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Antarrashtriya
Hindi Vishwavidyalaya

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Editor
Mamta Kalia



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Editor : **Mamta Kalia**

Editorial Assistant : **Madhu Saxena**

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Editor's Note

On a recent visit to Goa, I had the occasion to be present at the conferring of Jnanpith award upon Konkani author and national activist Ravindra Kelekar. It was an event in which the Government of Goa not only took active part but mobilised the entire literati to participate in it. Jnanpith laureate Ravindra Kelekar was not in the best of health that day. He remained seated during the award function. However the audience of 2000 strong accorded him a standing ovation for full five minutes. Lovers of Konkani language and literature thronged the auditorium to have a glimpse of their venerated writer.

The Hindi world could learn a lesson or two from this experience. Hindi has a great number of writers and scholars who have given a lifetime of service to the enrichment of the language. In Hindi, books are published in bulk and marketed all over the world. Considering the vast number of people who speak Hindi and no less who read it, the returns of this harvest to the writer are meagre. Even worse is the output in terms of social status. This history repeats itself from Nirala to Nagarjun and from Premchand to Amarkant.

Upendranath Ashk whose centenary occurs this year was one brave author who broke free from the clutches of commercial injustice to set up his own publishing house in 1949. His writer wife Kaushalya Ashk took over the reins of Neelabh Prakashan and relieved him of all humdrum business chores. Except for a few short term jobs, Ashkji remained a freelancer throughout his life. He formed an ideal family with an understanding, sensitive wife and an intellectual son Neelabh. The three shared great vibrations and ruled an otherwise difficult literary town– Allahabad. Ashkji's life was not luxurious but self dependent.

We carry two of his famous short stories in our heritage column and two memoirs on him by his contemporaries. His son Neelabh has obliged us by giving us this archive material. It is noteworthy that the level of

mutual appreciation among writers was exemplary fifty years ago. Bedi and Renu were writers of a different genre but they warmly acknowledged Ashkji's individuality. This type of tolerance is totally missing in present times.

Other short stories by Kashinath Singh, Manoj Rupra and Manisha Kulshreshtha are very significant for their content and style.

Badri Narayan is known for his simplicity of diction and richness of content. We bring you some of his poems. In discourse Bharat Bharadwaj has painstakingly chalked out the history of Hindi literary journalism. We also have a candid study of dalit saint poets by Subhash Sharma and an analysis of poetic theory by Ravinandan Sinha. Our readers are well familiar with both of them.

Hindi has a rich treasure chest of memoirs and we bring you one by Harishankar Parsai. He recalls Muktibodh in all his shades of personality.

Mridula Garg's novel Anitya has been translated into English recently and we present one chapter from the same. Chandrakanta's collection of short stories 'abbu ne kaha tha' is reviewed by hindi literary critic Rohini Agrawal. In films column, Kanan Jhingan's portrayal of Meena Kumari speaks volumes about that superb suffering artiste.

Friends, you can well assess that the number of women writing in hindi is no less than that of men, in fact it may be greater. But this is incidental. After all gender is not important in literature. Women writers can not wear it like a badge or a banner. Every writer has to face the test of time.

Manoj K. C.

CAPTAIN RASHID

Upendra Nath Ashk

Translated by
Jai Ratan

“I was thinking of Hanif. Why don't you find a place for him in your new scheme?”

Captain Rashid had his tunic on and was pacing the room as usual, while buttoning it. At the same time he was feverishly thinking of giving a face-lift to his weekly. His imagination ran riot. He had already appointed new, able and experienced sub-editors; had asked the press to cast new type-faces; had prevailed upon the headquarters to supply better quality news stock; had increased the number of pictorial pages and during his editorship, the paper had undergone a vast change and had become far more useful for the armed forces...

His wife's words fell dimly upon his ears as if he were in a state of somnambulism. He knit his brows and turning round, he looked at her in surprise.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed, preparing a cup of tea for him. Capt. Rashid's office started at nine, but he had made it a point to be in the office fifteen minutes before time. It was his belief that an officer should be at his desk before the clerks arrived. He would set the alarm clock for an early hour and the servant had instruction to bring the morning tea in the bed room, so that he would be ready to leave for office by 8:15.

As she stirred the sugar in the cup, a faint smile played across her face, like the first reluctant streak of an autumn dawn, and

her face gradually reddened with the ordeal of a request. She looked at her husband from the corner of her eyes. Stirring the tea, she repeated her request. "I was telling you about Hanif..."

"You are a fool." Capt. Rashid snapped. There was a scowl on his face. Picking up the cup, he again started pacing the room.

His wife watched him silently as he strode to the other end of the room. Her gaze sliding down his fast balding head, the back of which ended in pronounced bulge, took in his thin neck and rounded shoulders and came to rest on his feet. She realised that his gait had undergone a great change. For that matter, she had noticed the change since the day he had been appointed to his new position. His thin neck was always stiff as if he had pulled a muscle. He walked on his toes and on reaching the wall he pirouetted on his toes, like a top taking a sharp spin.

Not only his gait, even his manners had undergone a change. His gaze, which previously was always subdued and bore a puzzled and helpless expression, had now changed into a bold stare, brimming with confidence. While talking, he would smile ironically, thinking the other person to be a damned fool or curl up his lips, as if the other fellow was indulging in some silly prattle, unworthy of his notice.

For sometime Mrs. Rashid watched her husband sipping tea and pacing up

and down the room. She did not mind the 'title' that her husband had bestowed upon her for asking him to fix up her cousin's husband with a job under his control. When Rashid had donned the military uniform for the first time, his elder brothers had laughed at him. "What's the army coming to these days." his eldest brother would say with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "that even such prize specimens have come to find a place in it". The elder brother would recite a couplet saying:

'Seeing my photo said that impish beauty.

This cartoon is fit for a newspaper.'

Their wives stuffed handkerchiefs into their mouths to keep them from bursting into laughter and Mrs. Rashid hung her head with embarrassment. This was the reason, that now her husband's stiff neck, his short temper, his droll appearance and irascible nature gave her a sort of satisfaction. She knew that his elder brother felt sorry for having made him the mark of his witticism and that the eldest brother felt awkward at this reed-thin man having made the grade. Hadn't he lived up to his boast that without the recommendation and help of his Khan Bahadur father, he would come up in life. Through his own ability and perseverance he had risen to the rank of capt. and been selected for this important post. His words still rang in her ears: "I am the first Indian to be made the Editor of this weekly. For the

past half century this position has been invariably held by Britishers alone.”

Mrs. Rashid looked at her husband with great pride. He had finished his cup and after putting it back on the tea-tray was now nibbling at a biscuit. She drained the cup in an empty glass and pouring the tea for a second cup broached the topic again. “You know how much regard I have for Shamim. She’s a distant relation, no doubt, but I hold her dearer than a sister.”

She paused. Capt. Rashid was still pacing the room. She said again, “Auntie is worried about shamim. It’s now four years since she was married. She has two children. But Hanif Bhai is still without a decent job.”

She put a spoonful of sugar and half a spoon of milk. Capt. Rashid continued to walk. He knitted his eye-brows which furrowed his forehead and his gait became heavy. His wife continued: “In these expensive times one cannot feed even one mouth on sixty rupees a month.” She sighed. “And then Shamim has two children and father and mother to care for.”

She stirred the sugar. Capt. Rashid made no reply. His lips twisted and the scowl on his face deepened. “People without even the rudiments of English are these days earning a salary of Rs. 200/-” she continued, without noticing her husband’s expression who stood facing the wall. “Hanif, as you know, has done his B.A. with Honours. But

he is poor and lacks contacts to pull the right strings.”

Capt. Rashid could not hold back his anger. ‘You foolish woman,’ he said to himself, tantalised, ‘did I get where I am through anybody’s help? Hard work, ability, honesty– these are the keys to success. I have not made this scheme to give asylum to worthless creatures like Hanif. I have no use for drones. I want diligent and experienced journalists, who know the ropes!’ But he did not say all this to her. He cast a pitying glance at his silly wife, and looked at the watch. It was going on to be eight. “I want journalists, not clerks,” he said shortly, and without touching the cup of tea, he strode out of the room.

Mrs. Rashid didn’t get up. She sat stunned and although she had stirred the sugar, she went on stirring the tea absentmindedly.

Capt. Rashid was the third and the youngest son of a military contractor, whom the Government had honoured with the title of Khan Bahadur. In comparison with his two brothers, he was not much to look at, but he had an alert and agile mind. Although he was no match to these two ‘bulls’ (who, he used to say, had fattened themselves on the ill-gotten wealth of their father) he was fired with the ambition of outstanding them in some other field of activity. That was the reason, while

his two brothers were busy squandering their father's money, earned through legitimate or illegitimate means, he had put his heart and soul into acquiring an education. After completing his college education he went in for a course of journalism. He had hardly finished his course when he was offered a commission in the army. Although his father had a big hand in getting him this position, Capt. Rashid however, attributed his achievement to his own talent and diligence; he was fully convinced that he was worthy of this position.

The weekly journal, of which he had been made the editor, was not one of those countless newspapers, which had sprouted overnight like mushrooms during the second World War. The paper had been established about fifty years ago and was intended for the armed forces engaged in fighting the tribals on the Afghan border. When Capt. Rashid took over its editorship, it was being published in several vernacular languages.

The armed personnel do not have access to the general run of newspapers. Hundreds of miles away from home they have to fight in jungles, difficult mountain terrain, forlorn deserts and isolated pockets. Although even in those days every effort was being made to provide wholesome diversion through games and recreations to fill the leisure hours of these semi-literate soldiers, yet it was felt that they must have a newspaper of their own, which should help them

to beguile the tedious hours which hang heavy on them after a full day's ordeal; when their thoughts turn to their homes, when they pine to know about the welfare of their near and dear ones, the condition of the land and the crops. The paper had been started to fill this need. In the beginning, the newspaper was confined to a bare two sheets, and its editorial staff limited to a few persons.

Although the two world wars saw the addition of number of translator-clerks to the journal, and its establishment also expanded considerably, yet its mode of editing was as hackneyed and stereotyped as that of the earliest days. The bulk of its material was supplied by the Government Information Department. The sub-editor and the typist between them vetted the text, which was then typed out and distributed to the vernacular sections for translation. The vernacular sections were faithful versions of the parent English edition. The gossip columns and tit-bits were first written in English and then translated into the various vernaculars, where the jokes failed to come off, and the translations, often made quaint reading. The English edition was actually intended for the Officers, so that they could make sure, that nothing objectionable or seditious was going into the vernacular editions. Not a line was changed, not even the captions, to suit the vernacular texts.

As soon as Capt. Rashid came to the helm and examined the paper with

the eyes of a professional journalist, he frowned and curled his lips. "It's a rag," he said in disgust, flinging it down on the table. Within a week he had drawn up a scheme to infuse new blood into its degenerate body.

The eye-brows at Headquarters went up. Would the finance Department approve Capt. Rashid's scheme? What could be wrong with a paper which had stood the test of time for fifty years? To admit that there was something wrong with the paper amounted to accepting the fact that Capt. Rashid's predecessors had been a pack of fools.

Capt. Rashid had gone to the Headquarters fully prepared to meet his adversaries on their own ground. First, he patiently explained to them the significance of the newspaper. This paper, he said, was the only organ of its type for the other ranks and could play an important role in moulding their way of thinking. Then he impressed upon them that the soldier today was not the same as his compatriot fifty years ago. Today, he was politically conscious and sensitive to what was going on around him. It was, therefore, necessary to show a greater degree of astuteness in framing the policies of the paper so as to cater to his new requirements. He also ridiculed the idea of entrusting the editing to petty clerks, who were not only innocent of the rudiments of journalism, but also incompetent translators. He picked up the Urdu edition and pointed out some howlers.

"I can look after the English edition myself", he said, "And the Urdu edition too. But what about the Hindi, Gurumukhi, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi editions? Are we to leave them at the mercy of petty clerks?"

Capt. Rashid's proposals were accepted. It was decided in the first instance to appoint Sub-editors for the four vernacular editions at Rs.250/- a month and also a Sub-editor for the English edition.

It was a deep winter morning. Although past eight, there was no sunshine, as if like the inhabitants of the surrounding bungalows, the sun was also reluctant to fling aside its quilt. In the sky's slumberous eyes traces of sleep still lingered. A cold wind blew scattering the dead leaves along the road and the foot-paths. But the earth was awake. In the bungalows, on both sides of the road, eucalyptus, jamun, mango, silk-cotton and neem trees kissed the sky in their nude apology.

But Capt. Rashid was oblivious of the indolence of the sky or the exhilaration of the earth. He was obsessed with only one thought, how to change the garb of his journal. In his mind's eye he was already seeing his journal shuffling off its skin like a snake. With his hands thrust in his trouser pockets he was mentally interviewing candidates, who had been called for interview to fill the newly created jobs.

Although there were only four jobs, the number of applications was inordinately large. Out of these, Capt. Rashid had called only twenty candidates for interview— five for each section, out of which he would select the most eligible four. Of these applicants, some were already working in responsible positions on well-known dailies; he personally knew that they were competent. This was one reason why he was having so much difficulty in making up his mind. On his way to the office, he vacillated between one candidate and the other, not knowing in whose favour to throw his weight.

The orderly was sitting on a stool outside his office. He jumped to attention and saluted Capt. Rashid.

Lost in thought, Capt. Rashid passed him; slid into the chair and then rang the bell.

Like a puppet pulled by a string, the orderly briskly strode into the room. "Yes Sir."

"Give my salaams to Panditji." He said and picked up the latest edition of the journal.

Of those clerks, who, taking a cue from their officers, arrived before opening time, Pandit Kirpa Ram was the foremost. Fifty five years of easy going life had made him soft and rotund. Now bald headed, with his front-teeth missing, he had joined service at a young age, and acted as the translator of Gurmukhi, Urdu and Hindi sections respectively from time to time. He was now incharge of the

Department. Not that he was any good at this job. Far from being an efficient translator, he was still raw at the game. But he was a past-master in the art of humouring his superiors, which is an invaluable asset in a Government Office and helps one clerk to score over his fellow clerks, gaining him quick promotion. He would bully his less fortunate colleagues into grappling with the work of translation, while he took upon himself to hail a taxi for the Sahebs; procure rations and poultry for them; or ingratiate himself into their wives' favour by doing odd jobs. He had made it a point to be the first to greet his officer on arrival, and bid him farewell at the time of departure. He would break into a broad grin at the faintest trace of a smile on his officer's face and start frowning when his officer became grave. It was because of these sterling qualities that by gradual stages he had risen to be incharge of a section. Before the orderly could convey the Captain's message to him, he was standing before his boss, teeth bared in a smile.

Ignoring his smile, Capt. Rashid acknowledged his salutation with an imperceptible nod of the head.

Unable to plumb the mind of his new Indian master, whose ways were so different from those of the British sahebs, Pandit Kirpa Ram gave another bland smile and then stood there looking blank.

"How many people are coming for the interview?"

Pandit Kirpa Ram ran out to fetch the files.

Capt. Rashid picked up the latest edition of the journal. The very first page carried such a rich crop of misprints that his mind boiled with rage. He was about to pick up the telephone to call up the press, when the telephone bell rang.

“Hello” His voice had a touch of asperity. “Chaddu.” It was his father at the other end. “Your mother has already spoken to you about it. It’s about Hanif. Yesterday he came to see me in this connection. And besides, he’s our relation you know...”

“I can’t do anything about it, abba jan*,” Capt. Rashid said interrupting his father. “Hanif won’t make the grade. He’s unfit for this job.”

“What do you mean by unfit? He’s B.A. (Hons.)”

“A B.A. (Hons.) does not necessarily make a good journalist, *abba*. I want a journalist, an experienced hand, who can give a face-lift to our paper. Hanif does not know even the ABC of journalism.”

“He’ll learn. Given a chance, a diligent man can learn anything.”

Capt. Rashid felt exasperated at the brazen demand of his father. “This is a newspaper office, *abba jan*,” he said controlling his temper, “Not a school of journalism. If I recruit a raw hand, what will my superior officers say? Hanif

will not be able to pull his weight with others. They’ll laugh at him.”

“The government offices are full of fools— one worse than the other.” The Khan Bahadur who knew all about the set up, said.

“You are inducing me to act dishonestly,” Capt. Rashid bellowed into the mouth piece. His voice was so loud that the clerks in the other rooms held their breath.

“You are a fool.” He heard his father bang down the receiver.

Pandit Kirpa Ram placed the file of the candidates before Capt. Rashid and stood before him smiling. Capt. Rashid’s eyes blazed like live coals. The Pandit’s smile died on his lips.

‘er...er... may I...?’

“Yes, you may go.”

Holding the collar ends of his tunic Capt. Rashid started pacing in the room.

The image of his father and that of the other Khan Bahadur, the owner of the press, where his newspaper was printed, flitted across his mind. He wanted to vent his spleen on this other Khan Bahadur, for turning out such a shoddy job on his newspaper. He sat on his chair and was about to lift the telephone receiver when a car stopped outside and next moment Major Saleem, wearing a languid smile, entered the room, with a young man in tow.

Capt. Rashid got up from the chair and saluted major Saleem. Instead of

returning the salute the Major, who was on friendly terms with him in private life, held out his hand. "Please, please, don't be so formal." He sat on the opposite chair and before Rashid could take his seat, introduced the youngman to him. "Here is Mr. Jyoti Swaroop Bhargava, B.A. He's a well-known Hindi writer and a journalist. He's equally at home with Urdu. He'll help you with the Hindi edition." Again putting on that languorous smile, he rang the bell and asked the peon to give his salaam to Pandit Kirpa Ram.

But seeing the car, Pandit Kirpa Ram was already on his way to pay his respects to Major Saleem.

"Panditji, this is Mr. Jyoti Swaroop Bhargava, B.A." Major Saleem said, "He'll assist you with the Hindi edition." He nodded to the youngman to go with Pandit Kirpa Ram. Both of them left immediately.

"He's Col. Chopra's man," Major said. You'll have to accommodate him. You'll have no trouble with him. He knows his job."

"On which paper is he working?"

"He has come from Burma and is now working as a canvasser for a business firm. But while in Burma, he brought out a paper by the name of 'Burma Samachar'.

"But translation..."

"He has translated two English books into Hindi. One of them is Col. Hurdon's

Poultry Farming. You know, how acute the problem of supplying eggs to the army has become these days. All units are being encouraged to run their own poultry farms. You'll do well to serialize Col. Hurdon's book in your journal. Mr. Bhargava can prepare Hindi and Urdu versions."

As if a big load was off his chest, Major Saleem leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar. "The book will be of immense interest to our jawans," He added. "Most of our Jawans are peasants. Many of them may take to poultry farming after the war."

Capt. Rashid found himself in a serious predicament. He had already made up his mind to offer the job to a renowned journalist, who was working on a leading Hindi daily. It became difficult for him to sit in the chair; the strain was getting too much for him.

"Do you think this fellow will do justice to the job?" he said at last hesitatingly. "Even our translators have some grounding in journalism. I was looking for a really capable journalist."

Major Saleem ignored his remark.

"Col. Chopra has recommended your case," he said after taking a few leisurely puffs at the cigar.

"My case?" Capt. Rashid looked up, surprised.

"He was saying, you should be promoted to the rank of a Major. Your predecessors, who were in charge of this

newspaper were all Majors.”

Capt. Rashid wanted to have more particulars about Mr. Bhargava, but he never came to the point of asking more questions.

“Aren’t you coming to the meeting?” Major Saleem suddenly asked.

“What meeting?”

“With the Brigadier of course. He has returned from the front and would like to discuss a few important things in that connection. Come along. I’ll give you a lift.”

“But I have to interview the candidate.”

“At what time?”

“Between eleven and four.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll be back in good time.”

Capt. Rashid had no alternative. Leaving word with his assistant editor, Lieut. Ali Gul Khan to take care of the candidates, while he was away, he left for the Headquarters with Major Saleem.

In the evening when Capt. Rashid returned from the Headquarters, A Sikh Subedar accompanied him.

At the meeting the Brigadier had made a pointed reference to the technical mistakes that abounded in the paper. He was particularly sore at the ridiculous rendering of the military jargon into the vernaculars. For instance, ‘fox holes’ was being translated as ‘fox’s dens.’ Such

howlers were strewn all over the pages. To safeguard against such mistakes the Brigadier had suggested that the newspaper should have an officer on its staff, who had seen actual fighting and was fully conversant with military terminology. The other officers present at the meeting heartily approved the Brigadier’s proposal and told him that in fact they were themselves thinking along these lines. Col. Chopra went one better and pressed for the immediate appointment of an officer of the staff of the newspaper.

After the meeting the Brigadier called Capt. Rashid to his room and introduced him to a Sikh Subedar. “He is a seasoned officer,” the Brigadier said, “And is fully conversant with all the military terms. Put him in charge of the Gurmukhi section.”

“My good sir, I know next to nothing about journalism,” the old Subedar had said as he sat by Capt. Rashid’s side in the Car. “I worked with the Brigadier Saheb a long time back and he is very kind to me. I requested the Brigadier Saheb to put me on some other job, as I had never seen the face of a newspaper, much less edited it. But the Brigadier saheb won’t listen to me. He said, “well Subedar, you just try your hand at it. It’s not difficult. I’ll ask the editor to teach you the game. I want an officer who has seen actual fighting to serve on the newspaper.”

“Which front were you at?” Capt. Rashid asked.

“My good sir,” the old Subedar said naively. “If I had to die a dog’s death, what was the point in coming here. Unfortunately, I had enlisted in the Engineer’s Corps. I have no experience of this line. And what is worse, our Corps is shortly being drafted to the Burma front. I ran to the Brigadier Saheb, “Sir,” I said, “If you want to help me, it is now or never. There’s no one to look after my wife and children. If I am packed off to the front, what good will your kindness be to me there? The Saheb has a soft corner in his heart for me. He took pity on me and shunted me off to you. I’ll do my best to learn the job. If I make a success of it, the Saheb has promised to recommend me for decoration.”

Reaching his office, Capt. Rashid immediately sent for Pandit Kirpa Ram. But the Pandit was already coming to Capt. Rashid. He wanted to pay his respects to his boss and was eager to know what had transpired at the Headquarters. He stood before Capt. Rashid and smiled ingratiatingly.

It was for the first time in three months that Capt. Rashid responded to his smile.

“Subedar Saheb is the Brigadier’s recommendee,” he said. “He’ll be the Sub-editor of the Gurmukhi edition. The Brigadier Saheb wants us to have a man from the Military wing on our staff. Please tell the Gurmukhi translators not to make things difficult for the Subedar sahib.”

“Please do not worry,” Pandit Kirpa Ram said effusively. “Your instructions will be carried out. As long as I am there, my officers need have no worry.”

And when he came out with the Subedar the smile on his face had broadened into a grin.

Capt. Rashid again rang the bell for the peon. “Give my salaam to Lieut. Ali.”

“Did you get my instructions?” he asked Lieut. Ali, when the latter came to him.

“Yes Sir.”

“Have you interviewed the candidates?”

“Yes Sir, only for the Hindi and Gurmukhi sections. The others, I have asked to report tomorrow.

“You should have disposed them of too. The selection has been more or less finalised.”

“Who has been selected for English?”

“He’s the Director General’s man. The Brigadier told me that the Director General wants the English assistant to be a man of the highest calibre. It’s the English Edition that feeds the other sections. Probably he is a man from the Headquarters.”

“And the Urdu man?”

“He too has been selected.”

Capt. Rashid picked up a file and got engrossed in it.

Although the file was before him, he could not sign even a single paper.

Pushing away the file he got up from the chair, and holding his tunic collars he started pacing the room.

It was past seven. Hesitatingly the peon peeped into his room. Capt. Rashid was still pacing the room as before.

Next morning when Pandit Kirpa Ram came to Capt. Rashid's room to pay his salaams, he found a youngman sitting by his side. "This is Mr. Hanif, B.A.

Hons." Capt. Rashid said introducing the youngman to Pandit Kirpa Ram. "He'll look after the Urdu section."

Pandit Kirpa Ram bared his teeth in a smile and bowed to Mr. Hanif.

As they were leaving the room, he heard Capt. Rashid saying, "Please tell the translators to help him with the job."

Upendra Nath Ashk (1910-1996), renowned author

whose creative output like Premchand was first in Urdu and later in Hindi. He was born and educated at Jalandhar, Punjab and settled at Allahabad in 1948. Except for a few short term jobs in All India Radio and films, he was a whole timer in creative writing. He wrote plays, novels, short stories, poems, essays, memoirs and literary criticism besides editing the famous literary volume 'sanket'. He was a progressive writer who led an eternal struggle against reactionary forces. He wrote regularly from 1926 to 1995. Most of his works were published by his writer wife Kaushalya Ashk from their own publishing house Neelabh Prakashan, named after his illustrious son who is a major poet and an intellectual in his own right. Ashkji's major works are 'girti deewaren', 'pathharal pathhar', 'garm rakh', 'badi badi ankhen', 'ek nanhi kandil', 'bandho na nav is thanv (novels); 'anjo didi', 'tauliye', 'sookhi dali', 'lakshmi ka swagat', 'adhikar ka rakshak' etc. (collections of plays); 'akashchari', 'judai ki sham', 'kahani lekhika aur jhelum ke saat pul', 'chheente', 'ubaal', 'dachi', 'kale saheb', 'palang' etc. (short story collections); 'deep jalega', 'chandni raat aur ajar', 'bargad ki beti' (poetry collections); 'manto : mera dushman', 'chehre anek' (memoirs); 'hindi kahaniyan aur fashion (lit. criticism).

Jai Ratan : born Dec. 6, 1917 Nairobi, veteran scholar of Hindi and English who has devoted a life time to translation. He worked as P.R.O. in a prominent business firm in Kolkata and was founder member of Writers' Workshop. Hindi owes him a tribute for numerous prestigious English translations including Premchand's Godan way back in 1955. He now lives in Gurgaon.

DACHI

Upendra Nath Ashk

Translated by the author

Bakar— the Muslim *Jat* from the hamlet Pi-Sikandar—was greedily eyeing the *dachi* (She-camel). Chaudhary Nandu, who was resting beneath a tree roared, “You there! What are you doing?” And his six-foot tall massive body, which lay propped against the trunk, suddenly grew tense and his broad chest and rippling biceps showed beneath his buttonless kurta.

Bakar came a little nearer. His eyes flashed for a brief moment from the dark, sunken hollows and his face lit up in the black and dusty frame of his pointed beard. His moustache, closely trimmed over the upper lip according to his religion, quivered slightly and he said with a faint smile, “I was just looking at your *dachi*, Chaudhari. What a lovely, spirited animal she is!”

Hearing his *dachi* praised, Chaudhari Nandu relaxed. Smiling he enquired, “Which one do you mean?”

“There, you see. The fourth one from the left” Bakar said, pointing to the *dachi*.

There were about eight or ten animals tethered under the shade of a tree; the *dachi* in question was craning her long and beautiful neck to pluck at the leaves.

In the cattle fair, so far as one’s eyes could travel, nothing was visible except a large number of tall camels, black and ugly buffaloes, hefty bullocks and cows. There were quite a few donkeys too. But the camels predominated in this fair, which was being

held in the desert near Bahawal Nagar. Camels in this region were put to work in a number of ways, mainly for transport and agriculture. In the past, when cows could be bought for ten rupees and bullocks for about fifteen rupees, a good camel fetched no less than fifty rupees. Even now, when this area received an adequate water supply, camels have not lost their usefulness; in fact, those used for riding are sold for anything between two to three hundred rupees, and those employed for agriculture and transport, for not less than eighty rupees.

Advancing a little closer, Bakar said, "To tell you the truth, Chaudhari, I have not seen a more beautiful *dachi* in the whole fair."

"Why just this one? Nearly all my camels are equally fine, because I feed them properly," Nandu said proudly.

"Would you like to sell it?" Bakar asked with diffidence.

"That's what I have brought it here for."

"Then tell me a reasonable price for it." Nandu's penetrating eyes surveyed Bakar from top to toe and he said, smiling, "Do you want to buy it for yourself or for your landlord?"

