most of the ideas (clear or vague) were implemented and bore desirable fruits not only during my tenure (1994-96) at that Japanese university,

but also during the years that followed. My idea was happily and enthusiastically approved by Professor Katsuro Koga and Professor Akira Takahashi.

The universities in Japan observe summer vacation mid July to mid September. We initiated the 'Hindi dramatics plan' in July (1994) itself. Professor Takahashi, along with a group of our students (and a number of beer cans) arrived at my official residence in Onohara Higashi area of Minoo-city to further discuss and finalize the plan that we already had chalked out.

The students were enthusiastic to participate and ready to spare requisite time for the rehearsals. We hit the hammer at the right point and decided to stage the world-renowned Indian classic 'Abhijnanshakuntalam' of Kalidasa in Hindi. Rehearsals started and continued during summer vacations and intensified after the university reopened. Rehearsals during September and October often continued late into the night.

The annual festival of the university held during October-November 1994 witnessed presentation of a full length play, 'Abhijnanshakuntalam', in Hindi by the Department of Indology. It proved to be an assuring and inspiring experience which ultimately culminated into a long-going tradition of 'Hindi drama by Japanese' which many of us, today, are aware of.

Regular and intensive rehearsals bore significant results. Some of the students

who had acted on or behind the stage had improved a lot in terms of Hindi conversation; their pronunciation was now comparatively nearer to that of the native speakers and had gained considerably in other linguistic skills as well. The experiment of utilizing dramatics as a technique of language-teaching had been reasonably successful.

The sense of satisfaction and success had paved the way for future plans. In 1995, a comedy ('Sachiko ki Shaadi') dealing with the differences in the ways of Japanese and Indian life was a hit not only at the annual cultural festival of the university, but also beyond its boundaries.

This entertaining play was such a success that Professor Tomio Mizokami and its cast decided to stage it in Kobe, a city with a considerably large Indian community. It was staged there on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1995. A large number of Japanese and Indian audience enjoyed the show.

The play found a bright mention in Japanese media. It was partially broadcast by Radio Japan along with the interviews of main characters and writer-director, Dr. Harjender Chaudhary. Some audience were of the view that 'Sachiko ki Shaadi' played a role in reducing the depression caused by the great earthquake, which, with its epicentre near Kobe, had wreaked havoc in Western Japan in 1995.

During the following years, Professor Tomio Mizokami took the lead. It was

the joint effort of the staff and students of Osaka University of Foreign Studies and Professor Tomio Mizokami that made 'Hindi drama by Japanese' cross not only national borders, but also the boundaries of the continent. In 1997, the Japanese team of Hindi students came to India and performed here for the first time. They were also invited by The National School of Drama to stage their play in our national language. Further, Hindi intellectuals all over the world would remember that they (the Japanese team) were officially invited to perform at the VIth World Hindi Conference held at London, UK, in September 1999.

Many cities situated across length and breadth of India and countries like Nepal, Mauritius, United Kingdom, Singapore and Thailand have witnessed the performance of 'Hindi drama by Japanese' during the long period ranging from 1997 to 2007. During this entire decade, Hindi theatre troupe from Japan performed 79 times in the countries other than Japan.

It is noteworthy that Tokyo University of Foreign Studies has been following the tradition by presenting Urdu drama in India and Pakistan during the last few years under the guidance of Professor Asada. The Hindi drama troupe of Osaka University of Foreign Studies and the Urdu drama troupe from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies have travelled together to perform in our country. The Hindi staff and students of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies have been performing locally in their annual festivals and on other occasions.

Retrospecting my theatrical experience at Japanese University and the resultant tradition of 'Hindi drama by the Japanese', I intend to flash the idea to the universities/institutes involved with the teaching of Hindi abroad that a theatrical performance is definitely an interesting and effective tool of teaching/learning Hindi as a foreign language. It may be hoped that Hindi teaching and Hindi theatre would go a long way, hand in hand, to pave the path to international understanding and world peace.

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## T'TA PROFESSOR

Manohar Shyam Joshi

Translated by  
Ira Pande

Poets must die when they're young and novelists be born only when they're old.' Can't recall where I read that line, or its author's name. God knows who wrote it: a failed middleaged poet or a successful old novelist. Sounds more like the former, if you ask me. A middle-aged German poet, perhaps, with a bald pate and a malodorous body, whose female admirers peer beyond his beer-bloated, flatulent belly trying to find the young man who wrote romantic lyrics.