"For myself!" Bakar answered emphatically.

Nandu nodded his head somewhat indifferently. He could not think of this poor labourer being able to afford a camel. He said nonchalantly, "I'm afraid, my man, you won't be able to afford

it." With 150 rupees in his pocket Bakar excitedly said, "It is none of your business to ask me for whom I am buying it. Your only concern is the price of the camel. Now tell me."

Nandu again looked critically at Bakar's weather-beaten face, the dirty clothes and the rough pair of home-made shoes. And to get rid of the fellow, he indifferently demanded a high price, "You must look for an ordinary camel elsewhere man, for I shan't accept a pie less than a hundred and sixty rupees."

A quiver of joy crossed Bakar's seamed and weary face. He was afraid that Chaudhary might suggest a price beyond his capacity, but now he felt happy. He was short of only ten rupees and thought, if Chaudhary does not yield, I will ask him for credit for this small sum. He was simple and naive, ignorant in the ways of bargaining and haggling. Hopefully, he whipped out the folded bundle of notes from his pocket and flung it at Chaudhary, saying "Well, you may please count these. I'm sorry I don't have more. It is entirely up to you to finalize the deal."

Nandu started counting the money rather indifferently, but as he finished it, his eyes brightened. He had quoted an exorbitant price only to avoid Bakar. One could get good camels for less than hundred and fifty rupees and for this one he had not expected anything more than a hundred and thirty rupees. But he artfully wore a grave expression on

his face and told Bakar in a patronizing tone, "My camel could easily fetch two hundred rupees, but I will give it to you for a hundred and fifty rupees." Saying this he got up, untied the camel and handed the bridle-string over to him.

For a brief moment, Nandu's hard-heartedness melted instinctively and gave way to a rush of natural tenderness. The camel was born and bred at his place; and today, after all the years of affectionate rearing, he was no longer its master. His heart was inundated with the same feelings that come to a father at the time of sending his daughter to the bridegroom's place. He murmured softly, "I needn't remind you to take good care of this camel. I brought her up with great love and devotion."

"You need not worry, Chaudhary. I'll tend it with the greatest care possible," Bakar replied, his heart surging with joy.

Nandu put the money carefully between the folds of his waist-cloth, and then filled an earthen cup with water from the pitcher to slake his thirst.

Everywhere in the fair, huge columns of dust rose towards the sky. Dust is a common feature even in fairs held in the cities. The temporary pipes there and the water-bearers sprinkling water the whole day long do not help much; it was no wonder then that in this desert fair, dust reigned supreme: on the vender's sliced pieces of sugar-cane, on the *halva* and *Jalebi* of the sweetmeat-seller, and on the spiced delicacies at the stalls—

everywhere a thick layer of dust had settled. The drinking water was carried from the canal, but by the time it reached the fair, it invariably became muddy. Nandu had thought of drinking some water after the dirt had settled. But his throat was dry and parched. He gulped the water greedily and pursing his lips asked Bakar if he would like a cup of water. Though Bakar was thirsty now, he had no time to drink water. He was in a great hurry to return to his village before nightfall. Holding the bridle of the camel in his hand, he gently led the animal through the blinding dust.

Kameens by caste, Bakar's ancestors were potters; but Bakar had given up his ancestral occupation and eked out a meager living in the fields, working as a landless labourer. He had always been lazy, and he could afford to remain so, because his wife, who loved him and cared so much for his comfort and happiness, worked very hard.

His carefree days, however, ended with his wife's passing away about five years ago, leaving behind a doll-like daughter. On her death-bed, she had whispered to him, "I am now leaving Razia all alone in your care. My last hope is that you will save her from all troubles."

This last wish of his wife altered the course of Bakar's life. After her death, Bakar brought his widowed sister from her village, and throwing off his slackness, devoted himself conscientiously to

fulfilling his wife's wish.

He worked hard so that he might be able to buy good things for his daughter to make her happy. Whenever he returned from the market, little Razia would cling to him, and fixing her eyes on his dusty face, ask, "What have you brought for me, *Abba*?" Bakar would lift her onto his lap and planting a kiss on her cheek, give her many toys and sweetmeats.

As soon as Razia got these, she would jump down and run away to show her toys to her friends.

When she was eight years old, one day she asked her father, "Abba, I want a *dachi*. When will you buy one for me?"

Poor, innocent child! How could she realize that she was the daughter of a poor landless labourer who could not afford a *dachi*? But lest he hurt the tender feelings of his daughter, Bakar smiled and said, "My darling Razzo, what will you do with a *dachi*?"

But he failed in attempting to distract her. Razia had seen the landlord coming to their hamlet riding on his *dachi*, with his little daughter seated in front of him. It was then that Razia had begun to long to ride one herself. And realizing the intensity of her longing, the last vestige of Bakar's laziness had vanished.

Although he had somehow succeeded in diverting the attention of his daughter that day, he took a vow to buy her a *dachi* before long. To earn enough money in order to fulfill his daughter's

wish, he started going to the neighbouring villages seeking more work. Very soon his daily wages increased with the volume of labour he was putting in. During the harvest season, he used to reap the corn in the field, thresh and cleanse the grain, and prepare fodder for the cattle during the sowing season; he ploughed in the fields and did many odd-jobs. Whenever he could not find work in the village itself, he would get up early in the morning and go to the market, trudging a distance of 16 miles on foot, to do odd-jobs there. All the time he was intent on saving a good slice of his income with a miser's frugality. Sometimes his sister would say, "How much you have changed, Bakar! Never before you worked so hard in all your life."

"You want me to remain a lazy lout throughout my life? Hmmm...?"

"Oh no! I don't mean that you should remain lazy, but I don't want you to earn money at the cost of your health."

And always, on such occasions, Bakar would almost instinctively be reminded of his dead wife and her last wish. He would then throw an affectionate glance at his daughter playing in the courtyard. A tremor of inexpressible bliss would touch the inner-most core of his heart and a contented smile would play across his lips; and a renewed sense of energy and enthusiasm would pervade his whole being.

Today, after a long spell of hard work for nearly a year and a half, he had at last fulfilled his long-cherished desire.

He held the bridle-string of the *dachi* in his hand and was returning home along the path skirting the edge of the canal. It was evening. The rays of the setting sun had daubed the scene in tints of gold. The air had turned damp and in level fields, far away, a 'red-wattled lapwing flew low over the ground repeating its shrill cry : tihu-tihu-hut... tihu-tihu-hut. Bakar was however oblivious of the surrounding beauty. His mind roved through the meandering alleys of his past. Sometimes a farmer riding on his camel would pass him. At times the children of the farmers sitting on big stacks of hay in the carts would affectionately urge on the pair of bullocks and sing a broken line or two of a folk song, or play with the ungainly camels who followed the carts.

Swaddled in his own dream, Bakar threw an indifferent glance at the enchanting landscape touched by the last rays of the setting sun. His village was still a long way off. He looked back momentarily at the *dachi* mutely following him, and then, with a surge of unutterable delight, hastened his steps to reach home before Razia went to bed.

With his landlord's village in sight, Bakar's own hamlet was only some four miles away. His pace slackened a little and as he neared his destination his imagination began to run riot. Bakar visualized his daughter clinging to his legs joyously, her eyes full of wonder and curiosity as she looked at him holding the bridle of the camel... He imagined

himself riding the *dachi* along the canal-bank with Razia seated in front of him. It was evening and mild wind was blowing. At times a jungle crow cawed and flew about, flapping its heavy wings. Razia's joy knew no bounds. She felt as if she were flying in an aeroplane... Again, he imagined himself visiting a market at Bahawal Nagar with his daughter. She looked curiously at the mountainous heaps of grain and innumerable hackney carts. A gramophone was playing at a shop and Bakar took her there. Poor girl! She was at a loss, not knowing where the sound came from, wondering if there really was a man singing from within that box. Bakar went on explaining but she did not understand a word of what he said and her eyes gleamed with wonder and excitement...

While he was lost in these dreams, his mind was arrested by a sudden thought as he entered the village of his landlord. This was not a big village. All the villages in this part of the country were alike. Even the biggest one had not more than fifty houses. Tiled roofs or brick walls were not to be found in this area. In Bakar's own hamlet there were only fifteen houses. They were in fact small thatched huts. His landlord's village was slightly bigger with nearly twenty-five huts. The landlord's house was made of brick although the roof was thatched.

Bakar stopped before the house of Nanak, the carpenter. Before going to the fair he had asked Nanak to prepare a saddle for a camel, and now on his

way home he was reminded of it. Should Razia insist on riding the *dachi* how could he manage without a saddle? He called out the carpenter's name once or twice but his wife's shrill voice answered from inside that he was not at home, and had gone to the market.

Bakar's heart sank. If Nanak had gone to the market, he could not possibly have prepared the saddle. Bakar drew some comfort from the thought that he might have just found time to attend to it and he enquired again, "I had asked him to prepare a saddle for my camel, I wonder if he has made it."

"I don't know", came the curt reply from inside.

Half of his enthusiasm ebbed away. It was no use taking the camel home without a saddle. Had Nanak been there, he could have taken an old one from him, even if he had not prepared the one he had ordered. Then suddenly his eyes twinkled as he thought of a solution. He could see his landlord who had many camels and might spare him an old saddle till he got his own. And he took a turn towards his landlord's house.

The landlord had amassed a huge fortune while in government service, and when the canal was extended to this area he had at once bought many acres of land cheaply. He was now earning a handsome rent from his lands after his retirement.

He was smoking a hookah as he reclined there in his courtyard and was

wearing a white turban, a matching white shirt, a milk-white *tehmad* and a velvet jacket over his shirt. When he saw the dust-smearred Bakar, holding the string of a *dachi*, he enquired, "Where are you coming from Bakar?"

Bakar bowed a little and saluting him said, "Sir, I'm just returning from the cattle fair in Bahawal Nagar."

"Who owns this *dachi*?"

"It's mine, Sir. I bought it there."

"What price did you pay for it?"

Bakar felt like telling a lie that he had paid Rs. 160/-, because he felt sure that such a handsome *dachi* was worth Rs. 200/-. But he could not tell a lie. "He was demanding a hundred and sixty for it," he said with utter naiveté, "but reduced ten rupees for me."

The landlord threw a searching glance at the *dachi*. He was desirous of buying a beautiful *dachi* for himself. Although he had a good *dachi* for riding, she had contracted a disease last year and had lost her former gait. Bakar's *dachi* appealed to him tremendously. How lovely and well-proportioned were her neck and features, her white and grey complexion adding to her beauty.

"Well, you take Rs. 160/- from me. I've been on the lookout for a camel myself," the landlord said.

"Sir, I am sorry. I have bought the camel to fulfill the long-cherished desire of my little daughter," Bakar mumbled. A chill of fear ran through his whole

being, but his lips trembled to form a weak smile.

The landlord rose to his feet, and coming near the camel, he gently patted its neck. "Oh, what a lovely *dachi* you have bought, Bakar! You may take Rs. 15 extra. Agreed?"

He called for Noore, his servant, who was cutting grass for the buffaloes. He came running with the scythe in his hand. The landlord told him, "Take this *dachi* and tie it over there. I am buying it for Rs. 165/-. How do you like it?"

Noore snatched the bridle-string from Bakar's hand, who stood dumbfounded and sorrowful, and eyeing the camel said, "She is indeed very handsome, Sir."

The landlord took out Rs. 60/- from his pocket and gave them to Bakar with a crafty smile, "Just now a tenant has given me this money and perhaps it was destined for you. Keep it now and I'll send you the rest in a month or

two." And without waiting for a reply he turned away. Noore had once again started cutting grass. The landlord again shouted "O you, Noore! Better leave the fodder for the buffaloes now. Go and feed the *dachi* at once. She looks so hungry."

And coming closer to the camel he appreciatively patted it.

The moon had not yet risen. There were a few stars twinkling in the clear azure sky, and in the distance the dumb acacia trees took on the appearance of dark patches. When he reached his hamlet, Bakar lurked behind a bush and looked breathlessly at the dim light that issued from his hut. He knew that Razia would still be awake in anxious expectation of his return. And he waited for the lamp to be put out, so that he might enter his hut after she had gone to sleep.

courtesy : Neelabh

THE GRACEFUL CHARMER, ASHK

Rajinder Singh Bedi

Translated by
S.S. Toshkhani

The year was 1936. A condolence meeting was held at a local hotel in Lahore to pay homage to Munshi Premchand.

It was just the beginning of my literary career. I must have written about a dozen short stories or so, which slowly began to appear in literary magazines after minor difficulties. The entire batch of us new writers was influenced by Premchand. That is why all of us were feeling as though we had lost our godfather. That was the reason why I too went there to make my sorrow known to others and make the sorrow of others my own. It also occurred to me that this would enable me to meet the real inheritors of Premchand's legacy, whom I knew indirectly but had never met.

The programme of the condolence meeting began. It is rarely that good writers are also good speakers. Some people made very good speeches. Some such people too were in the meeting who beat their breasts and created a mournful atmosphere. They all were 'pamphleteers'. This reminded me of Sharatchandra Chatterji's Devdas who, when his father died, asked customary mourners wailing and weeping in a corner of the house to go to his worldly brother, saying, "Over there. That side."

There were some "this-siders" also in that meeting. One of them— a brown complexioned guy with his forehead as if a slate placed slantingly against the wall, his hair arranged in Tusharkanti Ghosh style, his eyes covered by Harold Lloyd glasses— got up.

He was dressed in dhoti-kurta— a mosque above, a temple below— tired-looking; distracted; sad; dead ages before death...

“I want to say something”, he said, joining his fingers to his thumb and extending his hand towards the chairman.

Even though the chairman had not yet given the permission, he went to the table and began to speak in a coarse voice and rough accent. It appeared as if he was straightening the humps of Hindi and Urdu with a Punjabi hammer— Now he set out for London, arrived in Calcutta; then people saw—“Oh, he is roaming in Coimbatore!”; no he is in Delhi; and just then he arrives at his destination in an imaginary jet plane. As for his speech, it was like the gait of a person who has boozed a little too much to drown his sorrow. But he didn't bother about anyone. He went on speaking in the “*nalaa paaband-e-nay nahin hai*”¹ (“the gushing water is not bound by the pipe”) mode and, standing at one side of the table, looked as if he was father of the whole universe and all else were his children who were playing and should be allowed to play.

In spite of all this, his speech was effective, because it came straight from the heart, which does not accept rules of grammar. It was suffused with a pain and restlessness which falls to the share of the devastated and the geniuses only; its illogical reasoning leaving the ‘pamphleteers’ dazed. He was referring to the letters that Premchand had written

to him during his lifetime, which gave the impression of emotional intimacy with a fellow writer rather than “guidance” or “solution of problems”. In those moments of grief, these letters had become more of a literary treasure than mere letters.

This was Ashk. I had not even met him before this. I had no doubt read him in Sudarshan's magazine ‘*Chandan*’, but not seen him. I had not even seen a picture of his. Those who know Ashk will say that this cannot be possible, for Ashk, besides writing and editing, also believes in publicity and regards the writer who knows merely how to write not only as a fool of the first order but also stupid.

Later, I too noticed – with absolute informality, Ashk foists an absurd-looking photograph of his on an editor or a publisher and the poor fellow has to publish it willy-nilly. And what a photograph it is. Front one fourth, three-fourths or profile with the locks falling on the shoulders or if the face is well shaven, then hair is very skillfully fashioned into curls. After closely looking at it for sometime, one thinks it is of a man... now bare, now covered ... If earlier there was a Gandhi cap on the head, now he has a felt hat placed deliberately aslant on the head, making him look foppish. What is more, even he himself is smiling. Or else he is donning a black curlew cap ... with his eyes half-open, trying to look very much like a

coquettish charmer– which is irritating to the eyes of thousands of his readers, yet finds a place in their hearts. In the words of Hafiz², 'he is relaxing in the private chamber of the heart and the world is under the illusion that he is sitting in the assembly'. I, who want to see a beard only on the face of an enemy, and because of that phobia do not even look into the mirror, see a French-cut goatee on his face. Nobody knows what Ashk will look like in his next photograph, not even Ashk. Because, despite his slender body and mind as sharp as a razor's edge, Chanakya's intelligence and far-looking eyes, Ashk fully respects only the present moment in which he is living at that time. He enjoys life not only through the senses but his consciousness too is involved in it in full measure. If anybody has wrongly understood Krishnamurti's³ discourse on the present, it is Ashk. May be in one of his next photographs he may appear in a Jogi's dress with one hand raised to pronounce '*chhu*'⁴ on the spectator. The matter does not end here. The photograph may even be published in some novel 'tender as a flower bud', but strong enough to 'cut through the heart of a diamond'.

May be some primeval friendship or lasting relationship was destined to be established that even though not introduced to Ashk, I was convinced that this man could be none else than Ashk. Ashk was the only one among the writers of that era who was close

to Munshi Premchand and yet he was different. Munshi Premchand must have written letters to so many other people in his life, but the letters to which Ashk was referring pointed to something that they both shared...

The meeting came to an end. Those days I was working as a postal clerk and was, hence, greatly afraid of public complaints. I, therefore, approached Ashk slowly and gingerly. He was discussing something with some editor. Discussion for discussion's sake has been Ashk's hallmark to this day. It is not that what he wants to say has no logic or weight. It has everything, and yet it has nothing. Ashk derives some sort of a vicarious pleasure from it and uses all the weapons of argument and debate to make his point heard. A man may be saying something quite sensible, but Ashk tells him that it is two different things they are talking about and puts him in such a dilemma, such a quandary, that he goes off the track and you know what follows once a train goes off the track. The opponent is left smarting with impotent rage. If he is clever and does not want to be drawn into a wrong kind of discussion, then Ashk can be seen bursting into a loud laughter and saying, "You've become serious, *yaar!*" And while the opponent has still not understood him fully, Ashk holds his hand and says – "Actually, I too am saying the same thing as you are." And what else can the other person do after this but feel stunned and think what

a silly person he is or feel angry that he has been unnecessarily made to exercise his tongue. The result in both the cases is the same. If someone is displeased, Ashk wins the day, if someone isn't displeased, then too Ashk wins the day – it is a win-win situation for him every way. As I slowly went towards Ashk, the editor had already faced the music. Now it was my turn. I stepped forward and said –

“Ashk Sahib...!”

Ashk swiftly turned round and fixing his gaze upon me started looking right through me. Now, if you fit a camera with x-ray light instead of the ordinary one, what will even the best romantic scene be like? What else than a skull collides with another skull, a skeleton raises its arm and it gets stuck into another skeleton's throat, and it comes to be known that a member of the other sex has been pulled closer not to hug but to smother. And then where is the throat? ...“Ashk Sahib, for a long time it has been my desire to...”

“You...?” And then, (dropping the honorific *aap*) the next very moment, he was saying, “You are Rajendra Singh Bedi, I presume?”

Suddenly I felt as though I had forgotten my name. At least I certainly felt that Rajendra Singh Bedi was some other person, and I just happened to know him. Then coming to my own, I said, “Yes, Mr. Ashk, Rajendra Singh Bedi is what they call me.”

How far does a man's ego reach? Indeed, what a big forest this world is, what a vast desert in which he wanders as though lost, wishing every moment that someone should recognize him someone should call his name. And if that happens, how happy he feels. A child slowly learns to say his name and begins to distinguish himself from others. But when he grows up, acquiring his worldly name, how hard does he strive to know his real name and after being identified by it cannot distinguish it from God's name. And then in spite of his desire to merge in Him, he wants to retain his own separate identity as well. If I recognized Ashk without any introduction, he too recognized me at one glance. I was a very small writer and such a big writer knew me by my name.

... No, no, he even mentioned the titles of one or two short stories of mine, which had appeared those days at short intervals in some Lahore journals... He was even admiring them. ... Can it be true? Is there a place for an incapable postal clerk like me in this vast desert?...

Whether a place was there or not, whether even now there is a place or not, that is not to be argued. If Ashk likes someone, he also accepts him and makes a conscious effort to create a place for him in this world of name and address. This is something that I have found abundantly in Ashk. Today when I look back at the thirty years

of my literary career, I bow my head with regret – I for one have not helped any new writer as Ashk has. I too could have praised someone, criticized someone, and made someone's path easy for him. But Ashk is Ashk and I am I! Even now when I meet Ashk and find him mentioning some new writer's name, I feel surprised. The love that one has for oneself all the twenty-four hours turns into hate, and because a man loves himself in all circumstances, one feels annoyed with Ashk. ... What is the reason for this weakness that I have? It may perhaps be difficult for me to explain this and for someone to understand! To make things simple, I will confine myself to saying that from the beginning I have been suffering from some kind of inferiority complex, and despite all my efforts, despite being praised and admired by others, I have not been able to shake it off. For instance, I do not have confidence in myself... Why do I not have confidence? If someone wants to understand it, he shall have to live my life, and to know why Ashk has it, he shall have to live Ashk's life.

Next very moment we were talking like two friends, as though we had known each other for years. ... It was summer, perhaps, and the sky was covered by a cloud of dust. The dust had risen from the dirt tracts below and carried upward by tramping of countless horses and unbridled winds and was now coming down slowly, particle by particle. We

were walking on foot. Ashk was the one who was doing the talking and I was listening. He wanted to say so many things. Why was it so, I came to know later. At that time, we were talking like a newly wed couple, who say a lot many things to each other for the whole night and on the next day wonder what they had said. Walking on foot and chatting with each other, we reached near Anarkali where Ashk showed me his house.

Ashk's house was a little away from the Anarkali Market in a densely populated back lane where women could be heard talking with one another face to face from their houses: "Sister! What have you cooked today at your place?" She replies, "I haven't cooked anything today as he is going to eat out. Could you please send me a *katori*⁵ of *daal*." And if you happen to pass by lost in your thoughts, garbage is likely to fall on your head from above and set your mood right. The lane is not wide enough for one to jump over and stand on one side. And then there are windows facing each other. A boy standing at a window holds the hand of a girl bending from the opposite window and scratches her palm. This is a common scene in Lahore, showing that in matters of amour there is no place in the world that beats Lahore!... And it was in this very lane that Ashk lived. There is a difference in the way you pronounce '*ashk*' (meaning 'tears' in Urdu) and '*ishk*' (meaning 'love'), but it comes to the same thing. Who

knows when '*ishk*' will change into '*ashk*' and vice versa? ... Ashk had a two-storey house, with his dentist brother Dr. Sharma living in the upper storey with his wife and children, and Ashk and his library – his workplace – located in the lower. To reach it you had to pass through “heaven for the thin man” and “hell for the fat man” type of stairs. There was a rope, soiled by people’s hands repeatedly holding it. If you did not hold it for going up the stairs, there was every danger of your tumbling down. ... It was in this narrow and dark house that Ashk lived. It was here that he would write in the wishy-washy style of an artist, cross what he wrote, and then write again – erasing old lines and drawing new ones. Writing was a habit for him and an act of worship too. It was something that transcended life, and transcended death as well!

Ashk began to earn his livelihood from his childhood. His father was a stationmaster, who had the habit of drinking and neglecting home. Whenever he would proceed towards home, it was for reprimanding or thrashing someone – quarreling with his wife, thundering at her, or suspending a child upside down and beating him up mercilessly. He looked like a tyrant and thought like a tyrant. A decision once taken was final and irrevocable. To this cruel man was married an extremely gentle woman, Ashk’s mother. Her husband’s atrocities had left permanent lines of sorrow on her face. In addition to domestic quarrels,

Ashk’s writings have characters that revolt against their parents. And it was because of the overbearing personality of his father that Ashk left paternal shelter to find a place for himself in life. The son threw a challenge, the father took it up, and both were victorious. For, he who was buffeted by storms and had faced hostile winds of life, who fell a victim to a mortal illness like tuberculosis but mocked death and escaped it, who despite utter poverty and indifference of friends and kith and kin steadfastly ran the business of writing and publication in a jealousy ridden city like Allahabad, could have been the son of such a father only.

Ashk’s parents had brought six sons into this world (actually they had brought seven but one of them died in infancy), and all of them males. They were brought up in Jalandhar, a zone which produces gems of men; where every person is a poet or a singer; where the Harvallabh festival is held every year; a place to which maestros of classical music are drawn from the whole of India and yet are afraid to sing because every child there is a ‘connoisseur’, knows where a note has gone wrong and so feels no need for showing deference to anybody. In whichever corner he may be sitting, he will call out from there with an invitation to kneel submissively before him or his guru and learn music from him for several years. During winter nights, he will sit around a fire and start recitation of couplets, which will

go on until morning hours. ... Every person of that city considers himself a genius, and if anybody does not accept him as one, then a hand will rise and go straight towards the turban of the person who does not accept it straightforwardly, and then it could come to even abuses and blows. ... All the six brothers were products of that city and it is not surprising that each one of them was a well-known figure in his own field – possessor of a personality that only he will deny who wants to invite trouble. It so appears that a punch is also a part of an argument. And, if for some reason he is unable to land a punch, he will at least be raising hue and cry without any reason. Cries of, “Oh I’m dead! They’ve killed me!” will be heard, with people pretending not to have heard them. It is not just one-day’s affair that one can do something about it. Every day the roar of someone or the other is heard from this house. They are all lions, the six of them. If an elder brother pins the other one down under his weight, the younger one too will not desist from growling. If nothing, he will raise an outcry. Nothing here happens without noise. There is commotion all around. Two of them will be going hither, three of them thither. They are coming out of their den; someone is being beaten up for allowing himself to be beaten up. This is followed by everyone coming out to roar. A roaring voice is drowned by a still louder roar— “Silence!” This

is father’s voice – the roar of a lion, hearing which the whole jungle falls silent. In this mountainous zone, there is no fox – not one sister (one was born, but did not survive). Gentle as a cow, mother trembles when father sits with the bottle in front of him. He commits a mistake but being a Brahman, he also knows how to obtain pardon. He sings: “O lord, do not mind my vices!”

Ashk’s father was proud of being a Brahman. He was the descendant of that Parshuram who had decimated Kshatriyas twenty one times, axe in hand. These descendants of Parshuram intimidate Kshatriyas, whose profession it was to kill and be killed and who were not subdued by anyone, and are not even today. It seems that boozing by Ashk’s father increased after the birth of a couple of children. ...After fairly good names like Surendra Nath, Upendra Nath, he came to Parshuram, who was the third among these brothers. The reason for this was that they lived in that quarter of Jalandhar where Kshatriyas (Khatris) were always at daggers drawn with Brahmans. About a year back the Kshatriyas of the locality had mercilessly beaten up their mentally unsound uncle in absence of Ashk’s father as Ashk’s gentle mother and great-grandmother looked on helplessly with suspended breath. Since then Ashk’s outwardly weak and gentle mother had taken a vow in her mind, and it was because of this vow that the new- born baby was named Parshuram. From his

childhood the child was told: “What! ... You cry although you are Parshuram, he who decimated the entire Kshatriya clan and did not bat an eyelid?” ... And the child would stop crying, thinking that he will destroy all Kshatriyas when he grows up. ... Ashk’s father named the fourth son as Indrajeet – son of the Brahman Ravana, who subdued Indra, the king of gods, and made the Kshatriya Lakshman unconscious by shooting *shakti-baan* (arrow consecrated in the name of Shakti, the goddess personifying divine power) at him. Were it in the power of Ashk’s father, he would rewrite the whole of Ramayana wherein it would be proved that the Brahman Ravana was the hero and the Kshatriya Ramchandra the villain.

About Ashk’s mother, astrologers had predicted that she would be the “mother of seven sons”. In the first place she would never have a daughter, and even if she had one it would not survive, the joy of *kanyadaan* (giving away a daughter in marriage) was not written in her fate. And that is exactly what happened. Only boys fell to her share and, because of the teaching they received, each one was a brasher, more belligerent than the other was. The vengefulness of the Pathans is well known in the history of the world, for they bequeath their feuds, like their property, to their children in inheritance. But Ashk’s parents were no less vengeful. In the end, a day came when Ashk’s brothers had thrashed all the Kshatriyas

of the locality and sent them to hospital. It is obvious that Parashuram was the hero of this war. He single-handedly vanquished all his enemies. Although he himself was wounded and also fell into the clutches of law, everybody was glad that the soul of the mad grandfather would be feeling happy watching all this.