Look, successful or not, I am a middle-aged novelist too, and although I may now write to live, I no longer live to write. All the stories I put off writing because I waited for them to mature, have grown old along with me. In fact, they are as close to death as I am now. So what immortality can this dying baggage have?

Mind you, once—very long ago—I dreamt of writing immortal stuff, something that would floor my readers and critics. And perhaps I did write an odd dozen that future generations may read on a bright and sunny or dark and cloudy day. Such readers may pause at a sentence, mark the page ruminatively with a finger or get up to read it aloud to someone else. But when they look out of the window and see the brave new world, they'll probably shake their heads and say to themselves, 'No—anyone I read this to will think I've gone a bit soft in the head. This is for those who value period writing or those nuts who believe in literary immortality and that sort of shit.'

My old world is dying all around me: what is more, even the memories of that world now appear old and tired like me. So.. .no, I don't believe in anyone's immortality now, least of all in my own. I have virtually given up writing; in fact, I find now that I can't even muster up the desire to read anything written by someone else. I often find it difficult now to remember myself as the young writer who once had stories bubbling up inside him as spontaneously as laughter and tears. Was I the man who once, while drinking a solitary cup of tea in the restaurant behind the University, suddenly burst into laughter and then hastily got up and left before someone thought I had' gone mad? Was it me who left, still chuckling over my thoughts, in search of someone with whom to share the reason why I laughed? Someone to whom I could relate an entire plot, while talking and walking at the same time, completely oblivious of the traffic or even the people on the road who turned to stare at me? Was it me who could, at the sound of an old romantic film song, or on reading a line like 'Poets must die young. . .' get a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes? Unable to summon a listener, I'd run then to the bathroom and stare into the mirror over the washbasin at the spectacle of my welling eyes and contorting face and silently relive the story that lay trapped in those tears.

Was that me? Or was it a character in one of my stories?

Whatever the truth, I am no longer that man. Period. I seem to have lost

the magic button that created waves of emotion within me, the one that made me laugh and cry without reason. It's all haywire now, so that often I cry when I should laugh and burst into laughter when I should burst into tears, And all those stories that I did not write in my youth have aged and died a little—like me—some outside me, and some within.

However, there were some promising stories that I looked at from time to time, to test their health, as it were. I raged against their ageing as I raged against mine. I have piles of dusty files with several opening chapters written between long gaps. All they seem to me now are mute reminders that both my imagination and handwriting have deteriorated over the years. Among that collection of trash are also some luckless plots that took birth, developed, and died of suffocation in my mind even before they saw ink and paper.

What I am about to write is a requiem for just such a tale.

I had gone to Almora last summer to visit our ancestral home, when I was reminded of this tale by someone (he was actually a character in it) from a moving bus. There I was, standing near a dried-up apricot tree in our home, reflecting on the ancestor who must have planted it, when someone from the road above our home yelled: 'Joshi, Ma'at-saip!'

My startled gaze flew up and I saw a private bus going to Bageshwar that had probably stopped to pick up a passenger from the main road above

our house. I traced the voice of my hailer to an old man, who appeared to be smiling at me from one of the windows. I hurried up the terraced fields that led to the road and furiously jogged my brain to recall who he could be. He'd called me 'Ma'at-saip', so I figured he must have some connection with Sunaulidhar village, the only place where I had ever taught in a school. It was also the only time in my entire life when I was called 'Ma'atsaip' -Kumaoni for 'master-sahib'.

I huffed my way up to the road where the bus stood. The old man looked at me from a window and congratulated me on having become such a famous writer. I tried desperately to remember his name and what he must have looked like when he was younger. No luck. So all the while that he talked to me, I schooled my face to wear an expression that said, 'Of course I remember you!' It was only when he talked of how he had been left far behind me in the literary rat race and cursed his own fate that the penny dropped. So this was the junior clerk of the Sunaulidhar school who wrote horrendous romantic verse, I recalled. But no matter how hard I tried, the idiot's name still eluded me.

The driver cranked his old bus into life and as it lurched forward, the poet yelled, 'Ma'at-saip, won't you write about "T'ta Professor" Khashtivallabh Pant, Dubbul M.A.?'