These then were the main characters of Ashk’s play ‘*Chhatha Beta*’ (The Sixth Son) and his voluminous novel ‘*Girti Deevaren*’ (The Crumbling Walls). Ashk was the second of these brothers. Then the wives of these brothers started arriving. Goats began to be tethered by the sides of lions. Now, you say how they could have any food or drink. Even if they did have food or drink, would it at all be wholesome for the body in such an atmosphere of mutual violence and commotion that prevailed in the whole house? Before the house in Anarkali, Ashk lived with his elder brother in an extremely damp, narrow and dark house in the Changad locality where they did not have air but each other’s breath to inhale. In this ‘Hairatabad’ or ‘place of surprises’, the utmost that the women could do was to cry or feel choked.

When Ashk’s wife Sheela came as a bride, she was a plump girl of tawny complexion laughing about everything. She began to feel choked in the atmosphere of this house. Still, she would laugh at the earliest opportunity. It appeared that nothing could suppress her laughter. I have not met Sheela,

but in Ashk's room in Lahore and later in the room of his elder son Umesh in Allahabad, I surely have seen her photograph in which she is smiling. Even death could not suppress her laughter Ashk would remain very busy those days. He would take a close look at his writings, take them to the market to see if they were selling or not. Some of them sold while some did not. Some money was realized and some was not; but it was because of these very writings that he got a job of an assistant editor in the Urdu daily "*Bhishma*" and later in the '*Bande Mataram*'. During leisure time, he would engage himself in ghost writing – manuals written by Ashk sold in thousands but all he got for them was peanuts. Then another incident took place. Ashk's father-in-law became insane. His mother-in-law began to work as a maid in the house of a rich man. For her even taking water at her son-in-law's house was taboo, and she wanted to be near her husband. This hurt the sentiments of Ashk and Sheela. Ashk decided that he would give Sheela such a position and status socially that her inferiority- complex would go. He decided to sit for the examination for a sub-judge's post.

Now he began to study law. Literary work, college studies, tuitions during the day and personal study and reflection in the evening. He had books as large as mansions, but the stuff of which Ashk was made, the bone of which his spine was formed, could withstand any hard

work. Meanwhile, Sheela gave birth to Umesh –Ashk's eldest son. She fell ill because of the atmosphere in the house and lack of nutritious diet. Ashk had not yet taken his F. E. L. examination when the doctors suspected it to be tuberculosis. Ashk did not accept defeat. He passed his F. E. L in the first division. During his L. L. B. he took her to Lahore and got her admitted there to the Gulab Devi Hospital, eight miles away from the city. Now he would do literary writing on one side, study law on the second, and on the third side visit Sheela twice or thrice a week in the hospital, which was situated away from Model Town even. He did not believe that fate would take this cruel joke to the limits of baseness. He thought that Sheela would get well, but even as he passed his law exam with distinction, Sheela passed away. God gave with one hand and took away everything with the other. Now there was no order, no purpose left in life. Ashk gave up the idea of becoming a sub-judge. She for whose sake he wanted to become a sub-judge was no more. ... He picked up his pen in a state of terrible sorrow, terrible grief, endless exhaustion and engaged himself in literary creativity, as it was by burying himself in literary creativity alone that he could forget, to some extent, that terrible tragedy of his life. It was domestic quarrels, dreadful circumstances, social injustice which he formed the subject matter of his writings. During this period he had already started

writing his novel 'Girti Diwaren' ('The Crumbling Walls'), which can also be partly regarded as Ashk's autobiography and which is his greatest attainment. Along with this, he also wrote the mini-stories— *Konpal* (The Sprout), *Gokhru*, *Sangdil* (Stonehearted), *Nanha* (Little Child), *Pinjra* (The Cage), which bear a clear imprint of his extreme dejection.

Perhaps Ashk will bear witness to my statement that he had been in love with only one woman in his life and that woman was Sheela, because for all his awareness, he did not know in that age what love is. Nor did Sheela know. Both of them were living, sometimes for their own sake, sometimes for each other. And it was a love which was effortless in its every act, which wasn't dependent on any name or quality. . . . Even after this Ashk was in love, but it was love from which the passion was missing. He had acquired a certain maturity that made it possible for him to leave Maya, his second wife, only one month after marriage and say to Kaushalya, his present wife, "Darling! I am tired in this journey of life. I do not have anymore that flare of youth in me. If you are looking for that in me, then it is futile. I am not worthy of that love which flashes like a flame. I can give you the love that cooks on low heat and therefore tastes good."

Thus it was that Ashk took me to his house and talked about a hundred things. He revealed to me all about himself without any reservation. Experienced

people do not normally tell everything about themselves and that too to a person who is meeting them for the first time. But Ashk wanted to say so many things to me. It was good that he found me, otherwise he would have talked to the walls, unburdened himself before the lamp post on the street. ...Till then it was past midnight. The dust had settled, but the sky hadn't cleared yet. At some places, a star in its keenness to show off had started displaying its twinkling beauty, piercing through the layers of fog, dust and smoke. While listening to Ashk, I sometimes laughed and sometimes my eyes brimmed with tears. ...Now I had begun to feel a bit bored. The thought that Satwant—my wife—would be waiting for me at home also crossed my mind. Until convinced that he is a wanderer, every woman dispatches some horses after her husband. Some of them turn out to be asses, and among them was a relative of mine who was sent to look for me. Ashk came down to give me company for some distance so as to see me off. He couldn't go far for he had taken off his *dhoti-kurta* and changed into his undershirt and *tahband*[®] after he had reached his home. But letting off squibs of talk, we came out of the big market of Anarkali and emerged in front of Church Society, and from there to Mall Road... towards my home... As we reached Golbagh, the same relative of mine passed by us, singing (as we came to know afterwards):

Chitthiye dard firaq waliye

Laija laija sunehda sohne yaar da
(O letter of pangs of separation, carry,
oh carry, my message for my charming
Love)

We sat down on a bench, free from all cares. Slowly, I began to feel somewhat perturbed on account of my wife. I tried to get up, but Ashk was reciting a poem:

You will depart, this very moment,
this very night

Leaving my cottage desolate

Entrusting me with the task of burning
for ages

And I was admiring him. I certainly liked the poem, but was also worried about home. Now the situation was that I 'wanted to leave hold of the blanket but the blanket was not leaving hold of me'. At last, I mustered courage, but the words I uttered were nothing less than an apology. As I got up, Ashk too got up and walked along with me... Talking with me all the way... he was standing in front of my house.

My child opened the door and I went quickly inside, opened the door of my drawing room and asked Ashk to be seated there. In spite of the hot weather, my wife, Satwant was waiting for me downstairs. She was the wife of an ordinary clerk, who wanted to see her husband sitting near her knee within half an hour after office and now it was already past midnight and, "bad thoughts were coming to my mind." She Said.

"Where have you been so long in the night?" she asked me.

"In hell", I replied, "Come with me for a moment to the drawing room. A very distinguished writer has come to meet me."

"At this hour?"

"Yes. You just come."

Holding Satwant's hand I took her into the drawing room. Till then Satwant had started thinking about writers with some respect. She quickly overcame her anger and putting on her face the make-up of "as if nothing happened", she followed me into the drawing room and was frightened to see a man dressed in that manner. At that time, Ashk was looking like a hoodlum of Bhati Darwaza of whom all women of Lahore were afraid and if he appeared before them they would leave the road and stand on one side. I did not like this gesture of Satwant. But what could I do. I extended my hand towards Ashk first – "This is Upendra Nath Ashk!"—and, then towards my wife—"My wife Satwant."

At once Ashk called my wife by name—"Don't mind, Satwant,. I have come casually dressed", he said, pointing to his undershirt and *tahband*. "You see, I am a careless sort of fellow...."

Then striking his hand on my hand with force, he laughed — so loudly that his lungs could have burst. A sparrow that had made its nest on the cornice flapped its wings. Someone switched

on the light in the house opposite and wife could say anything, Ashk was telling
looked from the balcony. Before my her – “Satwant, I am very hungry.”

Courtesy Neelabh

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- 1 A line from a ghazal by Mirza Ghalib
 - 2 Hafiz Shirazi, a 14th century Persian poet.
 - 3 Well known modern thinker
 - 4 A blowing sound pronounced after incantation
 - 5 A shallow metal bowl
 - 6 A cloth worn by men round the waist

Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915–1984), his mothertongue was Punjabi but he wrote in Urdu. Equally accepted in Hindi as a foremost writer of short stories and novels. He worked for some years in the post office and All India Radio. Later he became a full time writer. He was interested in cinema and made an art film 'garm coat'. His novel 'ek chadar maili si' was adapted for cinema and fetched him sahitya akademi award as well. His other famous works are 'apne dukh mujhe de do', 'haath hamare kalam hue' and 'bejan cheezen'.

Dr S.S. Toshkhani, freelance writer, poet and translator. Writes in Hindi and English. Published many books in original and in translation. Chief editor of Malini quarterly journal. He lives in Delhi.

“QISSA KHAN”— A COLOURFUL STORYTELLER NAMED ASHK

Phanishwar Nath Renu

Translated by
S.S. Toshkhani

Ashk's name was heard for the first time by the people of our village from Bhimmal Mama— “*az Upinder Nath Ashk*.”¹

Those days our village library did not get any Urdu journal and Mama had taken a vow to read Urdu. No, not a vow, call it a fit—it was a fit of Urdu.

Bhimmal Mama gave an ultimatum that he would launch an agitation for it – Why aren't we getting any Urdu journal here? If some member wants to read a short story by 'az Upinder Nath Ashk', where will he go to read it? How will he read it? ...Don't call it a public library. It is now a library of '*Vivahit Anand*'² ('Conjugal Bliss') readers only.

For several days Mama had launched a tirade against the library authorities in the name of Ashk in every lane, street and market of the village.

But when Ashk ji started writing and publishing in Hindi, Mama was busy in propagating the Kaithi script³. He had developed an aversion for Devnagari script and Hindi language. Once we sent a story by Ashk published in the *Karmayogi*, or some other journal, to him for his information and perusal.

Mama was overwhelmed. So, it was Upendra Nath Ashk now? After full seven and a half years Mama had enjoyed a literary work in Hindi and Devanagari script, reading it aloud. Then he

had noted down some lines from the story in his huge 'wonder casket' alias notebook, and said, "It's Ashk and not Ashak!" A miscellany of things was being compiled in the notebook. Bhimmal Mama had several personal opinions about literature:

- a) No novel was ever written in any Indian language after '*Chandrakanta*'.
- b) Gulabratna Vajpeyi is the only fiction writer in the whole of India.

But after reading a series of best short stories of Urdu, he had added Ashk's name to Vajpeyi's and happily made the proclamation—now they are two. Fiction writer Vajpeyi and story-teller (*qissakhwan*) Ashk!

"All others are nobodies. They're all phony!"

It did not take time for '*qissakhwan*' (story-teller) Ashk to change to '*Qissakhan*'! Today, Bhimmal Mama is no more, but all readers of our village, both new and old, know that Qissakhan is another name of Ashk ji.

Nobody has ever seen such a devoted reader of Ashkji, or of any other writer for that matter, like Bhimmal Mama. He would say— "When my writer writes poetry, short story, drama, one-act plays, memoirs, travelogue, personal essay, criticism, everything, why should I read any other writer's writings? ...Does a writer of any other language have such a lovely name?"

One day he opened his 'wonder casket' and said, "Let someone tell me whose lines are these: '*Badshaho! mainu te parichay-varichay da koyee tajarba neyi, ...Badshaho kutte di maut marna honda te itthe aavan di ki lod si! Main saab nu aakhiya— Bhayee, je meharbaani karni hai te hun kar ...Main kamm sikkhan di puri koshish karanga. Jo main kamyab ho gaya te saab ne mere naal vaada kitta hai ki mere leyi tagme di sifarish karega*'...

(I don't have any experience of introduction etc. Had I to die a dog's death, why would I have come here? I told my Boss— Brother, if you have to do me a favour do it now. I will do my best to learn the job. In case I am successful, Boss has promised me that he will recommend me for a medal.)

Now, tell me which author's lines are these?"

"Guleri ji's."

"No, Yashpal's"

"Then, J.P. Shrivastava's."

Bedhab Ba...'

"Should I tell— Qissa Khan's!"

Bhimmal Mama took out a new book from under his *gamchha*⁴ and said— '*Ek srot se phut bah rahin kab se yeh do dhara*' ('Since long these two streams have been gushing out from the same source!') ...Ashk Made Easy ... After going through it, it will be easier for you to understand Ashk's writings.

Giving the book to the winner of

this riddle, Mama said— “Read it and make out what Ashk is.”

“Seems like I’ve already read some stories of this collection. For instance, ‘*Tableland*.’”

“You aren’t yet in the position of giving your opinion about a book without reading it.”

Before our eyes the number of Ashk’s ardent readers in the village had grown from one to eleven. That day there were one dozen members present at Bhimmal Mama’s ‘*Ashk vivechan goshthi*’ (Symposium on Evaluation of Ashk), besides Bhimmal.

Mama began to say— “First of all hear this admission by an affectionate lady. What does this lady write? She writes, ‘I hadn’t finished my morning bath yet when his (that is Ashk ji’s) younger brother arrived and I came to know that Ashkji has arrived four or five hours back. He (that is Ashkji) is not well; he has fever and has been badly hit on the eye while playing hockey. I said, please go and tell Ashkji that I will be coming in half an hour.’”

Brief Commentary: “This is about their very first meeting; till then their acquaintance was confined to an exchange of a few letters. The sketch writer further writes—

‘Partly because of veneration and partly because I had come all the way to meet him, I remained silent. Coming to know that this poet who plays with words can also play hockey with such

devotion that he has his eye wounded, ... Because of this strange carefree manner of his I grew more eager to know about him.’”

Further Commentary: “I think, and rightly so, that the name of this book is based on this sentence— ‘I had come all the way to meet him’. Ashkji too has written in a poem:

And I am a river which started on its course long back

So, let us hear what this ‘river which started on its course long back’ has to say about this lady— “Before seeing Kaushalya (the sketch writer), I saw her letters. I had decided to marry her after receiving her very first letter. Had Kaushalya not been so unusually skilled in writing letters and, whether wrongly or rightly, pouring out the entire feelings of her heart into the written words, the extremely tangled chords of our life would never have become disentangled.’

Now have a glimpse of their domestic life during the early days of their marriage in the words of Mrs. Kaushalya Ashk— “Once when suddenly more than the expected number of guests came, I called him into the drawing room and said. ‘While everything else is all right, *baingan ka bhurta*⁵ may not suffice for all. Should I quickly get a brinjal or two from the market and roast them? ‘Don’t worry’, he said, ‘everything will be all right’. ...When at the appointed time everyone sat at the table, he took plentiful of *bhurta* on his plate and said, ‘Look here

friends, this dish is only this much, please do think of others when helping yourself with it.”

A member got up to say something but Bhimmal Mama did not allow him to speak— “I know what you want to say. What else than that I do not take brinjals. Really this lady, Mrs.Kaushalya Ashk, has an unusual skill of pouring her heart out in her lines.” After a brief interval Mama said— “The last line is, ‘Now, for the last one year he is lying in the seclusion of Panchgani, suffering from tuberculosis.’”

Mama’s voice choked with emotion. The pupils of his eyes rolled un-naturally. I said, “Mama, that’ll do for today.”

It seemed that a spark had ignited a keg of gunpowder. God knows for how long he had been smouldering inside against me. He exploded— “I know a lot of old guilt has accumulated in your heart. You people wish ill of Ashk, because he is with the ‘*Hansvadis*’⁶. Have you allowed even a single copy of *Naya Sahitya*⁷ to be kept in the library? Nobody has even had a glimpse of *Pakka Gana*, not even cursory. ...There’s a limit to meanness. ...You think yourself to be a very big reporter ...You aren’t even a petty writer. ...You heartless fellows! ...History will be witness...

This was followed by some rustic abuses... When even this did not satisfy him, it came to political abuses— You Mensheviks! You social termites (Social Democrats)! Traitors! And so on. We

understood that this shower of abuses will go on for three- four days... We never took offence at his abuses.

For three-four days he promoted Ashk’s works along with two dozen followers of his... ‘Buying Ashkji’s books means saving the precious life of a writer’.

When he came after about a week he was relatively calm. He said, “I have come to talk to you in private. ...My request to you is that please go to Patna soon. Get yourself checked up. I am afraid to look at your face. Have you seen Ashk’s photograph in ‘*Do Dhara*’?”

I felt that Mama has touched my weakest spot. Mama said, “Why does your face turn pale on hearing Ashk’s name?”

I probed and found that for the last two or three years I had been reading Ashk’s works but only superficially. This indifference, this disregard had intensified since I had come to know that Ashk was suffering from T.B. The moment I took Ashk’s name the thought of that disease growing in my lungs would come to my mind. I had developed thickened pleura in jail. At the time of being discharged from the hospital, a famous doctor, T.N. Bannerji, had cautioned me— “No exertion. Sitting in your armchair you may slay any king or queen, it does not matter.” My weight was decreasing day by day.

I brushed away Bhimmal Mama’s good advice immediately from my mind because many great things were going

to happen... It was ambition versus the germs of the disease!

In Nepal the bugle of revolution had sounded. Thousands of Nepali young men had taken part in India's independence struggle. Is there nothing I must do for Mother Nepal who had brought me up on her nectar since I was eight years old? ...Yes, I must do something. ...C-in-C Eastern Command has written a letter to me. 'Come here and see how desirable death is. Many fathers, many sons are ready to die together? Come...'

Then all fear vanished. It is better to die like comrade Kuldeep on the front than to die wretchedly of illness.

I was directed to go to Patna for some urgent work. When I arrived in Patna, I had to halt there for four-five days. Dear friend Narmedeshwar Prasad said- "Come to my place this evening. Ashkji has come on a visit to Patna. We have invited him to tea this evening... Vishwamohanji, Gopiji etc. will also be there.

Ashkji came dressed in a black *sherwani*,⁸ brandishing a walking stick. The conversation began with socialist realism and ended with the opening words of a classical song appearing in the *Naya Sahitya: Sajni-i-i tadpat hun main nis-din rajani... O sajani. O rajani!* (O beloved one! I am restless for you day and night).

"I just wanted to ask whether you have completely recovered now."

Two months later I suddenly began to vomit blood. While spitting blood I would sometimes talk of '*Tableland*', sometimes of Panchgani... Ashk... Dina Nath... Qasim Bhai. At that time I found unprecedented pleasure in absurd talk. Who knows why?

For the last five or six months Bhimmal Mama is again obsessed by spells and incantations. From hocus- pocus, sorcery, witchcraft to even performing certain rites in the cremation grounds.

As I was coming to Patna, I looked back to have a glimpse of my village. Everything appeared blurred. I caught sight of Bhimmal Mama. He was returning home after ten or twelve days. After tying an amulet on his arm, he took out a number of ten rupee notes and a handful of small change from his pocket and said- "I was thinking of sending this money to my ailing friend Ashk. But the amount I had to pay to 'Chiragi' during these seven-eight months came to one hundred one rupees. Ashk ji has recovered now... Don't worry, you too will return with your cheeks red as apples." The four anna, eight anna, two anna coins were all smeared with vermilion. Once again I looked back at the village- it was no longer blurred. The whole village was smeared with vermilion.

Whenever I got Bhimmal Mama's letter in the hospital, Ashkji was invariably mentioned. Ashkji has published a new play. ...A short story of his has again appeared.

Having recovered, I returned to my home completely healthy in body and soul. At the station itself I learnt that Bhimmal Mama was no more. I have never seen such a reader of any writer, a character who has proved worthy of his creator.

During 1953-54, I again had the chance to see Ashkji in Patna. He came with Virendra and stayed for about five minutes at my place. But in those very five minutes he laughed away all the questions of health, literature and the world.

That day an unpleasant incident took place in the evening at the tea party arranged in honour of the novelist Yagyadatt Sharma, who had come from Delhi. Yagyadatt Sharma began to speak on the problems raised in his forthcoming novel. He was speaking very well when he noticed Ashk and Chhavinath Pandey whispering to each other. Yagyadatt began to tremble with anger. He said, "Ashkji, please finish your conversation first so that I can also speak." A flash of annoyance appeared on Ashkji's face for a while, but it soon disappeared. Licking a little lime, he said politely—"I was telling Chhavinath about you only, I was praising you."

Perhaps, Yagyadatt did not rise to speak again. When I recall that day's incident, a question or two arise constantly in my mind. Was it a mere coincidence that Ashk Bhai's and respected Pandeyji's chairs were placed

side by side. Ashkji tried to convince Yagyadattji to the last, but Pandeyji did not utter a word. Why?

I am going to Delhi with the Ashks and recalling all these things, one by one. Kaushalya Bhabhi⁹ is repeatedly ticking off her husband and son softly—"Nilabh, don't open the windows, sonny. ...Ashkji, please be considerate. How can the poor fellow lie down on the middle berth so soon?" The poor co-passenger looks at Kaushalya Bhabhi with gratitude, but Ashkji goes on—"But Renu, Bhairav said..." Ashk expresses his 'second opinion' in the name of the absent Bhairavprasad Gupt—"But, Bhairav said..."

After dinner we went to lie down on our respective berths. Before going to sleep, the father gave the cry—"Hey *chai garam*."¹⁰

Lying on the topmost berth, the son responded with - "*Moongphali hai, aye.*"

Kaushalya Bhabhi warned both in the same breath—"Hey, what's going on!"

And believe me, after that the father-son duo did not utter a word.

I couldn't sleep for the whole night. ...This evergreen writer! The other day a jovial publisher friend had said in Patna- "This man keeps doing peculiar kind of business. ... To obtain writings for an anthology he has engaged a lady literary agent." ...An unhappy writer friend sat for hours trying to convince me that Ashk was an opportunist. I ask myself, am I not an opportunist?

Am I not selfish? ...It is my good fortune that I am travelling with such a great writer.

On the day of the first session I didn't find Ashk ji sitting in ease. There was restiveness in the atmosphere. It was necessary to pacify it. A friend from Allahabad itself said— "So you think Ashkji is worried about pacifying the atmosphere? ...You're foolish!"

Our host has invited Yashpal, Ashk and Bhagvatsharan Upadhyay. On hearing this we did not fix any other programme.

Ashkji and Yashpalji started conversing. Upadhyayji would also chip in occasionally. I have nothing to do but to listen. It does not behove us to smile or shake our neck much at anything that either side was saying. Two renowned fiction writers of Hindi are engaged in a discussion. It is the merit of my previous birth that I am sitting near them and hearing and seeing all this. ...This is no small thing.

Ashkji has referred to the discussion that took place on the occasion of that dinner party in a personal essay of his. Yashpal ji may also have written about it. I do not remember the topic of the discussion. ...To keenly observe the way and the manner in which these two venerated and elderly persons chat is no easy job. I repeatedly happen to glance at Kaushalya ji's watch. Then at Prakshvatiji's watch.

While eating, both kept on crossing swords with one another. Both are artists; both know how to make use of sharp or mild invective as the need may be. From the beginning I occasionally looked at Yashpalji's face from Ashkji's viewpoint— a spoilt Christian officer!

At Allahabad itself I heard a new writer criticizing Ashkji. I told him courteously— "Imagine Ashkji leaving Allahabad and settling elsewhere."

The new writer smiled and closed his eyes. "The literary scene there will become very dull."

Strange things come to light about Ashkji every second or third month. Every time Ashkji will burst out laughing and pat someone on the back, saying— "Brother, I have said what I had to say, did what I had to do. Now I am sitting back and enjoying the whole thing. ...People are worried. ...I am having fun."

"*Badshaho kutte di maut marna honda to itthe avan di ki lod si?*" ('If I had to die a dog's death then why would I have come here?' ...'And I am a river that started long back' '.... Stupid! ...Dissolve green vitriol in water or give it with curds' ... Hearing these mannerisms from Ashk's mouth hundred times a day you will still want to hear them once again. And then Ashk will burst into laughter and say— "But friend, Bhairav had said...")

- 1 'By Upendra Nath Ashk'. An interesting character, Bhimmal Mama takes *az* to be a part of Upendra Nath Ashk's name.
- 2 *An old sex manual*
- 3 A modified form of Devanagari script used in Bihar
- 4 A kind of hand towel
- 5 A mash of roasted or boiled brinjals
- 6 A group of left-leaning writers patronizing *Hans*, a Hindi magazine started by Premchand
- 7 Another "progressive" Hindi magazine of the times
- 8 A long tight coat
- 9 Brother's wife. A friend's wife is also addressed as '*bhabhi*'.
- 10 } Cries of *chaiwallahs*
- 11 } peanut vendors at railway stations

Phanishwarnath Renu (1921-1977) twentieth century's foremost writer with memorable short stories like 'lal pan ki begum', 'teesri kasam' and novels like 'parti parikatha', 'maila anchal'. Renu also wrote historic reportages that read like fiction. His prose reflected a rural world of post-independence India in all its colours and flavours. This Sahitya Akademi award honoree was also a social activist.

MUKTIBODH

Harishankar Parsai

Translated by
Satya Chaitanya

The entrance to the old mansion in Rajnandgaon stands on the banks of the pond. The mansion has rooms close to the large gate on the ground floor. On the first floor there is a large hall and more rooms and on the second floor, still more rooms and an open terrace. The pond skirts the mansion on three sides. Old doors and windows, broken ventilators, here and there bricks slipping off from their place, the walls with plaster peeled off. In front of the pond, vast open grounds. In the evening when Gyan Ranjan and I approached the lake and from there saw the mansion, it appeared shrouded in some terrible mystery.

Muktibodh, incapacitated, was lying on a cot in one corner of the hall on the first floor. I felt this man's personality was like that of some strong fort. There are signs of many battles on it. There are bullet marks, the plaster has come off, the colours have been washed off by time - but its strong walls rise from a deep foundation and it stands proudly with its head held high.

"Only a brahmarakshas [ghoul] can live in this castle," I joked.

One of Muktibodh's poems is called Brahmarakshas. There is also a story in which a brahmarakshas who has been cursed lives among the ramparts of an old palace.

Muktibodh laughed. He said, "Say what you like, partner, I just love this place."

Muktibodh was always filled with affability, with friendliness. He used to say a lot of things addressed to 'the friend'. Poems, essays, diary - in everything the friend could be seen, either expressly or in some hidden form. He had a unique style of his own. He called friends partners. This is how he spoke: "Say what you like, partner, but your humour is mighty indeed!" Or, "You might feel bad, partner, but I just don't like that man," -this taking the name of someone. And if he was in a very loving mood, he would say, "Just you wait, sahib, you will see all this passing away!"

Muktibodh spoke as though lost in himself, "Where you are sitting now-royal mahfils used to take place there. With dazzling lights everywhere, with songs and dances. In those days this place would blind you with its splendour. Say what you like, partner, feudalism had its own grandeur... You come here during the rains and sleep in this room at night! The pond would be full to the brim and the winds would be blowing strong. The whole night the water would lap against the walls and you would hear the sound all through the night... At times you would feel it is a beautiful woman dancing and what you hear is the sound of her anklets. Last year Shamsheer was here. And we sat listening until two or three in the morning... And partner, a pretty owl- what can I say

about that owl! I have never seen an owl as beautiful as that. And at times bats come in..."

He was talking animatedly about the atmosphere there. Not in the least conscious of his illness.

We had reached the place in the afternoon. When Muktibodh saw us, he went on saying "How great, how great!" and kept laughing heartily. But the next moment you could see tears flowing from his eyes.

He had come to Jabalpur a month or a month and a half ago. His eczema was giving him trouble. He had become quite weak. In the middle of speaking, he became breathless. At that time I had felt he was quite apprehensive about himself. As though he was scared. Then too his eyes had filled up with tears when he told me, "Partner, I am completely broken now. The cart cannot be pulled along much longer. If I get some five or ten years, I could do some solid work."

I had never seen tears in his eyes earlier. We friends became quite concerned about it. We put a lot of pressure on him to stay here and have himself treated. But he had to go to Nagpur to see his sick father. He took leave of us promising to return in a week's time. He never came back after that.

In a moment he was back in control.

“Where is your luggage?” he asked.

“In my house,” Sharad Kothari said.

“How come, sahib? What does that mean? Aren’t you my guests?” he asked.

We looked at one another. Sharad smiled. We were in the habit of teasing Muktibodh about this. “Guru, your thinking might be very progressive, but in your habits you are very feudal”

“They are my guests, they will sleep in my house, will eat in my house, no one will go without having a cup of tea, I am going to pay the hotel bill, I’ll feed the whole city in my house... What is all this?”

Seeing Sharad smiling, he too smiled. He said, “You have no right to do that! In fact, this is a plot against me!”

This was not mere formality. There was never mere formality in any of Muktibodh’s emotions— not in his love, not in his hatred, not in his anger. If he did not like someone, he would stare at him for an hour without uttering a word. The man would become very distressed.

When he spoke of his disease, it was with scientific objectivity - as though his hands and legs and head were not his, but belonged to someone else. Very impersonally, as though he was bisecting the body limb by limb and explaining where the disease was, how it developed and what the result would be.

“So, sahib, this is my disease.” Saying

that, he became silent.

Then he began to speak again. “I get letters inviting me to one place or another. But how can I go? Is it in my hands to go? ...Oh yes, I have written a gruesome poem. I wouldn’t let you hear it. I am myself terrified of it. Extremely dark, very gloomy! There are frightful imageries. I don’t know in what kind of mood I was. I have sent the poem to Vatsyayan ji ...But now I feel things are not that bad. Life is a powerful thing. And there are very good people with me. How many letters of concern have come! And how many people want to make me healthy again! So much love, so much affection! ...Partner, now I shall write another poem. I mean, I shall now write the right things.”

Gyan Ranjan said, “The earlier poem was right and this one will be right too.”

He looked relaxed. We explained to him that the disease was not serious and in Bhopal he would become all right in a month or two.

Brightness returned to his eyes. He said, “I will be all right, won’t I? That’s what I feel too. And even if I am not cured fully, it does not matter. I’ll drag myself around. All I want is that I should become well enough to continue my reading and writing.”

In the meantime, Pramod Varma reached there. The moment Muktibodh saw him, he burst out laughing. “Look,

see there! He has also come! Wow, it's going to be great fun now sahib!"

Pramod and I went to the other room to consult Shanta Bhabhi and Ramesh. Muktibodh began to talk to Gyan Ranjan about new publications.

It was decided that he should be taken to Bhopal immediately.

A few friends had sent some money from different places. We suggested that this money be deposited in the bank in Ramesh's name.

Muktibodh's reaction to this was very strange. He became annoyed exactly like a child. And he said, "Why? Why can't an account be opened in my name? It should be deposited in my own name. Why? Do you people think that I'm irresponsible?"

He became unyielding on the issue. "The account will be opened in my own name."

"The thing is, partner," he said, "that's how I want it. I wish it. I do not know how it feels to have a bank account. It will be a new experience to me. It is a silly desire. But I want to have the experience of having my own bank account once. Let me have that pleasure too."

Muktibodh was always in financial difficulties. There was no end to the list of what he did not have. He was always under the burden of debt. He wanted money, but he also rejected

money. He never bid anything that was against his credos merely for money. It was amazing how the man who lacked money desperately used to say no to money without the least hesitation. An account would be opened in the bank in his name— that was a very exciting thought to him. A bank account that belongs to Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh— he wanted to experience what that would feel like. Maybe, that would also perhaps bring him a greater sense of security.

It was then that a letter came from a senior writer. The letter asked Muktibodh not to worry; he and some of his friends were soon going to release an appeal in the newspapers for his help.

Muktibodh became very disturbed after reading the letter. He lifted himself up slightly on pillows and said, "Now what is this? An appeal will be released seeking people's charity! Now they will beg for my sake? Collections will be taken in my name! No! I say, that will not happen! I am not about to die! I will accept help from my friends. But an appeal for donations on my behalf? No! That will not happen!"

We made him understand that his feelings would be communicated to the senior writer and no appeal would be released.

That evening Ramesh brought a letter and gave it to him. Inside the envelope was a twenty rupee note. The letter was from a student of his. The letter said

that he was working in some place and making money to meet his study expenses. It said, "I feel great reverence for you. I notice that a writer like you is not getting proper treatment for want of money. I have saved these twenty rupees. Kindly accept it. This is my own earning, so please do not feel any hesitation to accept this. I do not have the courage to give you the money in person, so I am sending it this way."

Holding the letter and the money in his hand, Muktibodh kept looking out through the window for a long time. His eyes welled up. He said, "This is a poor boy. How can I take money from him?"

There was a school teacher sitting there. He said, "The boy is sentimental. If you return the money, he would feel hurt."

Muktibodh was moved by the boy's love. He remained lost and silent for a long time.

Preparations began for going to Bhopal. His affableness was awake once again. He told me, "Partner, I want to tell you something very clearly. See, you make your livelihood by writing. You too should come to Bhopal with me. We both will stay there. If you do not write, you will be in financial troubles. I am asking you to consider my money as yours and use it."

Muktibodh was very solemn. We kept

looking at each other for a while. His eyes were on me, waiting for my answer and we were all struggling to control our laughter.

Then I said, "I am willing to consider your money as my money. But where is the money?"

Pramod burst out laughing. Muktibodh too laughed. And then he became serious all of a sudden. And he said, "Yes, that is the problem. That is indeed the trouble!"

The little money that had come to him was making him restless. He was remembering the things he ought to do—a long list of them. Some friend was in trouble, someone's wife was sick, someone else's daughter was ill, someone had to get clothes made for his child. He was himself incapacitated and suffering from money troubles, but he wanted to spend that money on others. Later in Bhopal we had a proper battle with him over this. It was with great difficulty that we were able to make him understand that a patient had no responsibility towards anyone; everyone's duties were towards him.

And that night when we started, there were reams of paper with us. Muktibodh forced us to load all his finished poems, unfinished poems and ready manuscripts. He said, "All this will go with me. When I will be well enough to do some work after a week or two, I'll complete the poems, write new ones and revise the

manuscripts. I cannot just lie in the hospital bed without doing anything partner! ...And you have kept that passbook, haven't you?"

But Muktibodh never wrote another

word on those papers, nor did he write a single cheque.

His life was over without a chance to see his collection of poems and without writing a cheque.

Harishankar Parsai (1924-1995), was a renowned satirist who commented on post-independence Indian society. He was equally involved with human concern about his peers and partners. His essays are available in many volumes, prominent among which are 'sadachar ka taveez' and 'jaise unke din phire'. He lived in Jabalpur.

Satya Chaitanya, born 1952, has his management consultancy. He is visiting professor at XLRI and several other management studies' institutions. He knows Hindi, Malayalam, Sanskrit and English and translates multilingually. He lives in Jamshedpur.

TEN POEMS

Badri Narayan

Translated by
Mausumi Mazumdar

1. Genealogy

In the ancestry of trees there were also leaves,
But the leaves are not there in the genealogy of the trees

Neither are there birds
Squirrels are not there

In it Buddha, who spent many years meditating under a tree
Is also not there

For so many years I wept under it
But I am also not there in its genealogy
There should have been in it that girl
Who killed herself hanging on it
And whose soul that has transformed into a bird's nest
Is still hanging on its branches

Where are those female saints in its genealogy
Who broke the four walls of their houses and came to it?

In it that man is also not there
Who, to still his pangs of hunger, plucked
Its first fruit

That's why I say it is a mistake
A grave mistake
For in the trees' genealogy
There is one stump
That has changed everyone else into stumps

2. Searching for

I am a little twig
Searching for trees
I am a tree
Searching for birds
I am that bird
Which is searching for the half-eaten
Bowl shaped guava

I am also the guava
Searching for the unending perennial seeds
I am a seed
Searching for myself
In the deeply etched lines of a farmer
Sifting grain.

I am that deeply etched hand
Searching for the husks of grain
Lying scattered in the fields
After the grains have been cut.
I am also that husk
Searching for the scattered seeds of grain.

3. For A little while

So spread out, so thickly branched
Its roots strewn on so many sides
I wonder who made this family tree
That has spread into my existence
Its branches have filled up my body
Its roots have reached upto my finger tips.

O my woodcutters!
For a little while chop off from its roots
This family tree
Although by doing this my own blood will spill
My own veins will be cut
My own arteries will bleed
But what can I do
For a little while I want to be free from this family tree
So that for a little while my soul can fill with pure water
And the sand inside it can be shaken off
For a little while I want freedom from this imposed orthodoxy.
I am tired of incessantly imitating tradition
For a little while I want to be original.

4. Why will anyone take me?

Even if I offer myself as a gift
Who will take me
Why will the *Dom* of Kashi take me
Why will Rishi Vishwamitra take me
Why will Gautam Rishi give the gift of immortality to the world
If he gets me
If I had been a milch cow may be someone would have taken me
To obtain milk for his son
If a desperate Dronacharya had been gold
Some greedy Brahmin would have taken him
If he had been a torn blanket
An ascetic would have taken him.

I am like that word
That is used to fill up the lies of wisdom
Like the '*dus paisahi*' in aluminium
That is completely powdered.
Not as a gift, even if I give myself as an offering
Why will Bhama Shah take me
Why will Queen Padmavati take me
And why will Queen Victoria?
The caged parrot will also drop me from his beak

Why will critics, why will editors and why will my poet friends
Accept me
When I am not worthy of any use
And when usefulness also asks for value
Then why will anyone take me?
These thoughts led me to forsake my contemplation
On usefulness
And covering my face I fell asleep.

5. I've thrown away the eternal fruit

Earlier I used to think
I'll become immortal
But after seeing the result of Buddha's immortality
I've dropped the idea of becoming immortal.

Many days in my dreams
I saw Jesus Christ praying for death
And poor mythical Ashwatthama
Grief stricken by his immortality
Wailing piteously
And whenever he wails
A quake hits the earth
And a storm rises in the seas
That is why I have dropped the idea of becoming immortal
And
From the window I threw away
The eternal fruit.

6. Belief

I am fragile
But more fragile than me is my book
Which I write with so much dedication.

I am fragile
But no less fragile than me
Is my photograph kept in the album

For my fragile self

More fragile are these diaries
That were written over so many years
And so flimsy is my belief
That I will go beyond time with them
During my lifetime I commission my own statues
These myriad statues of mine
That are immersed just after the auspicious days
Are no less fragile.

The letters that I write
That are burnt with matchsticks
At the end of the year
They are even frailer.

All the gifts that I give
Break in a few years
The age of presents is only one year
That of good wishes is only four days
Whatever I possess
Inanimate words, tears
That I am engaged in justifying
Throughout my life
Slowly melt away
Like snowballs

Some say
Words are immortal
But how can I believe my words
That dissolve with two drops of water.

7. Love Song

My *kurta* has collars of moon
And buttons of stars.
On my *kurta*
Are faint imprints of deer running on the slopes of mountains
On my *kurta*

Are my desires of meeting the girl with golden hair.
On my *kurta*
Are the fury of fathers
And the rage of social beings.
The romantic feel of summer evenings
And the passion of *sharad*
Are on my *kurta*

On my *kurta*
Are the musical instruments of the seasons
Yes beloved, on my *kurta*
Are the drum beats of thunder.

8. Defenceless

Neither am I a favourite of the Gods
Nor of the critics
And not even of the editors

I do not get to meet the award givers often
I do not have the power of wine
I do not have any officer friend
No strong hand of a paper mill owner
Is there on me
I neither have the power to benefit nor to cause loss to anyone
I have never had any relationship with Agyeya
I do not follow the tradition of Trilochan

Then who will be my shield
Who will be my sword
How will I survive in this battlefield defenceless?

9. While thinking

Thinking about birds and deer
Means ultimately thinking about hunters
That is why I see each narrative popular about them
In the context of hunters

In trees, mountains, forests, wherever, whenever I meet them
I tell them to doubt every narrative popular about them
And whenever I think about deer I believe
That till there is no historian of the deer
There is every possibility of the hunters being glorified
And to save the birds from the hunter's net it is very important
That the birds have their own philosophers.

10. Library

Next to my library
There is a house of sorrows
In which live our ancestors
Shackled in chains

They visit me when I read
And say- See! The marks of whips on our backs
Our tongues have been pierced
See the black stain of blood
Can you distinguish them from the awareness of time?

I want to escape from them
And in reply pick up a book on colonialism
One of them screams loudly-
See! While pulling the carriages of the Angrez
My shoulders have become skinned.

Some show their fingers
That have cracked by polishing the shoes of English ladies
Some come up and snatch away the book
And say- See, my lips
That are still stitched up.
Some show the marks of hot iron rods etched on their backs
Some come to me and say-
Why are you sitting like an important person with books
Come! See the nails pierced in your ancestors' feet.

Some bring out my past
That has been shredded to bits
Some display evidences of hot canes rained on them at that time
While going towards my future
I think- Come! To save myself from them
Let me search for salvation in a poetry collection
And I pull out from the shelf a book of poems
But how can I read the book?
Right next to me lives my past.

Badri Narayan, born 1965, feels like writing poetry when he visits his village. He is a scholar of history, language and culture. Has been visiting fellow of Mason de Sciences, Paris and Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. Received Bharat Bhushan award in 1991. He works in G.B. Pant Institute of Social Sciences, Jhusi, Allahabad.

Mausumi Mazumdar, born September 8, 1963, and educated at Delhi. M.A. in English from Delhi University, she works occasionally for G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Jhusi, Allahabad. She writes for journals in English and Hindi and lives in Allahabad.

HINDI LITERARY JOURNALISM SINCE BHARTENDU AGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Bharat Bharadwaj

Translated by
Ravindra Narayan Mishra

The economic, political and social exploitation of the British Raj was behind the political consciousness that visited the Hindi speaking states after the mass struggle of 1857. This mutiny had shaken the entire Hindi speaking area. On the one side the British rule had consolidated itself, on the other its cruel oppression started. The Hindi renaissance that started with Bhartendu Harishchand had in its background, consolidation of the Indian colony and the expansion of the British rule. Together with the new political consciousness the restlessness for the growth of Hindi language inspired Bhartendu for social economic and educational reformation of the Hindi-speaking people. Bhartendu had lived in the company of social reformers of Bengal like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshavchandra Sen etc and archeology-lovers like Rajendra Lal Mishra. Not only was he fully aware of the Bengal renaissance but he used to read the contemporary journals and magazines also. He was restless to change the destiny of the Hindi-speaking people. He had known not only Urdu, Persian, Hindi, Brajbhasha, Bangla but also English. So he was familiar with western literature as well. Bhartendu had inherited his literary inclination from his father. He used to compose poems not only in Brajbhasha but also in Khari Boli. He used to enjoy sittings with his literary friends who lived close by. He encouraged Hindi writers by publishing a monthly letter named 'Kavivachan Sudha'. In the beginning it used to have collection of poems by poets but before long this

magazine started appearing fortnightly and contained prose too. In the year 1875 'Sudha' became weekly. Till 1885 it kept appearing in both Hindi and English.

By publishing Sudha Bhartendu had stirred us when we were deep in slumber. The talk of male – female equality was a very big issue. There was a hint at future independence of India, this view was expressed at a time when Congress was not even established. We should not forget that after 17 years when Congress came into being it used to begin its resolution with display of devotion to the British rule. The government used to buy a hundred copies of 'Kavivachansudha'.

Babu Balmukund Gupt has written that when this magazine, after becoming fortnightly, started publishing politics related and other essays freely, a big movement was created. People started calling Bhartendu disloyal after publication of his essay 'Levi Pran Levi' and 'Mersia'. People started inciting the government against him. Some of Bhartendu's friends reasoned with junior officer, Sir William Kyore, that 'Mersia' is an attack on the government. On the other side even before government assistance could be stopped Bhartendu resigned from his post as honorary magistrate. Bhartendu published the magazine Harishchand in the year 1873. Later on it was published as Harishchand Patrika. Bhartendu had inherited devotion to the British. He composed poems not only in praise of the English and English beauty but also composed poems on queen Victoria and her son the Duke of Edinburg. He even prayed to God when Prince of Wales had become unwell. But at the same time he severely criticized the British rule. He also expressed his

concern for his motherland by writing 'Swatva Nij Bharat Gahe' and the progress of his language Hindi 'Nij Bhasha Unnati Ahe Sab Unnati Ke Mul' (the progress of one's language is route to all progress).

Only those people who don't want to approach Bhartendu in totality with the inner contradiction of his age accuse him of devotion to the British rule. Among the contemporaries of Bhartendu were not only Pandit Badrinarayan Chaudhary, Premdhan, Pratapnarayan Mishra, Babu Radhacharan Goswami and Pandit Balkrishan Bhat but also Keshavram Bhat.

'Biharbandhu' edited by Pandit Keshav Ram Bhat was published from Maniklal Street, Calcutta. In the year 1874 this paper started getting published from Patna. For forty years (1912) this magazine kept getting published, some times as monthly, some times as fortnightly, at other times as weekly. This paper played a great role in promoting the tendency of learning Hindi. Keshavram Bhat's friend Hasan Ali used to edit the paper in Patna. This paper had a tragic end. In 1908 a retired police inspector was made editor of this paper by some owner. He gave the title of the main essay How I was appointed?

In 1878 an important paper 'Bharatmitra' came out under the editorship of Rudradatt Sharma. Bhartendu himself has mentioned this. It was a political paper. Although it used to contain other- subjects also. From the year 1899 to the first half of 1907 Babu Balmukund Gupt remained its editor. A debate started over the word 'Ansthirta' with the editor of 'Sarswati' Pandit Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi. In this debate this paper played an important role. Everyone has praised the editorial language of Bharatmitra. Actually in answer to a question Pandit

Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi had said, only one person used to write good Hindi - Babu Balmukund Gupt. Confronting tradition, statusquoism and aversion to change, Pt Balkrishna Bhatt published Hindi Pradip from Prayag in 1877. He kept its flame alive for 33 years. Bhat ji defined literature for the first time saying -literature is growth of the heart of people. Acharya Ram Chandra Shukla enriched this definition in the beginning of his History of Hindi literature.

Calcutta played a leading role in publishing Hindi papers and magazines not only in the Bhartendu age but even afterwards. Third famous paper from Calcutta Uchitvakta was published under the editorship of Durga Prasad Mishra. This brilliant paper used to generally publish essays of Bhartendu. In 1881 Anand Kadambni got published from Mirjapur under the editorship of Pt Badri Narayan Chaudhary 'Premdhan' a close friend of Bhartendu. The inaugural edition of this magazine had come out in July 1881. It was priced at Rs 2 and contained 24 pages of royal size. The magazine used to be full with poems and essays of Premdhan ji. That is why Bhartendu wrote this is not a book that you use it for yourself, actually it is a paper. It is necessary that it should have essays written by people and it should not have only writings of the same type. 'Bramhin' published in 1883 from Kanpur under the editorship of Pt. Pratap Narayan Mishra was a brilliant newspaper of Bhartendu age. The annual price of this magazine was one rupee. But it did not have many subscribers. Even the two hundred subscribers it had did not pay their subscription on time. The helpless editor Pt Mishra had to beg in poetry-
^vkB ekl chrs tteku vc rks djks nf{k.kk
nku* 'O master it has been eight months

please give the donation now.'But it had no impact on the subscribers. In spite of that it kept coming out from Kanpur till 1887. Later on a littérateur and generous hearted Ramdin Singh the owner of Khadagvilas Press, Bankipur, Patna took the responsibility to publish this paper. Mishra ji used to say about him that Ramdin is so benevolent

The paper and magazines published in the Bhartendu age marked the beginning of poems in Khari Boli and also many genres of prose. Main among them are drama, novel and review. Hindi Pradip, Anand Kadambini and Bramhan the editors of which were Bhat ji, Premdhan and Pratap Narayan Mishra respectively were main literary papers of the Bhartendu age. They used to publish reviews of books. Generally these book-reviews used to be brief and used to have merely the introduction of the work under review. Three such reviews were- 'Nil Devi' (Review of Bhartendu written historical tragedy- published in 'Anand Kadambni', 'Ekantvasi Yogi' (The translation of Pt Sridhar Pathak written Goldsmith Hermit in Khari Boli in Hindi Pradip of May 1886) and review of Sati Natak in Bramhan. Not only this the two detailed reviews of Sanyogita Swayamvar first published in Hindi Pradeep (April 1886) and second in Anand Kadambni (second series - 10-10-12, 1886) still have historical importance.

The flood of publications of papers and magazines that came in the Bhartendu age led to not only the spread of consciousness among Hindi-speaking people it also exposed the exploitation under the British rule. In this phase many other papers-magazines were also published but their target was not English education. But I must mention Nagri Pracharni Patrika published in 1896 on

behalf of Kashi Nagri Pracharni Sabha and Venkateshwar Samachar published from Mumbai. Babu Ramdin Singh was behind the publication of papers and magazines of Bhartendu age and even the complete works of Bhartendu. Ramdin Singh established the first Hindi press-Khadagvilas Press in 1880 in the Bankipur area of Patna from a tile roofed house. The work had started by installing a treadle machine. He had established the press after the name of his intimate friend Lala Kharag Bahadur Malay. Babu Ramdin Singh was very close to Bhartendu and now and then he used to help him economically. Hindi literature is highly indebted to Khadagvilas Press Patna and its owner Ramdin Singhji. Not only he looked after Bhartendu in his last days but he took upon himself the responsibility of publishing dozens of papers and magazines of Hindi. Khadagvilas Press started the tradition of publishing complete works in Hindi by initially publishing the complete works of Bhartendu. In my knowledge 'the role of Khadagvilas Press in the growth of Hindi' is first such doctoral thesis on role of press on which doctoral degree was awarded in the decade of eighties. This Ph.D was awarded by B.H.U. This research not only reflects the creative tension of the Bhartendu age, it mentions a great deal on Bhartendu himself.

Sarswati was perhaps the first public magazine of Hindi which was published by Chintamani Ghosh in 1900 from Indian Press of Allahabad. It had got sponsorship from Nagri Pracharni Sabha. Its editorial board included Babu Raikrishnadas, Babu Kartik Prasad Khatri, Babu Jagannathdas Ratnakar, Pt Kishorilal Goswami and Babu Shyamsundar Das. In 1903 Pt Hazari Prasad Dwivedi got associated with its editorship. He was

a rigid editor. In one of the issues he criticized the research done by the Kashi Nagri Pracharni Sabha. The tragic consequence of this incident was that the 'Sabha' withdrew its sponsorship. Dwivedi ji wrote his comment with great excitement in the form of a poem - Anumodan Ka Ant (the end of sponsorship). This poem is very heart-touching. Dwivedi edited Sarswati till around 1920 with great proficiency. The new consciousness that he spread in society and culture made the third phase of Hindi renaissance possible. Although scholars have written that his aim was to abolish feudal and colonial system and establish democratic system in every sphere of life, but Sarswati magazine enjoyed some kind of government patronage also because of which it avoided openly criticizing the British rule. Despite being an advocate of judiciousness and concern for people under the British rule Dwivedi ji did not lack patriotism. He had love for the country even then but had not forgotten the objective of the owner of the paper either. After 1906 Dwivedi ji corrected these mistakes. He praised the British government less. So much so that he even criticized the British when he felt it necessary. In December 1906 while writing on Murshidabad he wrote that the English and some Indians showered adjectives like sex maniac, ocean of heartlessness, master of bad passions, greedy, human-demon on Sirajudaula but Babu Akshaya Kumar Maitreya almost washed this black spot by writing life sketch of Sirajudaula in Bengali. Dwivedi did a great work in Sarswati- by continuing to publish the poems of Maithlisharan Gupt he made him a poet. He advised Nirala and Pant and then published them also. So long

as Dwivedi ji kept editing Sarswati he promoted his contemporary writings by using his editorial rationality. Dwivedi ji did another great work by refining the essay what is poetry by newly emerging critic like Ramchandra Shukla. How many authors Dwivedi ji nurtured can not be counted. But Dwivedi ji was an aggressive editor and used to keep gun under his pillow. Sarswati continued being published for decades after Dwivedi ji. But after losing its shine and flavour perhaps closed in the eighth decade. Its last editor was Srinarayan Chaturvedi.

In the year 1900 only Chattisgarh Mitra was published from Bilaspur(now Chhattisgarh). Its editors were Ramrao Chincholkar and Madhav Rao Sapre and the publisher was Munshi Abdul Gafoor. Sapre had literary taste and had interest in economics as well. He wrote the initial story of Hindi- Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti(a basket full of soil).In 1907 Abhyudaya was published from Allahabad under the editorship of Pt Madan Mohan Malviya. In 1915 this paper became biweekly to begin with; later on it became a daily. In 1909 a monthly of poetry 'Kavi' was published by Ramnarayan Sarhari under the editorship of Rupnarayan Singh and Gayaprasd Shukla 'Trishul'(later on Snehi)

After Bramhan a brilliant and revolutionary weekly Pratap was published from Kanpur. Its editor was young and dynamic Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. Pratap was the paper of the revolutionaries which had the longing and restlessness for independence. This paper not only gave a revolutionary dimension but also an aggressive gesture.

In the beginning 'Prabha' came out under the editorship of Kaluram Gangrade and Makhanlal Chaturvedi in 1913 and continued till 1917.Later on in 1919 it started coming out from Pratap Press

of Kanpur. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi and Naveen remained its illustrious editors. Prabha was also a committed magazine and it stood in the freedom struggle. The weekly Swadesh started being published from Gorakhpur in 1919 under the editorship of Pt. Dashrath Prasad Dwivedi a disciple inspired by Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. Dwivedi was a bright nationalist and a follower of Tilak. Firaq and Ugra were also associated with this magazine.This magazine continued being published till 1938. Because of its attacking editorials its editor and Ugraji had to go to jail. The tradition of guest editor also started from Swadesh because the editor had gone to jail.From the perspective of Swadesh literature was as important as politics. 'Karmvir' was published from Jabalpur by Makhanlal Chaturvedi and it was edited by Madhavrao Sapre and Chhedilal. In 1925 Makhanlal Chaturvedi took it to Khandwa. 'Karmvir' kept being published even in post independence years under the editorship of Makhanlal Chaturvedi.

The year 1922 is important from this point of view that two literary magazines came out in this year. Adarsh was published from Calcutta. It was edited by Shivpujan Sahay. Its annual subscription was two rupees. Madhuri was published from Lucknow. It was a monthly published by Sri Vishnunarayan Bhargav the owner of Navalkishore Press. It was edited by Dularelal Bhargav. Its shape and size were just like Madhuri. Its annual subscription was six and a half rupees and the editorial board of this magazine included Rupnarayan Pande, Krishanbihari Mishra, Munshi Premchand and Ramsevak Tripathi. This was a famous magazine of its time in which Nirala used to write a column in the name of Kaka Kalelkar. This was

included in the second edition of Nirala Rachnavali (edited by Nand Kishore Naval).

The monthly magazine 'Chand' was published from Allahabad in 1923. Its editors have been Nandgopal Singh Sahgal, Mahadevi Varma and Nandkishore Tiwari. For some time it was even edited by Navjodkimal Srivastav. Problems related to women's life were central to this magazine. The Marvari issue, Nandkumar's hanging issue and prostitute issue became much talked about. Chand was an important magazine of its time. It did not play any less role in the freedom struggle. The famous book Bharat Men Angrezi Raj (three volumes) came out from here. It was instantly confiscated by the British but still thousands of copies of this book reached every nook and corner of the country.