I never got a chance to respond. By now the bus had gathered some speed, so when he waved his hand like Khashtivallabh I waved a limp hand

foolishly in return, my lips soundlessly mouthing a 't'ta'. I slowly walked down the hill again, still trying to recall the man's name, but although a line of his vile poetry came clearly to me, for the life of me, I could not remember it. Faces have had names erased, and names hover in my head without accompanying faces now. The departing poet must have also often reflected on the frustrations felt by an ageing, creaky brain because he was, after all, a poet: a poet and a junior clerk. Just as I was then a writer: a writer and a temporary schoolmaster.

And all of a sudden I was transported to a time when I lived in a faraway village called Sunaulidhar that had the Himalayas studded on its horizon like a gleaming horseshoe.

I was in rebellion against my family and the tyranny of university examinations those days. I had botched my MA exam and, after a quarrel at home, landed in the remote village of Sunaulidhar so that my family would not nag me to try and get a government job. For their peace of mind, I'd told them that I would do a 'private' MA but actually all I had wanted to do was to live in a pretty village and write.

The day I went to the school for the first time, I realized that the atmosphere there was pretty loaded. And I mean that in a comical sense. My first encounter was with the headmaster of the school—Shobhan Singh. He objected to my calling him a headmaster and said, call me Principal, please; the 'headmaster' here is one Khashtivallabh

Pant, who prefers to be called Professor.

Ah, I thought, chuckling silently. So this little school that had just been promoted to a high school from a middle school had a principal *and* a professor! As he went on about the running feud between himself and Khashtivallabh, the poetic possibilities of the pretty village retreated from my mind before its huge comic potential. Then, to impress me, a graduate from Lucknow University, Shobhan Singh dropped several important names so that I understood how he was no yokel but one of us. What he did not think it necessary to address, however, was the small matter of where I would stay. When the manager of the school had interviewed me in Almora for the job, he had clearly mentioned that Prihicipal-saip would give me a room in the quarters that had been constructed for him. Principal-saip, on the other hand, suggested that I may use the unfinished storeroom of the school laboratory as my digs and share it with the junior clerk.

So I reached the storeroom of the lab and found the junior clerk addressing an envelope to the editor of *Saraswati* magazine. I introduced myself and gave him the principal's message and asked where I could keep my stuff. He cursed the principal saying, 'He could have let you put your things in the office, couldn't he?'

I let that pass, and asked him, 'Are you a writer?'

'I am a Poet,' he replied petulantly. 'A Poet, understand? Not some writer-viter.'

I told him pleasantly that I was a writer too, and that one of my scientific articles had recently appeared in *Sangam*. Scientific articles can hardly be called writing, he sneered.

'Talk to me of short stories and novels, understand? I am sending my poem to *Saraswati* for publication and have to leave for the post office now.' Then he cast a disdainful eye over my luggage. 'Keep your things here if you must, but I am not going to leave you here alone, understand? There is too much stuff lying here-the lab's, my Own... If anything goes missing, the shit will break over my head,' he said darkly.

I offered to walk with him to the post office for I also had a short story to send to *Sangam* magazine. So we both reached the village bazaar which had all of two shops. The first one belonged to Jeet Singh, who stocked everything from groceries to shoes and clothes, and also doubled as the village post office. The junior clerk had by now worked out that the editor of *Sangam*, Ilachandra Joshi, must be some relative of mine and promptly asked me to put in a word for his poems. I said I would certainly help him with a letter to the editor who, incidentally, was no cousin or relative. However, I did know him. The young man then proceeded to tell me of the nepotism rampant in the literary world, confiding that this was why he always wrote under a pseudonym.

'I always keep clear of all caste biases,' he said virtuously. 'However, if you recommend my work to Ilachandraji,' he added slyly, 'he will know I am a



brahmin.' Then he hurriedly checked whether I belonged to the same subcaste as the editor. I assured him that neither the editor nor I had any interest in our castes or subcastes.

So we posted our work and, to celebrate the discovery that Sunaulidhar now had two writers, decided to visit the second shop of the village whose owner, Kheem Singh, sold tea, jalebis, pakoras and delicious potato gutkas. I ended up not only paying for this celebration but also listening to the junior clerk's poetic outpourings as well. By now he had unbent sufficiently to pay attention to the problem of my homelessness.