The beginning of the publication of the weekly Matvala from Calcutta on August 26 1923 was a remarkable event for the Hindi world. Nirala, Mahadev Prasad Seth, Shivpujan Sahay, Pandeya Sri Bechan Sharma Ugra and Navjodkimal Srivastav were associated with its editorial board. Matvala was a smart magazine of humour and satire. It used to comment on not only the British rule but also on Hindi authors. Its sharp comments used to have deep impact. For nearly six years it kept being published from Calcutta and kept walking on razor's edge. In the fourth decade Mahadev Prasad Seth brought it to his own town Mirzapur. Ugra edited it but by then it had lost its sheen and committee of its writers had got scattered. Nirala's poems used to be prominently published on the front pages of Matvala. On Matvala's pattern Suryakant Tripathi's - name was kept Nirala. There is culmination of Ravindranath Thakur's

influence in Nirala's poems published in Matvala—In 1926 the publication of the monthly 'Veena' started from Indore. Central Indian Hindi literature committee had contributed to its publication. Its editors have been respectively Kalika Prasad Dixit, Kusumakar, Ambikadutt Tripathi, Rambharose Tiwari, Shantipriya Dwivedi, Prakash Narayan, Chandrani and Gopiballabh. Veena is still coming out but it is lifeless.

Vishal Bharat got published from Calcutta in 1928. Its founder was Ramchandra Chatterji. Pt Banarsi Das Chaturvedi became its first editor and kept editing it till 1937. In 1938 Agyeya accepted the post of its editor. Although Vishal Bharat has been the most famous magazine after Sarswati yet it had a tragic end. Probably Shreeram Sharma was its last editor. This magazine closed towards the end of the sixth decade.

The first half of Premchand's life was the phase of extremism in Indian politics. The Jalianvalabag Massacre had already taken place and the Simon Commission had returned. The slogan of complete independence was already given. Bhagat Singh had been given death sentence. This was the background in which Premchand started the publication of 'Hans' from Benaras in 1930. He painstakingly brought out its special issue on Kashi. He continued as its editor from 1930 to 1936. After that Jainendra and Shivrani Devi became its editors. Among its special issues Premchand memorial issue, drama issue (1938) story issue and autobiography issue are worth mentioning. Actually the autobiography issue of Hans raised some controversy in the Hindi world. Shivdan Singh Chauhan, Sripat Rai and Narottam Nagar continued to be associated with its editorship. After a long gap on October

8, 1957 (Premchand's memorial day) Hans was published as a compilation of literature under the joint editorship of Balkrishna Rao and Amrit Rai. From the point of view of establishing new values for modern Hindi literature Hans has a historical importance. In the editorial essays of Hans Premchand ridiculed the British rule. Together with Hans Premchand also published a weekly 'Jagran'. He became object of the anger of the British. He paid a fine also. Anyway the weekly was closed down but Hans continued being published during his life. Premchand is among those writers of Hindi who continuously commented against the British rule in his writings-craved for the freedom of the Indian people from the colonial slavery of the British. In the last issue of Hans of his life time Premchand's essay Mahajani Sabhyata was published. This essay bears testimony to Premchand's revolutionary consciousness becoming sharper.

The first issue of 'Rupabh' was published in July 1938. As editor together with Sumitranandan Pant, Narendra Sharma was there. It was published from Prakash Grih, Kalakankar (Awadh). The annual subscription was four rupees. On the front page it was written-representative of the age : monthly paper. Vishal Bharat of Pt Banarsidas Chaturvedi even objected to it. As clarification the new issue of 'Rupabh' wrote "Rupabh's claim is not in the form of dictatorship. In the age of democracy for giving voice to different classes and parts of society and literature there are and can be different representatives and Rupabh is one of them." This good magazine closed in 1939. According to Dr Namvar Singh 'I have seen only ten issues of Rupabh and have heard that it could bring out only eleven issues. In the library of

the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan Bhavan Prayag the file of Rupabh is securely kept.

In 1945 the publication of the monthly Aaj Kal started from Delhi and exactly one year before independence under the editorship of Shivpujan Sahay the publication of 'Himalaya' started from Pustak Bhandar, Laheriasarai (Darbhanga). Only few issues of this paper came out. 'Himalaya' was a purely literary magazine. From another publishing institution Granthmala the magazine Parijat was published in Patna, in which for the first time some instalments of the novel Charuchandralekh were published. Later on they were published in 'Kalpana'.

In the summer of the year of independence 1947 the publication of a bimonthly compilation of literature Pratik started under the editorship of S.H. Vatsyayan, Nagendra Nagaich (Dr Nagendra), Sripat Rai and Nemichand (Jain). On looking at the list of contents of the inaugural issue it becomes clear that it was a purely literary paper. This issue had an essay by Ramchandra Tandon on Amrita Shergil, an essay by Nagendra on the condition of Ras and Marxist review of art- and in addition to Vishnu De on some problems there were poems by Naveen, Suman, GK Mathur, Prabhakar Machve, Nemichand Jain, Narendra Sharma and Sumitranandan Pant. It also had three reviews by Devraj Upadhyay, Prakash Chandra Gupta and Chandrgupta Vidyalankar of Bhagvaticharan Varma's novel 'Tedhe Medhe Raste'. The same issue had famous story Hilibon Ki Batakhen by Agyeya. It is perplexing that in his compilation he has not only dilated upon the crisis in magazine publication but also searched the real form of the English synonym of 'Sanskirti'

– culture. He has tried to trace its origin to Sanskrit— but ignoring the newly found independence of the country he only wrote in the editorial-Pratik is not a paper or planning of any party. It is symbol of the free spirit of the country. Only this sentence hints at freedom attained by the country. Some issues of this magazine were published. Later on Agyeya published 'Naya Pratik'. But it did not have the original aura.

In 1948 under the editorship of Mohan Singh Saingar the publication of Naya Samaj started. Saingar had been associated with the editing of 'Vishal Bharat'. That is why Naya Samaj kept being published for years regularly maintaining a rich standard of taste. It was a popular monthly magazine of the eastern region.

The publication of bimonthly magazine Kalpana started from Hyderabad in August 1949. Since its beginning its nature had been literary. Its principal editor was Aryendra Sharma and the editorial board included Dr Raghuvir Singh, Pro Ranjan, Madhusudan Chaturvedi and Badri Vishal Pitti. Later on Maqbul Fida Hussain, Raghuvir Sahay and Prayag Shukla also got associated. After 1952 this magazine became a monthly. In 1959 the magazine completed 100th issue. On this occasion it brought out a special issue titled 'Kalpana ke Sau Varsh'. The Navlekhan (New Writings) issue of Kalpana was talked about. Kalpana was an important magazine of its time. To get published in it was to become famous in the literary world. It can be said that in spite of all limitations this magazine represented Hindi literature for nearly two to two and a half decades. Even Agyeya used to write comments in this magazine in the name of 'Kuttichatan'. After 1970

this magazine declined and lastly it closed in May 1978. But it was such a magazine that it stayed in the memory of people decades after it closed. Kalpana's Kashi issue was proposed by Badri Vishal Pitti (1928-2003) and got published under the editorship of Prayag Shukla in 2005 after the death of Pitti. Even this underlines the importance of Kalpana. After getting Jnanpith Award when Nirmal Verma was asked as to when did he know that he has been accepted as a writer? Then he answered that after getting published in Kalpana he thought that he had got the recognition.

In 1950 the publication of two weeklies started one after the other. The publication of Dharmyug started under the editorship of Ilachandra Joshi by the Times group from Bombay. Later on Hemchandra Joshi became its editor. In 1960 Dharmvir Bharti became its editor. It was an immensely popular weekly and was deeply associated with contemporary literature. Nai Kavita series and many instalments of Ramvilas Sharma's book Nai Kavita aur Astitvavad got published in this weekly. Dharmyug published many story writers of its times including extracts of many important novels in 'Kathadashak'. In 1990 Dharmvir Bharti dissociated himself from its editorship and after only few years this weekly closed down. In 1950 the publication of a weekly Saptahik Hindustan started under the editorship of Banke Behari Bhatnagar. This weekly became popular under the editorship of Manohar Shyam Joshi. In publishing contemporary literature this magazine together with Dharmyug played an unforgettable role. Towards the last decade of the century even this magazine closed down.

In 1950 from Ashok press, Patna of

Raja Radhika Raman Prasad Singh under the editorship of Rambriksh Benipuri the publication of Nai Dhara started. In this magazine not only the poems of Nirala, Pant and Mahadevi but also the poems of Dinkar, Suman and Bachchan were published. As Benipuri was associated with the socialist movement it published the writings of authors associated with that movement. This magazine published issues on Bernard Shaw (January 1951), Nalin reminiscence issue (Nov-Dec-1961), Shivpujan Sahay reminiscence issue (April-July-1963). This magazine published special issue on contemporary stories which was greatly talked about. For some years Vijay Mohan Singh also had been its editor. He straight away associated with young writing. Then not only Dhumil got published but also its columns on papers and magazines aroused interest. This way or that way the magazine is still being published in its 58th year.

The history of quarterly magazine 'Alochna' is very interesting and exciting from the angle of literary history as well as evolution of criticism. That means the history of post independence literary writing, ideological struggles and the politics of ding dong battles. The inaugural issue of Alochna came in October 1951, it was published from Rajkamal Prakashan, Faiz Bazar, Delhi. Its associate editors were kshemendra Suman and Gopal Krishan Kaul. Shivdanji had entered literary field by writing the introduction of progressive literature. Eight issues of Alochna came out under his editorship, among them Ithihas Ank and Upanyas Ank were worth mentioning. The much talked about review of Renu's Maila Anchal by Acharya Nalin Vilochan Sharma was published only in Alochna. Afterwards Dharmvir

Bharti, Raghuvansh, Vijay Dev Narayan Sahi and Brajeshwar Varma also became its editors. The glimpse of the ideological war between right and left could be seen not only in Alochna but was also available in the essays of Ram Vilas Sharma and Namvar Singh. Bharti and Sahi made it an ideological platform of cold war. Then for some time Nand Dulare Vajpayee became editor of Alochna. Once again in the beginning of the seventh decade Shiv Dan Singh Chauhan became its editor. But by then the scenario of Hindi literature had changed so much that he could not handle it. Lastly amidst allegations and counter allegations the command of Alochna fell in the hands of Namvar Singh. From 1986 Nand Kishore Naval got associated with Alochna as an associate editor. Namvar Singh edited the magazine efficiently for 23 years. In 1990 this magazine was closed down. Among the important special issues published under his editorship were issues focused on Bhartendu, Maithlisharan Gupt, Premchand, Acharya Shukla, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Ram Vilas Sharma, Nagarjun, Muktibodh, Dhumil and Marx. Alochna has been a brilliant ideological magazine of Marxist critics. Republication of Alochna started in the year 2000 from Rajkamal Prakashan New Delhi. This way Alochna rejuvenated. The magazine is still coming out irregularly.

The publication of Nai Kavita started in 1954 under the editorship of Jagdish Gupt and Ramswarup Chaturvedi. In all only eight issues of this magazine came out. The last issue came out in 1966. In the last issue Vijayadev Narayan Sahi had also got associated with its editorship. This magazine has also played its role in establishing 'Nai Kavita'. In 1956 Nikash a compilation came out under

the editorship of Dharmvir Bharti and Laxmikant Varma. Generally the beginning of Nai Kavita is traced to Dusra Saptak and it is assumed that with the publication of 'Tisra Saptak' in 1959 it ended after attaining its culmination. The interesting fact is that Jagdish Gupt who

published books and magazines in the name of Nai Kavita and made it a movement was not considered worth publishing in Agyeya's compilation Saptak. Similarly Laxmikant Varma who wrote a book on Standards of Nai Kavita was not considered a new poet by Agyeya.

To be continued

Bharat Bharadwaj : born 1945 Gyanpura, Vaishali, Bihar. He is a literary critic, essayist and editor of various books. He writes a regular column in the literary magazine 'Hans'. He has edited the controversial volume 'hamare yug ka khalnayak : Rajendra Yadav'. His original works include. 'Sahitya Ka nopathya', 'Parikrama! Hindi Sahitya', 'Samkalin srijan Sandarbh and Betartib' (all literary essays). He retired from I.B., Govt. of India. He lives in Delhi.

Ravindra Narayan Mishra teaches Political Science in Khalsa College, University of Delhi. He writes in original as well as likes to translate at will. He lives in Delhi.

DALIT SAINT POETS OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Dr. Subhash Sharma

Bhakti (devotion) movement began in South India as early as eighth century CE. However, the idea and action of bhakti movement spread all over India in coming centuries (especially in fourteenth to seventeenth centuries). Interestingly saint poets from all castes ranging from Brahmin to dalits and even non-Hindus (Muslims) joined it with full enthusiasm. In Tamil, Marathi and Hindi languages and literatures many dalit saint poets composed poems and songs / hymns expressing their joys and sorrows in different ways. Some of them (like Marathi saint-poet Chokhamela and Hindi saint poet Raidas or Ravidas) expressed their self-experiences in daily life, especially their lower place in a hierarchical stratified society. As Eleanor Zelliott and Rohini Mokashi – Puneekar in 'Untouchable Saints, (2005) rightly point out, "Although time and the oral tradition have undoubtedly changed their songs, one still has a sense that these are the first authentic voices of untouchables, those outside the four-fold Varna system, and the only voices until the nineteenth century. In the South, there are no such voices. All that has survived from Tiruppan Alvar and Nandanar is one ecstatic song of praise of Vishnu."

Here we take up three dalit saint poets: one each from Tamil, Marathi and Hindi languages / literatures. In Tamil language the oldest dalit saint – poet was Tiruppan Alvar (eighth century CE). He composed only one poem of eleven verses in praise of Lord Ranganatha (Vishnu) at Srirangam. His poem is being recited both at Srivaishnav temples as well as at homes since eleventh century. His poem represents the typical 'sanatan' Hindu

tradition without any protest or questioning the hierarchical social order. Actually, the title 'Alvar' was given by the Srivaishnavas to twelve saint – poets, meaning 'who are deeply immersed in the love of Vishnu'. The term Tiru refers to 'Shri' and 'pan' means untouchable. But 'pan' also means music and 'panan' means Tamil minstrel. Unlike other Alvars, Tiruppan does not use his name in the last verse of his poem. The oldest biography of Alvars is found in 'Divya Suri Charitam' in Sanskrit; then 'Guru Parampara Prabhavam' I and II (thirteenth and fifteenth centuries); Alvarkal Vaibhavam (in Tamil in 15th century) and 'Periya Tirumudi Ataivu' (in Tamil in 16th century). According to all traditional hagiographies (mix of fact and myth), Tiruppan Alvar was an incarnation of Srivatsa (the mole on Vishnu's chest). He was born as Pancham (fifth varna). His divine nature was hidden by the surroundings, it is described, he was given pure food, he never wept, etc. Vasudha Narayanan comments on this aspect : " It is very significant that in all these ways the 'higher' caste authors of these biographies tend to insulate and protect the poet from his untouchable birth. The point is seen to be a divine incarnation, a recipient of Lord Ranganatha's grace, not tainted by impure food or surroundings." By 18, he is said to play 'veena' sweetly but cannot enter Lord Vishnu's temple, so goddess Lakshmi asks Lord to bring him to inner sanctum sanctorum. Lord tells priests that the

oldest and highest clan is that of the devotees. But he again refuses because of being a sinner. Thus it is notable that argument shifts from 'loneliness through birth' to 'lowliness due to sin'. Finally, Lord directs a Brahmin priest, Loka Saranga Muni, to bring Tiruppan. But he again refuses, so he along with others forcibly brings him on his shoulders – still not putting his foot inside the temple and maintains the purity and sanctity of the temple.

In a later hagiography, it is mentioned that Loka Saranga Muni went to river Kaveri to bring water for ritual bath of the deity. There Tiruppan was singing; the priest asked him to move away but Tiruppan was deeply engrossed in singing and did not hear him. Then he threw a stone at Tiruppan whose forehead started bleeding. When Muni reached the temple with a pitcher of water, he found Lord's forehead bleeding. Lord's voice told him about his sin and he was directed to bring Tiruppan on his shoulders. But this story is not included in old hagiographies, hence it is an interpolation in modern versions 'when prejudices were even stronger'. Now the question arises who inserted this. Since such hagiographies were traditionally with Brahmins, they seem to have interpolated it "to convince the non-Shrivaishnava Brahmins that Loka Saranga Muni did after all have a 'politically correct' attitude towards the 'Untouchables' at least unless commanded otherwise by the Lord" (Vasudha

Narayanan). Further Amar Chitra Katha tells that Tiruppan was abandoned by his parents and was brought up by the sweepers but panans are described as singers in early Tamil literature. Hence this distortion is probably due to north Indian stereotype. Further, this classic mentions that when Tiruppan was allowed by the Brahmin priests to enter the temple, he was full of anger and sorrow: "The priests have made my Lords a prisoner, he cannot see those whom he wants to see." Further he utters, "I wish I were dead, Lord! With death the questions of birth and impurity cease to exist. No one can separate us then." Furthermore it portrays senseless violence heaped on Tiruppan. Since these details are not in older versions, these are interpolations. The agenda of social reform is visible when Amar Chitra Katha mentions: "Even as early as the time of Buddha, Hinduism was already vitiated by the hierarchy of the caste system... the caste system is still a blot on Hindu society despite the relentless campaigns carried on against it by enlightened social reformers and thinkers through the ages...."

However, all hagiographies mention that when Tiruppan sang inside the temple, Lord accepted him, Tiruppan ultimately disappeared into the sacred feet of the Lord. Actually only two Alvars, Antal (woman bhakta) and Tiruppan disappeared into the deity. Antal had refused to marry a human being and insisted to get wedded to the

Lord as incarnation of Goddess Earth. So Tiruppan was also seen as a unique singer (all singers could not get entry inside the temple). Here the paradigm is a divine being, not a social role model. In his poem Tiruppan's depiction is a particular and local manifestation identifying with the Vishnu manifestation in the sacred hill of Tirumala Tirupati and with the generic Vishnu of the Puranas. First verse of his poem shows humility to Lord:

'Pure Lord
Primordial Lord
Faultless one
Who made me a servant?
of his servants'

Here 'servant of servants' is Vasudha Narayanan's realistic translation whereas Steven Hopkins translates the phrase as 'slave of slaves' but slavery has absolutely a different connotation in western world. Further he depicts in fifth verse:

'Destroying the bonds
of my ancient sins
he made me his own, his love
keeping me so,
the other day
he entered inside me'

Here the poet Tiruppan admits that Lord had exonerated him of his old sins. He made him his own and he entered inside him – that is, he not only embraced him outwardly but also absorbed him inwardly. In tenth verse he expresses his desire and inner voice:

'Dark as the stormy cloud

Cowherd whose mouth
Swallowed butter.
Lord who captured my heart
King of the sky lords
Lord of the jewel, Arankam
My ambrosia.
My eyes, which have seen him
Cannot see anything else.'

Here the poet, Tiruppan is of the clear view that he does not want to see worldly things after seeing the Lord closely and inwardly. But, unlike many dalit saint poets of that era, Tiruppan does not mention social status of untouchable caste. He is spell bound by the Lord's beauty, love, benevolence, powerfulness, purity, faultlessness, righteousness, sacredness, brightness, fragrance and so on. One may be puzzled why an untouchable poet, considered impure and profane, frequently talks of Lord's purity and sacredness. This description, of contrast and assimilation with a Hindu God does not fit in with the current dalit assertion where typical Hindu tradition is questioned and abdicated, rather an alternative Buddhist tradition (of B.R. Ambedkar) is adopted by a substantial section of dalits. But also notable is the fact that during Bhakti period many dalit poets did not question the Hindu social order and its religious texts, temples and rituals – as did non-dalit poets like Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai Dadu, Malukdas, etc. He praises Lord for destroying the bonds of his 'ancient sins' but these works are generic in nature, not specific about low social status and

wickedness. Similarly, he does not wish to serve other devotees, priests and so on – rather he wants a direct relationship with the Lord as well as equality with humans. Needless to mention here that another Alvar of that time Nammalvar prefers the devotees of the Lord as his masters (even if they are untouchables). Further, Tiruppan talks of Lord of Arankam being the same as the Lord in Venkatam. Like other Alvars, he presumes the primacy of Lord Vishnu.

If we analyse the legacy of Srivaishnava community, we find that Tiruppan (and Andal too) was considered exception to normal social system but other untouchables were not allowed temple entry to worship Lord or Tiruppan (whose idol was installed in temples and worshipped). Srivaishnava scholars like Pillai Lokacharya observes in 'Sri Vachana Bhushanam' that Tiruppan Alvar is higher than other devotees because being the servant, the lowly, his lowliness was 'natural' while other devotees' lowliness is 'assumed'. Similarly it is said that Andal's love for the Lord was 'natural' because of being a woman while men's love was 'assumed'. A myth is prevalent in South India that once Ramanuja and his disciples were lost in wilderness, and some untouchables gave them shelter and showed the way. Ramanuja called this group 'tiru Kulattar' (clan belonging to goddess Lakshmi). These people, living in Bangalore, are allowed temple entry but they prefer to worship in their community shrines–

some kind of assertion and alternative worship. There are twelve shrines (first one built in honour of Tiruppan Alvar)-four for Lord Vishnu and eight for all Alvars. Many followers (ex-untouchables) wear sacred thread, believing that Tiruvaymoli, composition of Nammalvar and the Sacred Collection of Four Thousand Verses are the Tamil Veda. According to Sri Vipranarayana, there is a biological chain of Srivaishnava devotees on the one hand and a direct link to Alvars, on the other. But Srivaishnava devotees, as Vasudha Narayanan observes, have agreed in theory that bhakti (devotion) transcends all religious prescription but not in practice.

[II]

Chokhamala was a fourteenth century untouchable saint-poet in Maharashtra. He belonged to Varkari community that worships Vitthal (Vithoba) at Pandarpur. The pilgrims, during on foot journey to Pandarpur, sing songs and hymns (abhangas). Vitthal is identified by the stories about the saint-poets, not by myths & stories about himself. He stands without terrifying arsenal carried by many armed Hindu deities. He is a 'swarup' (not avatar) of Vishnu, and sometimes identified with the child Krishna. As Fred Dallmayre says, the identity of Vitthal contributes to a feeling that it is "intriguingly placed at the crossroads between the manifest and the non-manifest, between revelation and concealment, familiarity and non-

familiarity, or, in Indian terminology between 'saguna' and 'nirguna' conceptions." Further Rohini Mokashi-Punekar is rightly of the view that Chokhamela's life 'captures the paradigmatic ambiguity of Hinduism: its liberating intellectual plurality and its equally restricting social construction.'

He belonged to Mahar (the lowliest caste) community of untouchables whose identity in Hindu society is shaped through a bunch of negations. Mahars were considered untouchable because they were dragging out carcasses, considered impure & polluting. He was, like other untouchables, denied education, scriptures, use of wells and tanks, entry into the temple; hence these themes became themes of his poetry. Chokha acknowledges Namdev (a lower caste rebel saint poet) as his guru. Chokha's 'samadhi' is located at the foot of stairs to the Vithoba temple (Pandharpur).

As per weaving of one legend and poem, one day Chokhamela stood the whole day in front of the temple and at night the priests locked up the door of the temple and went away. Then Vithoba himself came out & embraced Chokhamela and led him by hand to the innermost sanctum sanctorum. Vithoba took out his 'tulsi' garland and put it around Chokhamela's neck. So Chokhamela being pleased lay down on the sands of river Chandrabhaga. On the other hand, the priests found golden necklace of Vithoba missing. So they suspected Chokhamela who was wearing

the golden necklace while lying on the rivers sands. So he was punished by being tied with bullocks but these bullocks did not move despite being lashed. Finally, Vithoba revealed the truth. Chokhamela's poem is remarkable:

They thrash me, Vithu
now don't walk so slow.
the Pandits whip,
some crime,
don't know what:
How did Vithoba's necklace come
around your neck?
They curse and strike
and say I polluted you.
Do not send the cur at your door
away,
Giver of everything,
You,
Chakrapani,
Yours is the deed.
With folded hands,
Chokha begs
I revealed your secret, Don't turn
away.'

This poem reveals that Vithoba touches and eats with Chokhamela and gave him the garland – these favours are not done to Brahmin priests. Since then the devotee untouchables of Vithoba wear tulusi beads as a mark of respect to Chokhamela. Even today pilgrims to Pandharpur belonging to all castes recite this abhanga but he is not as popular as Namdev or Tukaram (lower caste saint poets) – probably because of his Mahar identity. But at present the dalits – Buddhists – have not given

Chokhamela a due place because his protest 'is contained in bhakti' and also because 'he accepts his karma, his birth as an untouchable due to his previous deeds' (Rohini Mokashi – Punekar).

Chokha had died along with other Mahar labourers when a part of a wall (they were repairing) collapsed on them. When Namdev went to pick up his remains, he found his bones chanting 'Vitthal'. Hence his bones were buried at the foot of the stairs of Vithoba temple – where he used to stand all day long in worship. Now all devotees have to visit Chokha's shrine first before entering the main temple. Chokha's poem relates to rural professions of labourers:

"The saviour of his devotees,
who never turns away.
hurries to help them
with their chores
he dusts and cleans
and fetches water,
the upholder of dharma;
saves from the searing
flames of nirvana.
He keeps the cows
at the milkman's house
and happily with others
breaks the pot of curd...
says Chokha, he is so tender:
his devotees know him
as a fond mother."

In many abhanga Vitthal is addressed as mother (mauli). According to A.K.Ramanujan, in bhakti poetry not only the poet is a woman before god but also god is a loving mother but, as says

Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, 'has little control over the injustices and cruelties of the patriarchal family. Divinity becomes a powerless feminine principle, thus turning the traditional hierarchy topsy – turvy'. Further, there is egalitarianism only in theory because, in practice, while going to Pandharpur different castes walk and eat together amongst their own groups. As the sociologist Irawati Karve rightly observes, the 'dindi' (group) in which she was walking sang Chokha's abhangs but observed all purity rituals of the Brahmins, not eating together with other lower caste members of the dindi. Thus one may say that this varkari movement could not yield much result, yet this quiet movement has been more flexible and durable. Actually dalit movement originated and took roots here and its oral tradition contributed to Marathi literature in a dynamic way with irony. For instance Chokhamela's following abhang is radical:

'The Vedas and the Shastras polluted;
the puranas inauspicious, impure;
the body, the soul contaminated;
the manifest
Being is the same.
Brahma polluted, Vishnu too;
Shankar is impure, inauspicious.
birth impure, dying is impure
says Chokha,
pollution stretches
without beginning
and end.'

Similarly in another abhang Chokhamela recites and questions the very conception of impurity, untouchability and thus the caste system based on it:

'Five elements compound the impure body;

all things mix,
thrive in the world.
Then who is pure and who impure?
The body is rooted in impurity.
From the beginning to the end,
endless impurities
heap themselves.
Who is it can be made pure?
Says Chokha,
I am struck with wonder.
Can there be any such
beyond pollution?'

But in the following Abhang, Chokhamela accepts the 'karma' theory of Hindu religion (destiny guided by actions in previous birth) which is rejected by present day dalit writers, intellectuals and social reformers:

'I will give you a key:
what must be, will be;
what will not, cannot.
All joy and sorrow you will see
are based in karma.
Don't fret Chokha, says God,
this is my promise:
you are the best of devotees.'

Thus about 400 Abhangas (of Chokhamela and his family – wife, sister, sister's husband, and son) have spiritual impulse first and literary creations only

later. Chokha's voice has a combination of both spiritual aspirations and physical deprivations. Since Abhangas are oral in nature, there is no final version (like Kabir's Sakhis, Sabads and Ramainis). Chokhamela's wife Soyraibai, their son Karmamela, his sister Nirmala and her husband Banka composed Abhangas. To know the importance of Chokhamela, one needs to see his impact on later generations of untouchables, especially Mahars. When B. R. Ambedkar openly favoured conversion of Mahars in 1935, Kisan Fago Bansode (1879-1946) opposed him. He named one of his newspapers 'Chokhamela' and urged protest through the following poem:

'Why do you endure curses?
Chokha went into the temple
resolutely.
You are the descendents of
Chokha.
Why do you fear to enter the
temple?
Brace yourself like a wrestler,
Come, together let us conquer
pollution.'

Though B. R. Ambedkar had a different path from Chokhamela, yet he dedicated with honour his book 'The Untouchables' to Chokhamela, Nandanar and Ravidas (Raidas). Ambedkar's dissenting view was that the untouchables had been Buddhists, forced into degradation when a Brahminical revival in fourth century CE had marginalized that religion. Chokhamela is seen throughout as a Mahar (no myth of being born as a

Brahmin as in case of Raidas). Earlier no Mahar could go beyond 'samadhi' of Chokhamela but in 1947 a Brahmin Gandhian, Sane Guruji fasted in front of the temple for dalits' entry into the temple and since then temple entry is open to all. Pandharpur pilgrimage is actually more a democratizing and humanizing tradition than a revolutionary one. We tend to agree with Eleanor Zelliot: "It is difficult to see Chokhamela as a revolutionary figure; it is easy to see him and his family as a proof of two things: first, creativity dwells at all levels; second, the idea of pollution is rejected in no uncertain terms by even the most devout of untouchables."

Chokhamela's tradition is still living and changing. He has been represented in poetry, drama, music and film by contemporary creative persons. Veer Savarkar wrote a musical play 'Sangit Ushap' (Antidote to the Curse) by utilizing the image and character of Chokhamela to project his views about socio-political reforms. Its first performance was done on 9 April 1927 but at the suggestion of the Censor Board its tragic ending was changed to happy ending. The anti-Islamic and anti-Christian sentiments were combined with the message of eradication of untouchability in this play Savarkar draws an affectionate picture of Mahar children by invoking a sense of pride as Mahar – it is more glorious to love and die as a Hindu than to convert to Christianity or Islam. The greatness of Hinduism

is expressed through the character of Chokhamela who hails Hinduism as a superior religion and provider of salvation to the downtrodden. Chokhamela explains to fellow untouchables about cleanliness, devotion and willingness to serve God. He praises Brahminism by telling his son Karmamela: 'don't make such unbecoming poisonous remarks against the Brahmin caste. A Brahmin is the third eye of knowledge of Lord Mahadev of our great Hindu Dharma.' Further one female character, a Mahar girl Kamalini hates her Mahar lover Shankar because he renounces Hinduism in favour of conversion. She claims to be a follower of Chokhamela and for her Hindu dharma she is willing to lay down her life. Finally some opportunistic Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas complain to the Muslim king that Chokhamela is corrupting Hindu dharma by trying to enter the temple. Muslim king encourages him to convert to Islam but Chokhamela confirms his loyalty to Hinduism: "Yes, I am a Hindu. I am a Mahar, a sweeper who cleans the traditional circular path around Lord Vitthal's shrine". Thus, Savarkar shows divine justice to be preferred by Chokhamela to social justice (Anil Sapkal).

In another play, 'Yugayatra' (by M. B. Chitins, an assistant of B. R. Ambedkar) in 1956, the character of Chokhamela is depicted realistically with oppression of the time. He is shown as a bonded labour of the village headman but not allowed to enter Vithoba temple though

standing on its door for long. Then he sends a message to Lord through Janabai, who is from a lower caste but not an untouchable and allowed to enter the temple: My last johar (Mahar greeting) to God. Tell him that this devoted servant remained loyal to him till the end." There Chokhamela accepts the destined karma theory by even quoting Sant Gyaneshwar. But Chokhamela is casteless representing the huge oppressed masses and he emerges to see the Lord but he is aware of casteism. He says that the life of the untouchables has become defilement embodied throughout. The play depicts the exploitation of Chokhamela at the hands of 'deshpande' and 'patil' (upper caste village officials). It also shows that he was crushed under a wall while working. Thus Chitins has realistically depicted the deep devotion of Chokhamela, on the one hand, and the hypocrisy of the upper castes towards him, on the other (Anil Sapkal).

A Marathi film 'Sant Chokhamela' was directed by D. K. Kale in 1941 showing him working dutifully as a Mahar but engrossed in devotion to Vitthal. Once his shadow falls on a Brahmin Bindu Madhav who treats this as an act of defilement, hence denies him entry into the street leading to Pandharpur temple. But he continues his prayer. Consequently Bindu Madhav's son Anant Bhatt becomes Chokhamela's follower. Chokhamela stops Mahar tradition of sacrificing a male buffalo before the deity Mariai. But Mahars regard it a blow

their pride. They along with upper castes oppose Chokhamela but Vithal helps him by appearing as a Mahar to share his meal. Thus while underlining the caste conflict, this film highlights the story of Anant Bhatt in a progressive way. In the end, the bones of Chokhamela repeat the names of Vithoba and Namdev declares that Chokha has become God incarnate. In the film the character of Chokhamela says, "What kind of a Brahmin is he if he has no mercy, no compassion." He feels the pain of Mahar caste but accepts the theory of Karma, "It is our credo, our duty to serve. The son serves his parents, the breadwinner serves his family, and the lowest of society serves the Brahmin. One community serves the other. I serve you, you serve me – This is the basis of the credo of service." (Anil Sapkal).

Another Marathi film, 'Johar Maybap' (1950) was directed by Ram Gabale and famous Marathi writer P. L. Deshande played the role of Chokhamela and Sulochana acted the role of his wife Soyraibai. Its story was written by the writer Venkatesh Madgulkar, and screenplay, dialogue and verses by writer G. D. Madgulkar. Poverty as well as affection in the family are vividly depicted. Vithoba's early appearance before Chokhamela reflects a sign of approval of his devotion. Chokhamela is shown as a bonded labour of the village headman doing all odd jobs, Though in poems Banka accepts Chokhamela as

his guru but in the film Banka introduces him to 'bhagvat dharma'. Though evils of caste system are shown in the film, yet poverty is shown as the major cause of all troubles. Instead of inhuman caste system, a liberal social situation is shown. Namdev declares to Chokhamela, "All of you are Vitthal." Chokhamela is a virtuous and moral person but is opposed by the village headman. However, the priest Anant Bhatt is close to him. The character of Bindu Madhav is absent. Rather Chokhamela is shown accompanying Anant's mother to Pandharpur. Chokhamela was engrossed in devotion when village headman drags him away to construct the boundary wall around Manglevadhe. But the wall collapses and he dies. Vithoba directs Namdev to bring his bones to be placed in 'samadhi', to be constructed in front of his temple. Here is the effective use of music and moving performances about devotion. However, casteist humiliation is missing in the film. (Anil Sapkal). Thus a comparative analysis of two plays and two films shows that Chokhamela's devotion to Vithoba is well represented but other aspects of his life and perspective were depicted with specific ideology or partial understanding of his persona.

III

Raidas, Ravidas or Rohidas (in Maharashtra) was a dalit saint-poet born in Varanasi. His caste of tanners (charmakar) was considered physically

and socially impure because in their occupation dead animals were carried outside the village and were deskinning, and finally they made leather shoes. Further because of Karma theory it was believed that people were destined by actions of the previous birth. There are six sources of Raidas, coloured by their writers' religious, social, economic and ideological views. The first source is Nabhadas' 'Bhaktamal' (garland of devotees), written at the turn of 17th century (1600 AD). There it is described that the 'banis' (verses) of Raidas were skilled in the knots (granthis) of doubt, but were not opposed to the Vedas, shastras, and the practice of good people – that is he did not rebel against Hindu order. Further, through God's grace Raidas attained the ultimate goal in this body. Finally, he showed pride in his lineage, caste and ashram – i.e. he was not ashamed of his birth. But Nabhadas' description lacks specific concrete details.

Second portrayal by Anantdas in 'Raidas Parichai' (1588 but unpublished) is full of magic and miracles to prove that Raidas was a great saint. He declares that Ravidas was a Brahmin in previous birth but he ate meat and kept an untouchable co-wife. Further, his parents in present birth were irreligious, Raidas did not suckle mother's milk for four days. Then Ramanand, directed by heavenly voice, appears and initiates his entire family, then Ravidas suckles. His parents don't share his devotion and he is deprived of his share of property.

Raidas' devotion makes him a saint despite his lowest social standing (James G. Lotchtefeld).

In third portrayal by Priyadas in 'Bhaktirasabodhini' – a commentary on 'Bhaktamal' – in 1712, shows that birth in a Charmakar caste is not the result of Raidas' previous birth's actions (karma) but because of a curse in previous birth. Then he was a Brahmin and disciple of Ramananda, and he served food to his guru by begging from some specific families. But one day due to storm he did not move out and accepted food from a merchant who did business with Charmakars. Knowing it, Ramanand cursed him to be born as a Charmakar. Thus Priyadas' account reinforces the conventional view that Charmakars are polluting and lowliest – even doing business with dalits is considered impure. Further, as per Priyadas, Raidas did not suckle his untouchable mother's milk due to her touch. Again, Raidas is saved by Ramanand who initiates Raidas alone. Since initiation is considered 'second birth', and one's guru a parent, Ramanand becomes Raidas' 'real' father – thus Raidas is born in a lowly family but does not belong to it in reality. In addition, Raidas is kicked by his father.

If we compare the accounts of Anantdas and Priyadas, the following points emerge (Lochtefeld) : first, regarding Raidas birth, Priyadas shows greater ambivalence than Anantdas – for the latter Ramanand's appearance is merely dramatic, for Priyadas it is

continuation of an established guru-disciple bond, confirming that Raidas is not a Charmakar. Second, as per Anantdas, Ramanand initiated the entire family of Raidas – availability of devotion to all - but Priyadas uses initiation for only Raidas as a way to remove the stigma of being a charmakar. Third, both writers mention that Raidas was treated badly by his family, Anantdas' account reflects their individual shortcomings but Priyadas tries to establish that Raidas never really belonged to them. Fourth, both writers show him as a saint. Both writers show that Raidas did not suckle for four days, but Priyadas adds that Raidas regretted his error and refused to suckle until initiated by Ramanand – hence Raidas was not an ordinary child. Fifth, both writers describe tales in which Raidas displays superhuman powers. e.g. Raidas goes to his disciple Jhali, queen of Chittore but Brahmins refuse to take food with Raidas who goes in a corner but all Brahmins see the figure of Raidas in between them and later Raidas peels his skin to reveal a golden sacred thread! This established his devotion, sacredness and Brahminhood. Sixth, both writers show him to worship with an image (Anantdas explicitly describes him a 'saguna' devotee) but Raidas actually worshipped (and also in poems) 'nirguna' (formless) God. Eighth, Anantdas shows the tension between dharma and bhakti, between a hierarchical social system and essentially egalitarian religious practice.

He tries to subvert the social system completely but Priyadas tries to rehabilitate Raidas as an individual, leaving the social system intact. Though both accounts are hagiographic but while Priyadas' ambivalence is about Raidas being both a saint and Charmakar, Anantdas focuses on devotion.

Fourth portrayal of Raidas by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu in his 'Sant Pravar Raidas Sahib (1956) is deliberately "A Discriminating Biography: Written from a Buddhist point of view' (as subtitle says). According to its author, Raidas was a Buddhist, drawn into the Hindu tradition later. He mentions B.R. Ambedkar as an example of the fact that great spiritual leaders can come from any community. He appeals all to accept Buddhism and abdicate Hinduism as 'Urine and faeces'. In 1956 Ambedkar had converted to Buddhism. Rejecting Priyadas' account that Raidas was Brahmin in previous birth, criticizing birth due to curse, not suckling for four days and surviving, he emphasizes that Raidas was a Charmakar and never claimed to be anything else. Brahmins cannot accept that low caste people can know God by themselves. He gives an account of Raidas' birth: Oneday Raidas' father was passing through the deer park at Sarnath where Buddha preached first. An ascetic there was very fond of 'Khir' (pudding), so Ravidas' parents supplied it, so the ascetic promised them a son. Jigyasu claims that an old sadhu at Varanasi had told him this – but this

is equally irrational & unscientific. Second, criticizing Priyadas he further says that Raidas never mentioned in his poems that he was a disciple of Ramanand. Third, disagreeing with Nabhadass, he argues that Raidas' poetry was distant from Hindu tradition. But, surprisingly, he uses many mystical stories and miracles from Bhaktamal to buttress his point that Raidas was a great saint though in his book Jigyasu keeps one chapter 'Buddhists are not convinced by miracles!' To him, miracles were harsh tests of his devotion. This contradiction is duly pointed out by James G. Lochtefeld, "On the one hand Jigyasu shows the rationality and rejection of the miraculous characterizing in both early Buddhism and twentieth century scientific thought. But, on the other hand, he also fixes a full account of these miracles, as if these could provide further proof of Ravidas' sanctity. It seems as if Jigyasu wants to simultaneously deny and affirm these miracles."

Fifth portrayal of Raidas is in Amar Chitrakatha (1988). There it is mentioned that real problem is not poverty but lower status associated with tanning. Raidas' teacher Sandan Swami tells him that distinction between pure and impure occupations are the product of ignorant persons. Later Raidas tells his followers: "Do not be ashamed of yourself. Do not be afraid of your caste. Do your work with dignity and bow before no one but God". This book shows that parents of Raidas were taking bath in

Ganga and came daily for a 'holy dip'. They pray to the sun God for son. As per teaching of Sandan Swami he breaks his mental block – stops thinking himself as a Charmakar and then destroys the distinction between 'self' and 'other'. He sees God everywhere and says that seeing God only in an image puts the image between one self and God. To name is to limit and particularize but God transcends human conceptual capacities. Hence, Raidas says, he refers to God solely as 'Name'. Later, in the story, Mirabai visits Raidas and says that she cannot bear to be separated from Lord Krishna. In response, Raidas says that since she is already with God, how could there be any separation? Mira, finally, sets the image down, feeling liberated from slavery to a statue. Further the conflict between Raidas and his parents arise due to his compassion for the poor for whom he steals shoes and money from his parents.

Sixth portrayal of Ravidas comes from his 39 poems included in Adi Granth (1604) and 8 poems in Fatehpur Manuscript (1582). These poems are benchmarks defining the real Raidas. These poems, however, depict his religious concerns, mentioning little about his personal life. In one poem the image of absolute identity with God is depicted:

'What is the difference
Between you and me
Me and you?
Like the gold and the bracelet

Water and waves.'

In another poem the identification is less direct, phrased in terms of associated things:

'If you are the mountain,
I am the peacock;
If you are the moon,
I am the Chakora bird.'

Third poem shows a humble man with little faith in his capacities; his only hope lies in surrender to God:

'Tanner Ravidas says:
My birth is low
My people are low
My caste is also low
Raja Ramachandra
I have come to you for refuge!'

However, in one poem, he talks of 'begampur' (the sorrowless city) where there is no anxiety, no jealousy, no taxes or trade; there is 'no second or third' (social hierarchy) – all are equal. People live there comfortably – this is a utopian version indicating what his society was wanting. However, he seems less interested in changing the society than in transcending it altogether. In one poem, he compares himself to a fish that never forgets her home, even after her body has been cut up for cooking, every piece still longs for water. This conveys a sense of alienation and displacement. Though he does not mention his guru's name, Raidas recognizes his significance: through guru's grace one attains God and does not go to hell; through true guru

(sadguru) one can know the saints; he exhorts people to follow guru's path. Often 'sadguru' is another way of referring to the Divine. He does not favour rituals:

'One cleans the outside body with water, but inside there are various faults. How can one become pure, this is like the elephant's bath.'

In another poem he tells that a man of good family performing rituals without devotion is no better than an untouchable. Though he does not reject Vedas and shastras, (as Jigyasu thought) in one poem he says: 'O Lord, the Vedas call you the Inner Knower, but they do not know your glory' – thus he is not totally unopposed to Vedas (as Nabhadass asserted). Thus he has some kind of ambivalence regarding Vedas.

Thus against these six portrayals, his poems express the authenticity. As his one poem says about devotion as the ultimate decider:

'In whatever family a good vaishnav is found,
Whether they be high caste or outcaste, lord or pauper,
the world will know the one by his flawless fragrance.
Whether one's heart is Brahmin or Vaishya,
Shudra or Kshatriya
Dom, Chandal, or Mlechcha
through the worship of the Lord,
one becomes pure and

liberates the self and both family lines.'

In another poem he questions the very conception of impurity:

'The baby calf makes the cow's udder unclean,
the bee spoils the flower and the fish, the sea.

Oh mother! What can I bring to offer in worship to Govind.

There is no perfect flower to be found!

The snake has spoiled the sandalwood tree;

the poison and the nectar are one.

Incense, lamps, offerings of food, fragrances:

How can I, your servant, offer these?

I would offer my body, my mind;
through the grace of guru I will find the one without stain.

I cannot worship you and offer rituals,

So, Ravidas says: What is to be my end?

He declares his tanner caste but tells that devotion to God has brought upper castes to bow down to him:

Oh people of the city!

My notorious caste is Chamar!

In my heart is the essence of

all good qualities, Ram – Govinda

...

My caste is Kutabdhala. I carry cattle hides

All around Benares always.

Now the Brahmins and leaders bow down before me.

Ravidas, your servant, has taken the refuge of your name.

In another poem he calls himself 'the servant of servants'. It is noteworthy that Sikh's Guru Granth Sahib consists of forty one poems of Raidas – here 'a dalit forms part of the spirituality of a major religion,' says Chandrabhan Prasad, a dalit scholar who quotes Engels: "Every struggle against feudalism at the time had to take on a religious disguise," and Ravidas did that centuries back. Actually, Raidas has got a large number of followers called 'Raidasis' or Ravidasis.' Raidasi Sikh migrants in US and Europe have built temples and gurudwaras in his name and celebrate continuously by organizing seminars, discourses and festivals. His followers made first Raidas temple in Varanasi. But like Kabirpanthis, Raidasis, too, have indulged in rituals (instead of devotion) and different sub-sects, groups or individuals indulge in fighting for the capture and control of the seat of power there.

From above analysis, the following critical points emerge about dalit saint – poets in different parts of India during Bhakti movement:

First, the voices of dalit saint-poets are the first authentic voices of the untouchable communities.

Second, these saint-poets opened their following to all humans, irrespective of barriers like caste and creed, language and residence. A sense of companionship and brotherhood exists in their poems.

Third, all saint-poets praise and worship God as 'saguna' (with qualities) or 'nirguna' (the formless) and see in them the saviours of the oppression, untouchability and helplessness.

Fourth, all dalit saint-poets are conscious of their lowest caste position in a hierarchical social system. They dislike and humbly protest against the caste, impurity and pollution but they did not rebel against the existing stratified social systems as such. They often see individual liberation through devotion to God, but not radical collective liberation from the socio-economic, political and religious inequalities. Contemporary dalit writers criticize them for being liberal and not questioning the caste system itself.

Fifth, they are proximately associated with various myths, legends and anecdotal tales reflecting unrealistic magic and miracles to establish their authority of great sainthood. Contemporary dalit writers usually question the Hindu religion and social order on the ground that it has various miracles which are not rational and scientific in everyday

life but they deliberately ignore similar magic and miracles associated with dalit saint-poets.

Sixth, these dalit saint-poets often developed new sects like Ravidasis (like Kabirpanthis and Dadupanthis), or annual Pandharpur pilgrimage or new temples (Raidas temple in Varanasi, Punjab, US etc.) or 'samadhis' at the foot of the stairs of ancient temples (Chokhamela) – reflecting some kind of latent and partial inclusion in the Hindu social-religious order.

Seventh, these dalit saint-poets used vernacular languages of the masses for mass appeal through their poems, songs and hymns. This process of democratization of regional literature is noteworthy since medieval period in different parts of India. Their personal self-experiences with caste-linked occupations popularized new terms, idioms, tools & techniques of depiction, and metaphors from grassroots reality.

Finally, a new trend of establishing personal bonds with the divine power without any mediators (like priests) opened new vistas of word and deed. What feminists adopted in the second half of twentieth century for ventilation of their grievances under the idiom of 'personal is political', was expressed many centuries back by dalit saint poets, though in a latent form that may be accurately called 'personal is social' because liberation from the caste prejudices could be achieved through

devotion to God and the so-called upper castes also became their followers and disciples in due course of time.

Thus, the poems and songs as well as the religious discourses of dalit saint-poets did bring functional and

incremental (not fundamental) changes in socio-religious and cultural order of Hindu society in India during Bhakti movement period (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) in more than one ways.

Subhash Sharma, born 1959, educated in J.N.U., author of ten books including books in English 'why people protest, dialectics of agrarian development.' His main interests include culture, environment, education and development. He works in Ministry of Defence and lives in New Delhi.

SOME GREAT INDIAN LITERARY THEORISTS

Ravi Nandan Sinha

Indian poetics is at least as old as Greek and Latin literary theory, and no less rich. From Acharya Bharat to Pandit Raj Jagannath (a contemporary of Mughal emperor Shahjahan) there was an almost unbroken tradition of literary criticism and theory in India.

Among the greatest Indian theorists Acharya Bharat is regarded as the earliest. His *Natyashastra* has influenced all later writers who have either re-stated Bharat's theory of literature or have commented on it. It is not possible to determine definitively the age in which he lived. All scholars, however, accept that Bharat must have lived before Christ. It is certain that he lived before Kalidasa, who has referred to him in his play *Vikramorvashiyam*. Professor Keith believes that Bharat did not belong to an age earlier than the 3rd century B.C. Harprasad Shastri, on the other hand, believes that he lived in the 2nd century B.C. He must have lived between these two centuries. Some scholars think that the *Natyashastra* was not written by one person but must have evolved over centuries.

There are thirty six chapters in the *Natyashastra*, though Abhinavgupta thinks that there are thirty-seven chapters in it. Abhinavgupta has commented on the thirty seventh chapter. Some parts of the *Natyashastra* are in verse, others are in prose. The book deals with various fine arts, but its main focus is on poetic drama. Bharat is supposed to be the originator of the *Rasa* theory in Sanskrit poetics, which simply stated, is an analysis of the process in which literature is experienced imaginatively. It deals with the origin of drama, the stage, music and musical instruments, acting, dancing and the theory of *Rasa*. Bharatnatyam, the famous

Indian classical dance form draws most of its theory and grammar from this book. Later scholars wrote commentaries on the *Natyashastra*. In the 7th century, Sri Harsha (606-647), the last Hindu emperor of north India and a dramatist of no mean ability, wrote a commentary on it. The finest commentary on the *Natyashastra*, however, is *Abhinavbharati* written by Abhinavagupta, who lived between the 10th and 11th centuries in Kashmir. The *Natyashastra* is the original source book for Indian poetics.

Bhamah occupies an important place among the earliest Sanskrit theorists. Not much is known about his life. He possibly belonged to Kashmir and lived in the 6th century A.D. Some people believe that Bhamah was a Buddhist, but since he has criticised the Buddhist theory of *apoha*, it is difficult to believe that he was a Buddhist.

His *Kavyalankara* is said to be the first independent and fully organized book on Sanskrit poetics. It has six chapters and 400 verses. Bhamah discusses the purpose, nature and types of poetry, the three qualities- *madhurya* (sweetness), *prasad* (tenderness) and *oj* (energy) – of poetry. He gives a detailed account of various *alankaras* (poetic devices) and also describes the defects in poetry. It can be said that no other poetics in the world discusses the features of bad poetry in such great detail as Indian poetics does. Bhamah's greatest contribution is that he was the first to

consider the combination of word and its meaning as poetry (*shabdartho sahita kavyam*).

Dandin, another great commentator on literature, lived in the early part of the 7th century. Maxmueller, Weber and McDonald believe that he lived in the sixth century, but a majority of scholars today accept the view that he belonged to the 7th century. He was a member of the court of the Pallava king Singhvishnu in South India. Three of his works *Kavyadarsh*, *Dushkumarcharit* and *Avantisundari Katha* are known. *Dushkumarcharit*, as the name indicates is the story of ten princes. *Avantisundari Katha* is in prose. *Kavyadarsh* is one of the most important Sanskrit texts on poetics. It has been translated into many languages including Tibetan. Dandin discusses the nature and kinds of poetry, *riti*, *alankara*, and various defects in poetry. Dandin was not only a theoretician but also a very good poet. He is famous for his beautiful phrases (*Dandinah padalalityam*).

Udbhat (his full name is Bhattodbhat) of the 8th century may be considered to be one of the founders of the *Alankara* school of Sanskrit poetics. He was a native of Kashmir and was the chief scholar in the court of Jayapida, the king of Kashmir. In his *Rajtaringini* Kalhana mentions one Bhattodbhat who was the chief scholar in the court of king Jayapida and who was given a salary of one lakh dinar a day. *Kavyalankarasangraha*, *Bhamahvivarana*

and *Kumarsambhav* are the only texts of Udbhat available today. *Kumarsambhav* is a short poetic work based on Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhav*. *Bhamahvivarana* is a commentary on Bhamah's *Kavyalankara* and *Kavyalankarasangraha* is an exposition of various kinds of *alankaras* (embellishments of poetry or figures of speech). He has discussed forty one kinds of *alankaras* taking most of his examples from his own *Kumarsambhav*.

Vaman, who is said to be the founder theorist of the *Riti* school of Indian poetics was also a minister in the court of Jayapida. His only work is *Kavyalankara*. He has described *riti* as the soul of poetry. (*ritiratma kavyasya*). He says that the word (*shabda*) and its meaning (*artha*) constitute the body of poetry of which *riti* is the soul. By *riti* he means a particular arrangement of words (*vishishtapadarachna*). These arrangements in turn depend on certain definite *gunas* or excellences of composition. *Riti* connotes something more than the English word 'style' in which there is always an element of subjectivity. *Riti*, on the other hand, suggests a proper agreement between sound and sense that is based on clearly defined *gunas*.

Anandvardhan lived in the 9th century and was the chief scholar in the court of Avantivarma, the king of Kashmir. He is one of the most important theoreticians associated with the *Dhwani* school of Sanskrit poetics. Anandvardhan

has authored a number of books on grammar, philosophy and poetics of which the best known is *Dhwanayloka*. *Dhwani* is an extremely old principle in Indian poetics. Even before Anandvardhan, this principle had been discussed by scholars. Abhinavgupta says that this principle of *dhwani* was not propounded by any single scholar. Anandvardhan also says that great poets like Vyas, Valmiki and Kalidasa were aware of this principle. He says that *dhwani* can be seen in Bharat's *Natyashastra* also. In the *Natyashastra* *rasa* has been accepted as the primary element in poetry. *Dhwani* seems to be an elaboration of *rasa*. Anandvardhan has therefore accepted *rasadhvani* as the soul of poetry. In the *Agnipurana* also *dhwani* has been mentioned, but not as a principle but as a figure of speech (i.e. *alankara*).

Defining *dhwani*, Anandvardhan has written in his *Dhwanyalok*, "Where the *vachak* (literal expression) and *vachya* (its literal meaning) make themselves and their meaning secondary and express their symbolic meaning, scholars call that *dhwani*." Poetry in which *dhwani* predominates is called *dhwani-kavya* by Anandvardhan. He considers *dhwani* to be the fundamental quality of poetry. He divides poetry into three kinds: *vastudhwani*, *alankardhwani* and *rasadhvani*. The first two may sometimes give a literal meaning but *rasadhvani* always has a symbolic or suggested meaning. The suggested meaning does

not depend on the individual meanings of the constituent parts of poetry. It is much more than that and constitutes what is known as poetic beauty. Abhinavagupta says that some scholars consider the experience of beauty to be the soul of poetry. He accepts that definition because according to him there is no difference between the experience of beauty and *dhwani*.

Anandvardhan says that poetry can have many forms but it has the same basic quality, and that is its power of suggesting a symbolic meaning. He illustrates his point with the help of an example. When a woman tells a wandering ascetic, "The dog which barked at you has been killed by the angry lion living in the forest of the Godavari"; it has both a literal and a suggested meaning. The suggested meaning is just the opposite of the literal meaning. The literal meaning is that since the dog that barked at you has been killed, you can come here without fear. The suggested meaning (*dhwani*) is that now though the dog has been killed by the lion, it is more dangerous for you to come here as you too can be killed by the lion, so you should not visit this place. She says this so that the ascetic will not come there and disturb her when she meets her lover in the forest of the Godavari.