'Here there is no such thing as rooms to rent,' he informed me between noisy slurps of tea. 'Everyone lives in his own house where many generations of a family live together. There *is* one largish house that has place,' he went on, 'but that belongs to "T'ta", Professor Khashtivallabh Pant, and there is no way he will accept you as a tenant because you were appointed by my uncle, Sher Singh, manager of the school board. You see, T'ta hates Sher Singh because when the school was promoted to a high school recently, Sher Singh imported a principal from Nainital instead of giving T'ta the job.'

'Is this Pant some retired professor?' I asked innocently.

'Hah!' he snorted contemptuously. 'He is an ordinary schoolmaster who started his career here when this was a primary school. He wants to become a professor and that is why he has done a dubbul MA-in Hindi and history. Privately. He

keeps sending applications to colleges all over but you know how it is: Apply, apply, no reply.'

'So was he upset at not being appointed principal?' I asked.

'Was he not!' the young man continued. 'He really believes that his efforts led to our primary school being promoted to a high school, get it? Now it's true that my uncle, the manager, asked him to write out the applications for him, but that doesn't mean that T'ta was responsible for this happening! Getting all this organized was my uncle's effort- he took the help of his brother-in-law, the forest contractor Pan Singh Bisht, who donated the slush money needed to move the red tape, understand?'

My head was reeling by now and by the end of all this, all I knew was that I was still homeless and would probably end up sleeping under the stars on a bed of pine needles through my stay. When I told the junior clerk as much, his poetic heart was so moved at my plight that he vowed to get me a room and kitchen in T'ta's house. So, armed with a letter from his uncle the manager, he took me to T'ta's place.

T'ta was busy doing some complex yogic exercises and we had to wait a while. He came, glanced through the letter, pointed out several grammatical mistakes and informed us curtly that he was not prepared to share his home with any Tom, Dick or Harry. Ignoring me completely, he then turned to the junior clerk and said that whoever this Mr Joshi-Hoshi may be, his house had no spare room.

'In fact,' he went on, still addressing the junior clerk and studiously avoiding my eyes, 'I want to send a message to your uncle that people like this Joshi person should not be appointed teachers in the school. When the school had a dubbul MA like me to teach the children Hindi and history, what do they mean by hiring a mere graduate like this person to handle maths and science? And that too, a person who shamelessly smokes in the presence of his elders and betters? What kind of ideal is he going to set for our students? Look at him, a mere stripling-how on earth- is he going to control the rough and robust village boys?'

We slunk away and the junior clerk placed my predicament before Principal-saip. I had imagined that the principal would be able to persuade the clerk to let me share the storeroom with him but instead I found the junior clerk asking me why I had accepted a position in Sunaulidhar when I had no place of "my own in the village.

Slowly, the power dynamics of the school were becoming clear to me: the principal was beholden to the school manager who had got him appointed principal over T'ta. The clerk was the manager's nephew so he had a claim on the principal's support. Thus, his insisting that the principal share his house with me-rather than offering to share his own room-started to make sense.

Eventually, the matter was resolved when the principal decided that Kheem Singh should be told to give Joshi-jyu a room in his 'hotel'.

Kheem Singh was located and, after

he was made to see how critically dependent he was on the income from the school's students and teachers, he had no choice but to agree that the storeroom behind his shop would be my lodgings and he'd provide me with my meals. So Kheem Singh shoved aside the sacks of potatoes and firewood to one corner and put in a wooden takht and a table and chair for me. Thus it was that I became the first and only tenant of Kheem Singh's 'hotel'.

I believe he still quotes the five rupees and eleven annas I am supposed to owe him for his contribution to the cause of Hindi literature.

To cut a long story short, I started living in Kheem Singh's 'hotel' and sat on a rickety chair as I composed literature on an even more rickety table. In between, I also swallowed unavoidable doses of the poetic outpourings of the junior clerk, who was delighted that not only had he now access to an account at Kheem Singh's shop, but also that there was a fellow writer who was not averse to poetry and gossip. The main subject of the gossip was T'ta because he was the declared enemy of the junior clerk's uncle, the manager.

One day, as the junior clerk was on his favourite subject, the man in question came to the neighbouring post office-cum-general store and started chatting with the owner, Jeet Singh. The subject of T'ta's declamation was the teachers of today, and every barb was clearly aimed at me.

The junior clerk whispered conspiratorially that T'ta invariably came

to Jeet Singh's shop in time for the post from the town because he was scared that someone may read the love letters he received. But who could possibly fall in love with a man like T'ta, I asked my companion.