Acharya Kuntaka has propounded the principle of *vakrokti*. He is the author of *Vakroktijivita*. Like most other Indian scholars of Sanskrit poetics, he too

belonged to Kashmir. He has cited from the works of Anandvardhan and Rajshekhar which proves that he must have belonged to a period after them, that is, the late tenth century and the early 11th century. He saw *dhwani* as a part of *vakrokti*.

Kuntaka called *vakrokti* the soul of poetry (*vakroktih kavya jivitam*). The word *vakrokti* was first used by Bhamah in the 6th century. Bhamah considers *vakrokti* to be a synonym for hyperbole or exaggeration and considers it the primary feature of poetry. He believes that *alankara*, that is the element of embellishment in poetry is not possible without *vakrokti*. According to Bhamah, poetry without *vakrokti* is not poetry but mere statement.

Acharya Dandin divided poetry into two parts: *swabhavokti* and *vakrokti*. *Swabhavokti alankar* for him is a plain statement. An expression that is different from *swabhavokti* and is hyperbolic is *vakrokti*. He however does not accept that all eccentric or *vichitra* writing can claim to be poetry. It should be *tadvid ahlad kari* (that is, capable of giving pleasure to the *sahridaya*, that is, the connoisseur). According to him all *alankaras* (figures of speech) are secondary to *vakrokti*. Vaman considers *vakrokti* to be just one of the many *alankaras*. Anandvardhan also equated *vakrokti* with hyperbole. According to him all *alankaras* basically tend towards *vakrokti*.

The description of *vakrokti* by

Kuntaka is different from all other scholars before him. He does not consider *vakrokti* to be an *alankara* but the very soul of poetry. He established a new school of *vakrokti*. He says that when a thing or condition is expressed indirectly it is called *vakrokti*. It is the idea of *vaichitrya* that creates extraordinary charm in poetry. He calls it *vichitra abhidha* (a striking denotation). The common man expresses something in an ordinary manner but a poet says the same thing in a manner that results in poetry. The quality of poetry depends on the skill of the poet. Elsewhere too in Sanskrit poetics the poet's skill is equated with the power of his imagination. It is because of the skill of the poet that his expression acquires a miraculous property or a special kind of charm. Thus, in his view *vakrokti* is different from ordinary language.

Kuntaka has given a greater importance to *vakrokti* than *rasa*, *dhwani* and *auchitya* (roughly translated as the quality of being right). He believed that *vakrokti* includes in itself all the other three. He has identified six kinds of *vakrokti*:

- i. *Varna vinyas vakrata (vakrokti* in the arrangement of letters). It includes alliteration and consonance.
- ii. *Padapurvardha vakrata (vakrokti* in the substantive of the phrase). It includes the striking uses of synonym, *rudhi*

(conventional words), identification based on resemblances, attributive words, covert expressions, adjectives, affixes, *bhava* (roots of words), gender and verb.

- iii. *Padottarardh vakrata (vakrokti* in the terminal part of a word) Under this come the peculiar uses of *kala* (tense), *karaka* (case), *sankhya* (number), *purusha* (person), *upagraha* (voice) and particles.
- iv. *Vakya vakrata (vakrokti* in syntax). Kuntaka says that a skilled poet can arrange words in a sentence in innumerable ways.
- v. *Prakaran vakrata (vakrokti* in the presentation of a particular topic).
- vi. *Prabandh vakrata (vakrokti* in the organization of the parts of poetry into a whole). He says that *vakrokti* can have many other types also but he has indicated only the six main types.

Abhinavagupta lived in the 10th century in Kashmir. He was a great exponent of the *Shaiva* philosophy. He has written authoritative commentaries on the *Natyashastra* and *Dhwanyaloka*.

Another great scholar from Kashmir was Mammat who lived in the second half of the 11th century. We do not know much about his life except that he had studied in Kashi and that he was a *Shaiva*. His most famous work

is *Kavyaprakasha* (written between 1050 and 1100 A.D.). He was interested not only in literature but also in grammar as he has quoted Panini's *Mahabhashya* in a number of places. *Kavyaprakasha* is a kind of compendium of all the earlier ideas in Indian poetics and yet, all along, the entirely original voice of Mammata can be heard.

One of the remarkable things about Indian poetry is that it discusses in detail the defects in poetry. Mammata's *Kavyaprakash* gives a detailed account of what constitutes bad poetry. His advice is timeless, from which poets writing today can learn a great deal. He says that when the primary meaning of a poem is not expressed properly, it is a fault. He also says that in poetry *rasa* (emotion) is the primary meaning and so when it is not expressed properly, it is a fault. He says, "That which diminishes the primary meaning is known as fault in poetry." In poetry *rasa* (generation of emotion, feeling etc.) constitutes the primary meaning. The literal meaning given by words too is influenced by the *rasa* and so that too is part of the primary meaning. Both *rasa* and the literal meaning are caused by words and phrases, therefore they also may have this fault. Mammata's view is that any element of poetry that diminishes the *rasa nishpatti* (creation of emotion in the reader) is a fault in it. Mammata considers three kinds of major faults in poetry: (a) faults relating to *rasa* (b) faults relating to meaning and

(c) faults relating to words. These three kinds of faults are interrelated.

Probably it was Vamana who was the first theorist to discuss the faults of poetry. He said that the nature of faults is the opposite of qualities. Acharya Anandvardhana has not discussed the faults of poetry separately, but in his discussion of *dhvani*, he has mentioned them.

Mammata begins by discussing the faults in the use of words. According to him the following kinds of words are faulty:

- i Those words that are not pleasant to the ear are faulty. A word that does not go with the music of the other words in the composition are called *shrutikatu* (that is, sounding unpleasant).
- ii Words not used according to the rules of grammar.
- iii Words which have become obsolete must not be used in poetry.
- iv *Asamartha* are those words incapable of conveying the intended meaning. They are words that are grammatically correct but cannot be understood without help from some other source.
- v A word may have a well-known and a little known meaning. If a poet uses a word in its less

known sense, it will be seen as a fault. Mammāt gives an example to illustrate this. If the colour of the lips of a woman is indicated with the word *shonit*, the common meaning of which is blood and not red, it will be seen as a fault. When a reader reads such a line he thinks first of blood, which is not the intended meaning of the poet.

- vi Those words are faulty which have an improper meaning. It means that the word gives a meaning which instead of praising someone ends up insulting him, despite the poet wanting to praise him.
- vii Use of meaningless words is a fault in poetry. It means words (such as 'and', 'also') that have been used just to complete the metre and which do not add anything to the meaning of the line.
- viii Those words that are obscene are faulty. Words that create a feeling of embarrassment or disgust may be called obscene words.
- ix Words that give an uncertain meaning are seen as a fault.
- x *Apratit* is a word that has a technical meaning in a particular subject and does not have a meaning that everyone can understand. He gives the example

of the use of the word *ashaya* as a synonym for *vasana* or *samskara*. *Ashaya* is used in this sense only in the *Yogashastra* and not elsewhere.

- xi Words that are crude and are used by uneducated people only must be avoided.
- xii Difficult words that do not convey their meaning immediately must be avoided.

Mammāt says that similar faults can be seen in the use of phrases and sentences also.

Many other scholars like Rudrat (9th century), Rajshekhar (10th century), Mukulbhatta (10th century), Bhattanayak (10th century), Dhananjaya (10th century), Mahimbhatta (11th century) and Kshemendra (11th century) made important contributions to the development of Indian poetics. The last major literary theorist was certainly Panditraj Jagganath, who is mentioned with great respect by all the later writers on the subject. He was a South Indian Brahmin who spent many years in Delhi in the court of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan, who honoured him with the title of Panditraj (the king among scholars). He has written a number of books two of which—*Rasagangadhar* and *Chitramimansa*—are on poetics. He also wrote a book called *Jagdabharan* on Darashikoh, the eldest son of Shahjahan. There is great originality in his literary theory and his style is mature. He

considers talent to be the only cause of poetry, while Mammatt considers talent as well as skill born of practice, observation and experience to be the causes of poetry.

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 (Autonomous), Ranchi.

THE BAMBOO

Kashinath Singh

Translated by
Minu Manjari

Stories are to tell and to listen — be they of present or of past. And they are of many types. There are some we don't hear even while listening. Some take entry from one ear and get straight out of the other. Some come, stay for a while and leave. But some reside in our hearts and minds, forever.

Such is this story. Very old— thousands of years old — of the time when Buddha! also called Shashta and Tathagata, was sojourning in Jaitvana near Shravasti.

A person had gone somewhere for some work and was now returning home. Perhaps after a considerable time. The forest was dense and the season was rainy. The month of Saavan-Bhadon. Lightning and thunder in the dense, bushed, dangerous, forest. He had to reach home before dark. Walking fast, he felt someone following him. He looked, back. A fierce man-eater was following him. Hungry and ready to jump.

The man ran with all his might. The lion also bounded. But behold the tricks of nature! He reached a place where in front there was a river. And the river not calmly flowing but frisking madly. Not meandering, but plucking trees, crushing stones. Uncivilized mountain river, ready to crush anything. The current so fierce that even an elephant would be swallowed.

The lion behind, in front the bouncing river. Both sides death with its mouth gaping. If he stopped to think, he'd die. He jumped. If one has to die, why think!

When he became conscious again, he was on the other side of the river. Exhausted but alive. He did not remember how he got the bamboo that saved his life. Even now his hands clutched it. He got up. This is not just a bamboo, this is my god', he thought. 'It has saved my life. I must have drowned without it. Even my dead body wouldn't be found'.

His eyes filled with tears of gratitude. He pulled the heavy bamboo out of water and joined his hands in devotion.

He decided that he will take this 'god', his 'god' , to his house and worship it.

The green bamboo had become even more heavy soaked in water. It was hard to turn it. But the man carried it on his head and went on;

The way was uncouth. Black clouds descended and the jungle was dark before night. The burden was heavy. His legs faltered. He breathed heavily, but never for a moment he left the bamboo.

Tathagata was coming that way and he saw the plight of this man. 'Are you alright, Arya!' Tathagata asked. The man stopped. He straightened his neck with difficulty and saw — a hermit in 'cheever', shaved head, calm and peaceful face.

'you did not answer, Arya! Either you are worried or angry!'

'Bhante, I am neither worried, nor angry. Forgive me for not answering you. I am tired with this heavy load, so I can't speak.' The man spoke with

difficulty.

'Where are you going Arya?

'Pattangram!'

'Is it near?'

'No, Bhante! Its quite far. On the other side of the jungle.'

Tathagata looked at the vast forest and the bent man. He pondered.

'Arya, are bamboos not found in Pattangram?'

'Bhante, Pattangram is situated amidst bamboo woods.'

'If this any special variety then?'

'No, it's easily found.'

Tathagata was silent. After a pause he spoke — 'Arya, you are so tired; sweating, hungry. Pattangram is far away. You can't even stand up, then why are you carrying this bamboo?'

'Bhante, what you call bamboo is my god'.

'Tell me in detail'.

The man recounted the story and said in the end — 'Bhante, this bamboo has saved my life, it helped me.'

'But Arya, now it is killing you.'

'But I am alive by its help only.'

'Arya, it's work is over now. Now, it's just a burden. Meaningless.'

The man shook his head and looked at the bamboo with tender gratitude.

'Arya , use your reason, put away this bamboo and go home.' Tathagata

told him before going.

‘Don’t ask me to become ungrateful Bhante,’ said the man.

‘Life is most important, Arya. I am with life.’

The man kept looking at Tathagata who was vanishing in the dark.

So this is the story — read or heard years ago. I don’t remember what the man did after all. But I keep imagining him — standing still with the burden on his head, exhausted, moving this way and that. He has to go miles, but what to do with the bamboo?

Kashinath Singh, born 1937, is a prominent author whose short stories, novels and memoirs have stirred the literary scene in Hindi. The present short story is a laghu katha that reads like a fable. Recipient of Katha Samman, Sharad Joshi Samman and Sahitya Bhushan Samman. He was professor and head of Hindi department in B.H.U. He lives in Varanasi.

Minu Manjari, works in an office of the Ministry of Defence. She translates in many languages. She is also doing her D. Phil. in English from Patna University. She lives in Patna.

THE BRATS

Manisha Kulshreshtha

Translated by
Eishita Siddhartha

These three youths had boarded the Pink City train early in the morning at 6'o clock after me. It seemed as if the dormant breath of this last, deserted coach of the train had suddenly started to move...talking loudly, interacting, carrying their luggage. Though imitating the foreign tourists, these tourists were clearly looking like natives. In their conversation, words like fuckin... fuckoff... fuckall abounded. All this was very annoying to me.

As they came, they dashed down their entire luggage with a bang on the front seat. A kind of liberal, middle class but a modern sort of callousness was visible in their conversation, be it their way of talking, manner of throwing the luggage, walking style or the hair, the slippers, the shoes without the socks or the faded jeans. In their eyes whatever they were doing was the fashion, was modernity. This modernity was sometimes concealing their middle class poverty and sometimes exposing it.

The pink city leaves from the Sarai Rohila station of Delhi exactly at 6'o clock and reaches Jaipur at 3 in the afternoon, so my son seated me in the train at 5:30 in the morning, settled my luggage, gave me a cup of espresso coffee from the front stall and left.

Already seated...moreover a settled, free, Indian passenger, on top of that a woman passenger... and that too a creative passenger like me, tries to investigate about the state of environment

according to the appearance— face, the way of talking, the kind of names of every newly boarding passenger, believe me I was also doing something similar to that. A sort of weird hobby isn't it... the excessive liking of an Indian to interfere in others' matters.

The three were definitely the residents of Goa. I didn't take the decision by merely looking at their faces...because it was written in the front of the shirt that the girl was wearing, 'My Goa, Heaven on Earth.' A big silver cross in black thread was hanging by her neck. Not only this, they were sometimes talking in English and at times in Konkani language. All the three boarded with their guitar, camera, walkman, three old bags, lots of chips and cold drink bottles and some magazines... and now all three of them were settled in the seat exactly in front of me in a disorganised manner. The girl was there, the rest of the two were boys. One younger, the other older. The three of them were bending over a tourist map of north-India and were making some programmes... in Konkani. Their camera was lying callously in the corner of the seat, I whimpered in the heart, it seems as if they don't have any idea regarding the north-India... specially the pickpockets and the petty thieves of Delhi or they have never heard of it. I thought I should warn them... but their indifferent look on me had offended me and so I thought, 'Ah! What do I have to do with it'.

They all settled in their respective places after seeing the map. The bags were thrown callously in their upper berth. The older boy kept the guitar in his lap, as if it was a pet. The younger put the walkman in his ear, the girl kept the eatables in the bag near to her.

The girl though dark complexioned was attractive, of average stature, slim and cute. Her hair was disorderly... She had coloured some of her otherwise curly black hair in dark red and golden hue. It seemed it was an effort to conceal the white hair by applying henna at home. I remembered Mrs. Batra of my college; she also looked like her after applying henna on her greying hair, but this is today's fashion, uncouth fashion! The adult woman inside me clenched.

Among the boys, the younger one by his face seemed to be her brother, (yes... the structure of his nose and lips were exactly like the girl... the girl was dark complexioned but charming and he! Absolutely black) that... the one who has the ear plug in his ear and is humming while shaking his leg. Sometimes he used to sing a bit louder completely ignorant of his environment... the girl then struck him with her elbow.

The hand of the elder boy was slowly caressing the strings of the guitar, he was humming some English song and looking at the girl sweetly, and the girl smiled and started looking outside the

window. The station started bursting with activity. The window near which the girl was sitting... some road side Romeos started wandering there. They said in Hindi some purely roadside filthy sentences that the girl was unable to comprehend but as a girl she understood by her sixth sense that something has been said regarding her clothes.

She was wearing a small, backless top which was showing her navel. She was wearing a silver belly -ring. The elder boy instantly understood her hesitation and there was a light shadow of frenzy on his face. He gave her a shirt with long sleeves from the back. And then he made the younger boy sit by the window. He made the girl sit in between and placed his arm on her shoulders and sat very close to her. The girl was wearing the shirt carelessly given by him, but unbuttoned.

The train had whistled now. Those who had to board the train... had boarded and had started locating their seats. It was a second class coach. And a middle aged man had seated himself next to me... and his wife also. The younger boy was exactly in front of me now... he was wearing a green bermuda and a flowery shirt. The hair in front were bleached so much that they had turn golden. The younger boy had increased the volume of his walkman as the train started. It was so much that even I could listen to it. So much noise and in between the voice of some pop singer.

After a minute when the noise got unbearable I bent towards him and asked, 'Isn't it Madonna!' I thought he would understand the sarcasm in the sentence and will lower the volume.

'Huh...' he said.

The girl nodded her head, made a face and said, 'She is not for our generation... he likes Shakira and Britney'.

I was not able to read anything from the set of books that I had brought with me. I kept listening to that deafening music for fifteen minutes. The middle aged man understood my problem. He patted on the knee of the younger boy. He took off the earphones and started looking at him in an irritated manner. The music coming out of the earphone was confronting the galloping sound of the train with full force.

Forever... forever... tan tan tan

Toun... chak chak chuk chuk...da to.

"Agar tum itana tez music sunoge tumhare kaan kharab ho jayenge", the middle aged man said politely and quietly.

The boy nodded his head, indicating that firstly he can't hear anything and secondly he cannot understand Hindi.

He said in English in a relatively louder voice that "if you listen to loud music your hearing will be damaged."

"What?", he asked in a loud voice and switched off the walkman.

"He is saying... you are going to ruin your hearing, if you will continue playing

music so loudly". I shouted loudly in the silence.

Suddenly all three of them started laughing loudly. The younger boy controlling his laughter said in a sort of fragmented Goan Hindi "accha! Shukriya!" And he hung the earphones around his neck and kept his walkman in the long hanging pocket of his Bermuda, because of which it hung even further.

I got up embarrassed and taking my hand towel started preparing for going to the bathroom. As I turned I heard the voice "...what fuckin concern these oldies have!" this was the girl's voice.

"Shut up Liza. She is right" this serious voice was of the older boy.

When I came back from the bathroom the older boy was looking at the centre spread of Debonair. The girl was also bending with him... time and again she was pulling his hair or giving a punch to the elder boy on his back for the comments made by him in a low voice. That middle aged man and his wife were now addressing me with sympathy. Through mutual acquaintance it came to be known that he is a doctor. His wife is a teacher.

"This is the condition of our young generation". Doctor sahib was saying.

"Day by day they are getting discourteous. No values are left". His wife said staring at the threesome who were engaged in themselves. The younger

boy hesitated and in reaction pulled his bermuda which was at his thighs-downwards and started looking outside the window.

"It is our mistake also...where do we have the time to teach them the lessons of values". I said taking a cold breath.

"Looking at them they seem to be middle class... but look at the fashion and manner of living. These Christians are like that only. You just see, how shamelessly they are seeing those filthy books, they have no respect for elders". The doctor's wife whispered.

"It's not about just one caste, our young generation is completely like this. It is the effect of the western culture and the rest has been completed by the T.V. channels. They have so much of freedom, did we have that?" the doctor said.

"Yes, every generation has its merits and demerits".

"Yes, but this generation...they have no maturity whatsoever. Look at them... just useless passion. They have no talent, no brain, no courage to do something, or to become something. In terms of social values-a zero. As she showed a zero by joining her thumb with her index finger the young trio started looking at her with surprise. Actually they all believe in enjoyment... enjoy what you are getting now... earn money anyhow and spend it... just spend it. Let the

rest of the world go to hell". The doctor's wife was cursing them. The three of them were understanding that the topic of our talk is them... may be because of this the younger boy had started singing loudly while listening to the walkman and teasing the girl who sat close to the boy. The boy had started playing some Goan music on his guitar.

"Call it enjoyment or materialism... we are also not left untouched. Yes but this young generation is more irresponsible. Whatever may be, our future is based on them".

"Future! Except for the old age homes what can this youth give us? This generation is too selfish. Did we ever hear the names of the old age homes in India before? Our mother-in-law kept vexing... I mean she kept staying with us."

The doctor nodded his head and was lost in thought. It seemed as if his wife had said something very important. He then picked up the newspaper and started reading it. His stupid wife started preparing the snacks.

"Take something".

"No... I am fasting". I clearly told her. The assimilation of my mother's saying in my childhood 'don't take anything to eat from a stranger while travelling'.

The doctor asked the three youths formally... the three took up a poori

each without hesitation and started eating. The girl said with a mouth crammed with poori, "very delicious aunty, what pickle is this?" saying this she took up another poori and spread the pickle on it and started making a roll.

"Teti" she said indifferently.

"What T?"

"A wild fruit." The doctor explained.

"Oh I thought... these are sea fish's eggs".

"No no we are pure vegetarian". Saying this, the teacher madam drew her tiffin from them and started eating facing towards me. I sat close to the window.

The train made the sound of creeee... kich and stopped. May be it was the chain pulling. This is the industrial area outside Delhi. This is everyday's story, many local passengers board this train and every train that leaves from Delhi till 8'o clock. Then there is chain pulling again and again. The train is not able to leave Delhi's boundary even in two hours. It is the same case with the evening trains. Not only a lot of time is wasted, these people enter everywhere-from the first class to the reserved seats. And then they misbehave with the passengers. If they see a girl or a beautiful woman they sit very close to her. If her guardians disapprove-then a fight... then these people won't let the train move. Will damage the train. It's such a hole in

the administration that cannot be closed. This trend is many years old. I have become an adult from a youth seeing this. Even today I am scared of these people.

It's good luck that my coach is at the very back because of which no crowd boarded it... as there would have been a massacre because of this girl's clothes and gesture... and these two lanky guards of hers would not have been able to do anything. I started thinking, isn't this openness, this excessively callous behaviour on their part pushing them towards danger? Do they do any studies or some job or not? Look at their age, they are hardly 18 or 19, the younger one looks just 15. And to top it what sort of irreverent parents send them in this world all alone. It seems that they are like that... kind of rebellious spoiled kids. I felt like saying, 'bloody fuckin brats'.

Our colleges, co-workers have also been Christian... but this sort of openness is never seen. Will they be able to solve any problem intelligently? Will they be able to save themselves from danger? Leave it... what do I care? Let them go to hell. It's good that I have brought up my son and daughter with extreme patience and hard discipline. My son is somehow fine, studying in I.I.T. Delhi, but Nishi...!!

I took a deep breath... the train started moving slowly.

I asked a question to myself... did I perform a great job by keeping my kids safe and in severe discipline? Isn't Nishi become very timid in this harsh discipline and in an excessively secure environment. Did we make her safe just by marrying her?

We didn't allow our talented M.B.A. daughter to go to Bombay for a multinational job... both of us got scared. She cried so much... but we didn't agree. Outside world... means a world full of dangers. We had said... stay here and do a job... or we said do a job after marriage, if the husband wants.

Now! She is dependent on her husband for every penny, there is a big business in her family no doubt, but her husband being the youngest amongst the three brothers is always fooled. There is no shortage of anything; it's a big house, a joint family.

But if Nishi wishes to purchase something or wishes to go somewhere... that cannot happen. She is scared to come alone to her mother's house by train; the son-in-law is not free to drop her. That is why I am going to bring her along, Nishi's father is diabetic; he doesn't leave the house alone.

If today Nishi would have been economically independent... what if we had allowed Nishi to marry out of her choice! Then! Today Nishi's face would have shone just like the girl sitting in front! Doesn't she look like 35 at the

age of 27... a permanent dejection would not have been on her face... but... this shamelessness! Openness, that is giving invitation to dangers. I was confused. I felt like crying on Nishi's situation.

The older boy and the girl were leaning on each other and sleeping in the front seat. Health and reader's digest were kept on debonair... the chip magazine was lying leisurely on the floor. So... today's youth reads everything. The younger one had again played the walkman but in a low volume. The doctor and his wife were dedicatedly playing rummy. Suddenly I felt very lonely. My feet were swollen... more so they were getting numb... I pulled them up. The train was running fast through the forests, it was the month of April and the weather was getting hot. It seemed like afternoon at 10'o clock in the morning. I was hungry also... but what did I have? Three apples! A sandwich! I stopped a stray tea vendor passing by.

I didn't have change. Asked the younger one... his reply was... one minute... he took out 3 rupees from his pocket and paid.

I even said, 'I need change only'.

'Come on mom'...saying this he started laughing.

'Sandwitch?'

'No thanks...' saying this, he took out some salted cashew nuts of light brown shell and put them in my plate.

Filled with surprise I said gratefully that I have seen such kind of cashew nuts for the first time which are baked with their shells on. He told me that he has 4 trees of cashew nuts in the backyard of his house... these cashew nuts are from those trees. Mom gave it to him when they were coming. An image of a motherly Christian woman wearing a dark frock, slim but having a slightly bulgy stomach floated in my imagination. I wished to ask something more... for example is this girl your sister? Why would your mother send an unknown boy along with you? Where are you going? When will you go back home? And just tell me... what all has your mother planted in the backyard. Are you Anglo-Indian Goan Christian or converted? Ah! Why will you ask all that? What if he says you nutty oldie... what fuckin concern do you have with us? What's her problem? Let him and his sister go to hell. Wretched, just see the way she is sticking to that young boy.

The younger boy said enthusiastically 'some station is coming'. One or two were becoming visible. Some warehouses... and another set of railway track had started running alongside our train. I said to myself, Alwar! Oh! In a hurry I forgot to purchase some sweets from Delhi... Nishi had suddenly called up and said that mummy, my mother-in-law has given me permission to go home, send bhaiya tomorrow itself.

‘How will bhaiya come Nishi, he is having his exams.’

‘So mom...’. Poor soul, she was almost in tears.

‘Why don’t you come by yourself. There are many trains from Jaipur that come directly to Delhi. Get the reservation.’

‘You know, mummy, with two small girls he will not send me alone. He is not free... then tell me... how can I come, it will be difficult, both of them keep bothering me. Oh! Mummy after so much difficulty my mother-in law has agreed for my going to my mother’s place’.

‘Ok ok... I will...’

‘Come on Maa leave tomorrow itself. I am longing so much’.

‘Let me see’.

So early in the morning how could I purchase the sweets. Let me take 2 kilos of milk cake from Alwar itself. There in Jaipur, my son-in-law will come to receive me, will it seem good to purchase the sweets in front of him? I saw Alwar approaching and took out my purse. I said to the younger one to look after the luggage. The doctor couple were lying on the empty berths on the top. The girl whined and leaving the boy she got up. As she got up she started eating chocolate.

The train had stopped. The coach was really at the very end. The milk

cake vendor was far ahead. The station was very crowded. The whole crowd will go in the pink city, thinking this I came down from the train hurriedly and dashing against the people... taking long steps I reached the shop, panting. Carrying 2 boxes of sweets and carrying my purse... I was half way from my destination when the train gave the whistle... I was distressed. Cutting through the crowd I moved forward and I remembered an advertisement of Doordarshan that in India there are more people on the railway stations that come to drop their relatives than the actual passengers. In that moment I realised that I was not able to walk... my coach was not visible to me... then suddenly the scream of the younger boy made me realise that I am very near to the coach.

‘Auntie’

The door was crowded... there was crowd behind me... I had somehow got hold of the handle of the door and had moved my foot than this train started moving faster, I fell on to the platform badly, if my foot had moved further, then I would have been dragged between the tracks. As I was falling I heard the scream of the younger boy. After that the crowd hanging over me seemed like a whirlpool and then something somewhere drowned. I searched the end of my consciousness with a splash of cold water and jumping the stairs of sub consciousness ... in a hurry to come back to my senses I was shouting

with my clenched fists under the transparent lining of that injury... that was turning into an unclear sound. Finally the lining was torn open by my blows... I was looking all around in a bewildered manner in that hot and humid railway retiring room.

"Auntie, are you ok! Doc, she opened her eyes." The younger boy was sitting close to me on the floor in an agitated manner. His voice was trembling with the heat of care.

"How are you?" bending, an unknown doctor asked me, "There's nothing to worry... If these youngsters wouldn't have been there...! Say thanks to them and to God. It's good fortune that there is no serious injury. It's because of the good health." Smiling, the doctor tried to bring me back to my senses.

"The ambulance will be here soon."