'Only T'ta knows the answer to that,' the junior clerk shrugged, 'or possibly his lover. All we know is that there is a lover somewhere. The postman tells us that three or four times a year, T'ta gets a letter with the name and address written in a particular hand. Earlier, the postmark was Lahore but after '47, the letters come from Delhi,' he said darkly.

'But it could be a relative, couldn't it?' I said.

'Oh, we know all about his relatives,' he scoffed. 'The old man had an uncle in Lahore once upon a time, and T'ta ran away from his village to study there. But the minute T'ta's gloomy shadow fell on that house, the uncle died of a heart attack. The uncle was an Arya Samaji bachelor so there is no possibility of T'ta having any cousins there.'

At this point, the postman appeared and smilingly handed over an envelope to Professor-saip.

'Look, look,' the junior clerk nudged me, 'look at T'ta's eyes light up. I swear even the old man's nose is twitching, guru,' he giggled. 'Tell me, have you ever seen anyone's eyes light up like that on getting a cousin's letter, huh? Wonder who the Heer of this cartoon Ranjha is! I've often begged the postman to let me steam the letter open. Promised him I'll stick it back exactly as it is but the wretch won't let me!'

T'ta was all set to leave, royally ignoring us next door, when I deliberately accosted him. I bowed low over my greeting and forced him to acknowledge us even as he was in the act of putting the letter away safely in his pocket.

'Whose letter is it, Professor-saip?' I asked politely. 'God knows where you learnt your manners, Mr Joshi,' he replied stiffly, 'but in Lahore we were taught that asking personal questions was a sure sign of bad manners.'

Then he turned away and left swiftly in the direction of the dense forest that lay at the edge of the village.

The junior clerk clapped a hand on my shoulder, 'There you are, maharaj,' he laughed openly. 'Witness now the departure of your hero into the dense forest to read his love letter in peace. Now he will go to the house of a woman called Kalawati. Arrey, I know all about the old rogue-for all his puritanical exterior, there is a Lothario lurking inside our crusty professor. Not for nothing has he left his wife in her village-he's never ever brought her here. Not even once!'

'Wonder how he produces so many children, though,' quipped Kheem Singh as he fried us a fresh batch of pakoras.

And we all guffawed.

'Have you ever noticed,' the junior clerk went on, 'how T'ta yells and curses us in Inglis but coos like a pigeon to any woman he meets? And have you ever noticed how he behaves with that half-Chinese primary schoolteacher, Kalawati Yen?'

Ah! Kalawati Yen. I must tell you

about her. You see, the British had once planted tea gardens around Sunaulidhar and employed Chinese labourers to work on them. The gardens didn't take root but the Chinese did, and Kalawati belonged to one such family. She was an exotic beauty and in my opinion there was just one young man in the entire village who was capable of loving her as she deserved: me. So the thought of Professor T'ta trying to romance her had me in hysterics.

'Our T'ta is a real joker, I tell you,' offered the junior clerk. 'You won't find a character like him anywhere in the world, believe me. You have to write about him, Ma'at-saip!'

In those days, I was arrogant enough not to write on topics suggested by others, so I ignored his request. I wanted to

write something that would be classical and modern at the same time, something that would blend D.H. Lawrence with Upton Sinclair, and Agyeya with Premchand. At that point, the character of Kalawati Yen and her Chinese ancestry appeared more promising to me than T'ta. Yet, while the pretext of researching her Chinese forefathers would give me a chance to come closer to her, it would also intensify my encounters with T'ta, her self-appointed guardian and bodyguard. How could I possibly waste my sophisticated intellectual aspirations on such a buffoon?

However, I soon began to see the potential of the comic 'zero' in him because, despite being an international intellectual, I was also the local satirist and lampooner.

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Manohar Shyam Joshi (1933-2006) was a prolific writer who tried his hand at virtually every form of writing: novels, ad. copy, t.v. scripts and journalistic features. Author of novels like Kuru Kuru Swaha, Kasap and Kyaap, he won Sahitya Akademi award in 2005. He wrote the first hindi soap opera 'hum log' followed by buniyad. He was editor of saptahik hindustan, a leading weekly journal.

Ira Pande, has been university teacher and editor of journals Seminar and Biblio besides being a creative writer. She is currently chief editor IIC Publications. Her translation of Joshi's novel T'ta Professor, has earned her this year's Crossword award. She lives in New Delhi.

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