When I tried getting up a little... that girl came forward... with the support of her arm. I saw that a big portion of her shirt is drenched in blood. I felt pain on the side of my right eyebrow. When I touched it a wet scarf was tied up, it was of the older boy. Two handkerchiefs were tied up on both the knees.

In the meantime the older boy came, drenched in sweat, carrying the medicines and the bundle of bandages in his hands.

"Don't get up, you are still bleeding." The elder boy said, pressing the scarf

over my wound, "Doc, first give her tetanus injection."

"Youngman don't teach me my duties." The doctor replied smilingly and started preparing the injection. I saw the doctor was a man of short height, black, crude sort of a person. Maybe Muslim. That's why... again and again... was saying... Khuda ke liye... Khuda ka shukra hai.

Mustering courage I asked the girl in the ambulance.

"Oh god aunty, that scene was horrible... not even an hour had passed... You fell badly onto the platform. Your hand lost grip of the handle ...you dragged along. It was my fiancé Roger... He pulled the chain... then the three of us came down with our bags... were not able to reach you... all the people were covering you, then my brother shouted and scattered them and brought you to the retiring room. Roger rushed into the station master's room. Then the doctor came and... .

'All three of you missed the train for me.' I said.

"Yes! It was necessary .We wouldn't have left you amongst those stupid people. They were watching the scene, nobody was picking you up."

"The doctor who was in the train..."

"That! bloody selfish fellow. " This was the younger one, "His wife scolded him not to come with us and he stayed

back. We literally prayed to him. But he told 'I can't... get down... I have to reach today'."

"Leave it Keith. There are selfish people auntie. My mother told me that to serve humanity is to serve Christ. You tell me, if we would have been in your place! Wouldn't you have stopped for us? "

I was lost in thought! What would I have done? Would I have come down for an injured? In this age, with these swollen feet what would I have done for the injured? They are young. The excuse of elderliness would have served good purpose. The question was the same... What would I have become among the 'Man, sheep and wolf' the story read in the childhood. Not the wolf, would I have mustered up the courage to become a human being or maybe... like the doctor in a hurry to reach my destination I would have closed my eyes and moved on like the sheep.

The girl was very close to me, her blood stained shirt was clung to her. The older boy was sitting next to the doctor and was discussing about the next train going to Jaipur.

'No we won't leave her alone.'

....

"Please complete all formalities and give her proper medication. We have to leave this place today only."

"Don't worry... We will take care of

her."

'... ..'

"No...No. We want to leave for Jaipur as early as possible. Day after we have further reservation also."

'... ..'

"Thanks doctor."

We had reached the railway hospital. Doctor Rasheed(I read his name from the name tab on his coat. Can't help it, this curiosity is by birth.) had done the bandage. Two X-Rays were done... but according to dr. Rasheed by God's grace everything was fine. Now we could catch the 3 o'clock train. Those young and kind angels were taking complete care of me. They were more worried about me than their future programme. They were holding my luggage along with theirs. I looked at the table nearby... There the two sweet boxes were lying along with my purse. My body with freshly cleaned and bandaged four or five big and small wounds and the mind entangled with varied thoughts was completely tired. I closed my eyes lying on the hospital bed. The three of them had left to change their clothes after the doctor left.

The four of us were again sitting in the 3 o'clock train. The station master had done us a favour... He got us seats in the A.C. compartment of this train. Dr. Rasheed had got the biryani packed for us from his home, along with the caution 'Take care sister.'

“Whaooh! This is my first chance when I’m sitting in A.C. compartment.” The younger one was very happy. He took out his walkman and started listening to Shakira in low volume.

“Keith, please raise the volume, let me also listen”. It was me.

Those two youths were engrossed in one another. Liza was watching Roger’s fingers playing on the guitar.

Manisha Kulshreshtha, born August 26, 1967 at Jodhpur, M.A., M.Phil. in Hindi, Manisha writes short stories and novels. Some of her short story collections are: ‘Kathputliyan’, ‘Kuchh bhi to romani nahin’ and ‘Bauni hoti parchhayian’. Her first novel ‘shigaf’ has been released this year by Rajkamal Prakashan. She is editor of web magazine–hindinest.com. Her e-mail ID : manisha@hindinest.com

Eishita Siddharth, born 1984, is pursuing a post graduate course in English Literature at Lucknow University. She has already completed her Diploma in French. She is interested in literature and translates at will. Lives in Lucknow. Eishita is writing her first novel ‘sabko maaf kiya’ these days.

SAAZ NASAAZ

Manoj Rupra

Translated by
Dhiraj Singh

I was lying on the parapet that separates Nariman Point from the sea. There were many others like me there that evening. Some had their eyes fixed on the city, others just sat and stared into the vastness of the sea. I had my legs hanging on either side of the parapet. Like a fence-sitter unable to make up his mind. My eyes were on the sky above me while my ears listened to the waves crashing against the rocks on one side and the sound of the city whizzing past on the other.

Hanging between the Devil and the deep sea I was suddenly gripped by the thought of my loneliness. Back home at my place I had so many friends, people who I could depend on and relate to, but here despite the crush of bodies I felt distinctly separate and alone.

I was reflecting on my life back home, when I heard someone playing the saxophone. I have always been crazy about the sax. Whenever I hear it on the radio or on a record player, it feels like I've met a long-lost friend.

As the familiar sound began to fill my ears I got up. I turned around and saw an old man playing the sax. It was a beautiful tune. On his shoulder was perched a grey mottled pigeon. The sun's dying light shone through his long silver hair and beard giving him the appearance of an archangel. A silver angel with a golden sax. It was a scene straight out of a movie.

He was also playing a very familiar tune. And then it struck me that he was playing Pete Tex's 'Blue Sea and Dark Clouds'. First I thought he was a foreigner, because I just could not believe that an Indian could play the sax so beautifully. It was like his music had the power to lift the waves and turn them into foam or squeeze out rain from the clouds. In fact, the kind of wild frenzy with which he was playing made him seem like a Beatnik transported from the past into present-day Mumbai.

When I went closer I realised that he had actually been living quite a Beatnik life. He seemed like he didn't care much about what he wore or how he looked. He was like a madman. He looked like he hadn't been anywhere near a bathroom for days. His clothes were patched with sweat stains, his skin was covered in grime and his hair and beard had begun to matt.

People were now starting to mill around him. But because he wasn't playing any popular film song they didn't stay too long. Those who were drawn to him, listened to him for a while and then went their own way, only a few stayed longer.

Suddenly the wind began to gain speed. Soon it seemed a storm was on its way. And before anyone could react, the dark clouds drenched Mumbai with the first rains of the season. I had never seen it rain so suddenly or in such a

downpour. Until then I had only heard about how unpredictable the rains in Mumbai were. People started to scatter, as if there had been a lathicharge. But I didn't panic. What was the use, for there was no shelter for as far as the eye could see. So there really was no point in running for cover because the rain would ultimately get you.

Everyone was running helter-skelter but the old saxophonist kept playing with the same single-mindedness and urgency. The change in the weather had had no effect on him, it only made him change his tune. Where he was first playing the calm soporific sound of the sea, the storm outside seemed to have whipped up a flurry inside his lungs. As the rains became heavier, the wind more furious and the waves seemed to swallow entirely the rocks at Nariman Point the veins in the old man's neck too seemed to throb with a kinetic force. It seemed that the blood inside them was boiling. And that if the storm didn't stop the old man would erupt like a volcano.

But before that, a giant wave rose and crossed the parapet spreading its hissing froth all over Marine Drive. When it receded I realised that the old man had been hit. He was lying sprawled on the road like a rag doll. I ran towards him and tried lifting him up, but his body had become too heavy and rigid. So I just sat down next to him and put his head on my lap. I brushed his

long hair away from his face and looked at his face for the first time. There was a certain puffiness to it, the kind that gradually spreads over the faces of those who try and drown all their sorrows in the bottle.

I didn't know what to do next so I just kept sitting. His breathing was uneven, and with every breath he took I was assaulted by the smell of stale alcohol. I tried to wake him up by patting his cheeks but it didn't help much. I was scared that he might never wake up. I looked around but no one seemed interested in us. We could have been street dwellers or those living off the crumbs of the rich. The city, whizzing with its fancy cars and taxis, had no time for people like us.

The sea behind us had still not calmed down. Above us, a new platoon of clouds was getting ready for a fresh assault. I made no effort to move. Once again I looked into the face that lay on my lap. It must have been a handsome face once upon a time. Time, hard knocks and bad habits had taken away some of its beauty but lying like that it seemed filled with a placid acceptance of its fate, which in itself was quite charming.

A few minutes later his eyes began to move behind their lids. When he finally opened them they stayed fixed blankly on my face. Even though they had generous lashes there lurked over his eyes a dark shadow of a tragedy or

something like it. But his face lightened up soon and a flicker of a smile passed through it as he put his hand on my shoulder and sat up. In no time he was talking to me as if nothing had happened. I hadn't expected him to recover so soon.

Usually when people meet for the first time they ask each other things like: 'What do you do?' or 'Where you're from?' or 'Where do you live?' But he didn't ask me any of those questions. Instead he asked me:

"Do you like to get wet in the rain?"

"Can you talk to the wind?"

"Do you feel a happy sadness when you're drunk?"

When I said 'Yes' to all his questions he seemed pleased with me.

"Then I am sure you also like music."

"Of course," I said, "I especially like the sax!"

"That's great. I think we'd get along fine." He said with a sudden burst of warmth as we high-fived to celebrate our new-found friendship.

"You're quite something... as a sax player. I never thought I'd find a good Indian sax player."

But praise didn't go down too well with him. He made a bitter face and turned to gaze at the frothing sea. The rain and the foam of the sea were together forming a dense mist over the area.

Suddenly a thought entered his head and he turned to face me: "Do you have some money?"

His question took me by surprise. I put my hand inside my pocket to check, wondering if he was one of those swindler guys. But his face seemed to be devoid of any shame, embarrassment or greed, which to me was reassuring. I whipped out my wallet from my pocket and asked him how much he needed. He said nothing but took the wallet from my hand like some old friend used to being indulged. He helped himself to four or five hundred rupee notes from it, and gave the wallet back to me. Then he started to walk away.

"Hey, wait!" I ran after him. He turned around.

"Take more if you need," I said pointing to my wallet, "but you have to promise me one thing... to spend the evening, maybe the night with me."

"Am not a fucking whore!" He said this with such vehemence that I was taken aback.

"I didn't mean it like that... it's just that I have no friends here. So I thought we could just hang out together."

"Hanging out with me is gonna cost you. I am not that cheap, you know."

"I am not trying to strike a bargain here. I just thought it'd be a good idea to hang out with you."

"But why me?"

"Because when I am drunk I feel a happy sadness inside me. And I like to get wet in the rain. And also talk to the wind. And yes, am a big fan of Pete Tex."

Hearing this, he relaxed, his lips began to spread into a smile. He put his arm around me and started walking. "How long have you known Pete Tex?"

"Five years ago I first heard that tune that you were just playing."

"No you're wrong. I wasn't playing that tune," he suddenly seemed very serious, "that tune was playing me."

"What do you mean?"

"You won't understand... so soon... it takes time, you know."

His sudden presumptuousness irritated me. But then I realised that even if he was acting like my chum it was true that he was in age my double so why should I mind. "When did you start playing the sax?" I asked him trying to keep pace with him.

"Twenty-five years ago a Hippy in Goa first gave me a taste of it. And then slowly I got hooked to it."

"Seems like you've been doing it forever."

"No, at first I used to treat my sax like a bad ass rider treats his horse. But since I got totally into it I've become the horse and my sax is the rider. I don't know if you know this, but the

sax is the worst son-of-a-bitch there ever was among instruments. You must have noticed... just now... how the son of a bitch was playing me. Had it not been for that wave that knocked me out it would have just squeezed the life out of me.”

“Then why do you keep the son of a bitch with you all the time?”

He looked at his instrument with a strange fondness and then smiled at it. “It’s a bloody twisted tale. C’mon, let’s go and sit down somewhere and then we’ll talk.”

He took my hand in his and we started walking through the puddles of rain water, and the gusts of sea breeze. The wet breeze managed to awaken in us a sudden thirst—a thirst that could only be quenched by vast amounts of alcohol.

His grip suddenly grew tight. He was about to change tracks: from the promenade to the footpath running parallel to the maniacally busy road. Soon, we were standing in front of a pub. The doorman seemed reluctant to let us in—two stragglers from god-knows-where. He was actually quite a sight as his filthy clothes dripped and his shoes squelched oodles of muddied water. But he had to, since we were guests and not some stragglers from god-knows-where. So he opened the door for us, at the same time made no attempts to hide his disgust at our appearance.

Once inside we left behind us a cruel testimony of our rain-soaked adventure on the clean and gorgeous looking carpet. We had barely made ourselves comfortable when a girl, gaudily decorated like a Christmas tree, came to our table. She shook hands with me and then without any formality sat down next to my old friend, arm lazily resting on his shoulder.

“Hey, Bhau Uncle! What’s up? Looks like you’ve forgotten me...”

“Don’t try and butter me up,” the old man shrugged her arm off his shoulder, “just go and get me a rum.”

The girl got up to go in mock anger and then she spun around to face me. “Would you also like a rum?” she asked me pushing her hair away from her beautiful face. I quickly nodded. She looked at me very seductively, as if nothing else mattered to her that evening, except the thought of devouring me. I felt very self-conscious and started looking at my feet.

The old man didn’t find it necessary to wait for his drink. Without any warning he began his tale. He spoke as if there was no necessity for any chronological order or sequence to his life. As if his life so far only comprised tales from here and there. Once while talking about his sax he began rambling about the girls working in the bar. After the girls he spoke at length about the importance of drinking. And then we time-travelled

to a graveyard where his friend was buried. We stood there in silence, mourning for his friend. Then rushing to a chawl in Dadar where he used to live with some room-mates some 20-25 years ago. Together they used to make background scores for Hindi films. Those were the days when they earned well and lived like kings.

One hour of talking to him left me with a graph that was full of ups and downs. As if he and his friends were always chasing one dream after another. They seemed like the kind of arty people who neither give a damn about what people think of them, nor respect any boundaries. As a result they have no clear virtues nor possess an essential wickedness. Instead, they inhabit a limning space that lies between sin and sinlessness.

Most of his friends from that time were victims of this sort of 'music madness'. Some of the smarter ones had established themselves in the film industry or become solo artists of some stature. The rest had remained pretty much where they were in the old days, when the glamour and the blinding shimmer of the music market had so enamoured them that they had exhausted themselves both creatively and physically. The market had in fact squeezed them into pygmy caricatures of their former selves. Now they were just expert drunks, gamblers, womanisers and borrowers but in their minds they

were still 'artistes'. But their artistic contribution could not be denied. Theirs was the generation of musicians who had after Independence taken Indian film music to great heights. They had in many ways described the Indian soul in music. In fact it can be said that these drunks, gamblers and womanisers had given voice to the spirit of their times.

When we came out of the bar nearly two hours later there seemed to be a fresh conspiracy of gathering clouds. But we were now unafraid to face their music. We were actually looking forward to getting wet once again, having soaked up the storm and thunder of the previous cloudburst.

The three stiff drinks that my old friend had consumed had given him renewed energy. He now walked as if he owned the whole metropolis of Mumbai. But in his new avatar there was no hint of the false liquor-soaked confidence of a poseur or a coward but the strident idealism of a *bona fide* subversionist.

We walked without a destination or a plan. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, and neither was I impatient to get somewhere. Our lack of plan seemed to be challenging the focused and driven busy-ness of the city. Close to the VT footpath we struggled to walk against the flood of busy people. We were like lint caught in the straws of a massive broom. In the face of the active mob

our passiveness was not a result of our inebriation or fatigue but sprung from our will to let go of all kinds of controls. I was gradually coming around to the view that my old friend was a rebel with a cause. 'The cause', being the active enjoyment of 'being', of standing up to the artificiality of goals and milestones.

I tried to catch a glimpse of his face as we walked, he seemed lost in his thoughts. His face and stride had taken on a clear purpose. Suddenly he stopped in front of a shop. It was a music shop whose glass window contained many different types of musical instruments. The centre piece of the whole arrangement was an electronic keyboard. My friend seemed transfixed by the keyboard. I thought it must contain a trigger for some old memory as his face began to grow dark. His expression darkened further as if he had suddenly come face to face with a bitter enemy. Soon he was trembling with uncontrollable rage.

"Do you know this useless piece of shit?" He asked me pointing towards the keyboard.

"Yes," I said, a bit unsure of his response, "it is a Japanese synthesizer."

"No," he said in a loud and irritated voice, "this is a fucking despot, a blood-sucking killer. It is because of this thing that Das Babu and Francis lost their lives. It is because of him that we are in the dumps today."

His reaction had taken me by surprise and I tried to look for signs of evil and malice in the piece of equipment but I couldn't find any such signs in the cold buttons and keys of the machine that lay before me. My old friend's face on the other hand was contorted with a peculiar hatred. He was trembling as if he was experiencing the rigors of high fever. I got worried with his unnatural reaction to what was to me just a piece of equipment. I put my hand on his shoulder and tried to egg him to move ahead. But he seemed immovable as if he had grown roots there. Then in an instant he picked up a stone from the footpath and was about to hurl it at the glass window. I immediately caught hold of his hand but this angered him more. He pushed me aside and railed against the crowd with a vengeance, as he showered people left, right and centre with the choicest of abuses. I had no clue why he was behaving in such a manner, except that behind his sudden change of mood was a supposedly innocent instrument that he was calling the vilest of names.

He then started abusing the record companies that had replaced musicians with such agents of change, dishing out bald and tasteless film music that had flooded the market. Then he showered his attention on the manufacturers of such instruments that aimed at duplicating the sound of manmade music. In a way he was right because such

instruments had become hot favourites of the music industry replacing those musicians whose livelihood depended on making music.

“Now who is going to explain to these bastards who can only think of profit and more profit that there is this thing called ‘art’. Who will? Because these fuckers just don’t care about the musician. The man whose violin is his life... can he be expected to drive a bloody taxi? Can a *tabla*-player turn into a masseur? Can you ask a pianist to become a bloody butcher?”

I don’t know who these questions were directed at. I think he had by now forgotten that I was with him. He was like someone who had left his faculties of logic far behind. And then he decided to get down from the footpath and cross the road. There was neither a zebra-crossing there nor a red light. His sudden entry into the traffic caused many brakes to be jammed. A city bus missed him by a couple of inches which caused a taxi to hit the divider. Many cars and taxis behind it suddenly rammmed into each other. The commotion resulted in some drivers getting out of their cars and surrounding the old man. When a traffic policeman got him out of their hands I noticed that he was bleeding in two places. But he was unconcerned about his wounds, he was still hurling abuses at some invisible enemy from his past. The policeman took him by the collar and deposited him at the other

side of the road.

It took some time before the traffic could resume. I was keeping track of my old friend from my side of the road. I saw him stumble through the crowd and turn a corner.

When the pedestrian light turned green I rushed towards where I’d seen him turn. I finally spotted his wet and angry form in the midst of all the cosy umbrellas. When I caught up with him I grabbed hold of his shoulder. He turned around and faced me. I saw his bruises and cut marks. Dark blood had congealed around his nose and his jaw making him look like a maniacal murderer. In the red light of the signal he looked like someone from a horror film.

“Where is your house?” I asked him.

But I don’t think he could hear me over the sound of traffic and blaring horns.

“Where is your house?” I said again, this time going closer to his ear. His face was still frozen in cold rage. When he didn’t answer me the third time I realised that the cocktail of booze, blood and rain had somehow affected him more than was apparent to me. And to leave him alone would amount to knowingly pushing him to the brink.

I was confused, as to what I should do next. It would’ve been okay had he been just ill but his condition was more mental than physical. In fact, had it just been mental also it would’ve been

okay but he had shown me a side of his that was pure genius and that made it very difficult for me to leave him and move on. The dirt and squalor of the city had nipped whatever desire there was in me to be a bleeding heart or a Mother Teresa to the homeless and the crazies.

I was racing my mind to think of what to do next when a thought occurred to me. Maybe the girl at the bar knew where he lived. I quickly stopped a taxi, helped the old man into it, got in myself and told the driver to take us to Sandhurst Road. It was 11:30 in the night when we reached the bar at Sandhurst. The old man's rigid body fell into my lap as soon as the driver applied the brakes. I don't know whether he was asleep or had passed out. I quietly arranged him on the backseat and got out.

"I'll be back in five minutes," I told the driver. He was unsure of my intentions, after all this was Mumbai and instances where people dumped drugged or passed out passengers in taxis and vanished into the night were not unheard of. I gave him a 50 rupee note and quickly climbed the bar staircase. I was assaulted by some very loud music as soon as I entered the bar. The loud senseless beats were making holes in my head. I had never heard such a vile use of sound. It took me a few moments to get used to the dim blue light inside and then I began to scan the bar for that girl. I didn't have to look too far,

she was dancing with a bunch of other girls on the dance floor in the centre. I tried to catch her eye but she was busy trying to hook a rich customer. He was seated on a chair facing the dance-floor and was covered in gold chains and rings that spelt new money. He was throwing 100 rupee notes at her whenever she so much as even moved her body.

After much trying when I still failed to get her attention I whipped out some currency notes from my pocket. The money in my hand suddenly made me very attractive... the centre of attention for everybody, from the waiters to the dancing girls. It didn't take much for the girl to gravitate towards me. Before handing the notes to her I loudly said to her: "I need to speak with you!" But whatever she said was drowned in the music. She grabbed my hand and took me behind the door that connected the bar with the kitchen.

"What is it? Quick, I have a customer waiting."

"The old guy I'd come with earlier... do you know him?"

"Yes, he's not one of my regulars but he's good... makes everyone very happy when he comes."

"Well, he's in a bad shape now. Do you know where he lives?"

"Am not sure. But I think he lives somewhere near the Dadar bird-shelter..."

Ah, just can't remember the name of his chawl."

"Look here, I am new to this city and am afraid I don't know places here too well. Do you think you could take me there?"

"No," her flat refusal left me speechless, "why don't you understand... my customer is waiting..."

I didn't know what to do next. When I came back to the taxi I found the old man lying there as I had left him. He was just like a dead body. I opened the car door and sank into the seat.

"To Dadar," I told the driver. My voice now seemed weak and remote as if it was coming from some far away place and not my mouth. Immediately he started the car, went some distance, took a U-turn and we were back on the main road zipping ahead in top gear.

I lit a cigarette and began to play back the events of the evening inside my head. The thinking made my head hurt yet nothing seemed to be coming out of it. Then the nothingness began to get bigger and bigger and bigger till it became a huge 'zero' that buried me under its weight and I fell asleep.

I woke up feeling the driver's hand shaking my shoulder. For a moment I didn't know where I was or how I got there. When realisation dawned I began to shake the old man. But he seemed to have entered a place beyond dreams from where he could neither feel nor

hear anything. Finally, I put my hands under his shoulders and dragged him out of the taxi. While pulling him out of the taxi I noticed that he had not let go of his bag from which peeped the neck of his sax.

I left him in sitting position against the grill of the bird shelter and went to pay the taxi guy. It was 3:15 in the morning. It was the in-between hour in the life of the city when it stood absolutely still and silent. After pacing up and down for a few minutes I also sat down next to the old man. The unnatural silence and the sound of my heart beating pushed me into looking back at my own life. Like the old man I too was a rebel. I was also rebelling against my father and his immense wealth by spending it in whatever way I thought fit. In my life there was also no place for common sense and caution. I just wanted to be free. I was very proud of the fact that I had no career to speak of. But in the company of my old friend and his sax and perhaps the effect of the booze, blood and rain I felt less stubborn and aggressive. And in the lightness of that feeling I fell asleep like a child who had exhausted all his tears.

I woke up to the sound of fluttering wings. The old man was lying on the floor of the bird-shelter. His entire body was covered with a blanket of grey that fluttered every now and then. There was hardly an inch of his body that was not taken up by the pigeons. Even his

face had pigeons squatting on it. For a moment I thought he had died but I chucked the thought out of my head, when I realised that only crows come for the dead, not pigeons.

I jumped over the grill of the bird-shelter and came to where the old man lay. The sudden thud scared the pigeons away. When I came close to his face I saw that it had not even the slightest hint of the anger and violence of the previous night. Instead it was bathed in a cherubic luminosity and had a smile to match. His clothes were covered in bird feed. It looked like he had sprinkled it on himself to attract the birds.

When he opened his eyes he smiled and stretched his hand towards me. I took his hand in mine and as he was about to get up a pigeon came and sat on his hand. It was a grey mottled pigeon that had a black string tied to its leg. It was the same pigeon that had come and sat on his shoulder the previous evening.

“Shhhh... don’t move,” he cautioned me, “don’t try to take your hand away... just stay still and slowly he will come to you and become your friend too.”

I nodded and looked at the bird with a new kind of fascination. The pigeon was also looking at me directly from its perch on top of our handshake. I could see dilemma play hide and seek in its tiny eyes. Then it seemed to smile at me as if it had recognised me from

somewhere. It nodded and then gradually took two steps from our handshake towards me. I felt a bit ticklish where its padded feet rested on my arm but I tried not to move my hand. It looked at me again and after a moment of hesitation it took a few more steps. I knew it was testing me to see if I was a reliable perch. And I seemed to have passed the test, as it moved closer to my shoulder. Now there was no fear in its eyes. Then in an instant it just took off and landed on my shoulder. I am not sure whether animals and birds can take a leap of faith but it seemed this one had done just that. I was so overcome with feeling for the pigeon that I began to stroke its back.

“It first used to be Robert’s friend,” the old man told me regarding the bird on my shoulder lovingly.

“How long has it been?” I asked still petting the bird.

My question seemed to have thrown him into a thoughtful mood. The old man didn’t say a word for some time and then spoke distractedly, “Exactly a year, today.” With those words the previous night’s dark anguish seemed to have returned. I didn’t want him to get melancholic again, so I grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet.

“Come, let me drop you home.”

He looked up at me surprised. “How do you know where I live?”

“Yesterday when you had passed out

I had gone to that bar again.”

“But who knows me there... except for... that... that girl...”

“Yes, she’s the one who told me.”

“Oh, did she say anything else...”

“Nope. I guess she was too busy.”

The old man sighed. Then his face darkened, as if a bitter memory had entered his head. He put his hand on my shoulder and we started to walk. We crossed the road and then took a right turning into a narrow lane. “Do you know who that girl is?” he asked without looking at me directly. I shook my head and then looked at him expectantly. He was trying to say something important but he stopped himself. The bitter memory seemed to have come back to him.

Once again we came to a turn. This was a narrower lane, as wide as a small room, cramped with chawls on both sides. It seemed like we had entered an old, decrepit museum whose crumbling woodwork, stale air, dampness and perpetual darkness had replaced all the treasures it once contained.

We climbed a creaking staircase to reach a second floor shack. It was the fourth one from the left. The old man was panting heavily as he dug into his pocket to find the key to his kingdom. “I think I’ll take your leave now,” I said trying not to sound gruff or cold.

“What? Do you think I am that

thankless a bum... come and have a cuppa chai with me,” he grabbed my hand and pulled me inside.

There was just a bed and a table in the name of furniture. A filthy mattress lay on the bed like wrinkled skin. But the walls were something else. They were covered with nails and on each nail hung musical instruments in various states of disrepair. The *tabla* for example had been ripped open and now provided a cosy nest for a family of sparrows. The violin’s strings had come apart like the hair of an angry woman. A *sarangi* in the corner had been covered by veils of cobwebs. The flute’s holes had turned green and black with fungus while its mouthpiece had been eaten away by termites. A harmonium lay on the floor like an ancient mummy violated by grave-diggers.

While I was taking in the assortment of decay on the walls, the old man went out and shouted out for some *chai*. The boy who got the tea didn’t hand us our cups but took out a tiny notebook and pen from his pocket. But the old man snatched the ledger from him and began turning its pages. When he came to his page and was about to scribble something on it the boy interrupted. “These two cutting chais making 70 rupees. Boss telling, taking money, then only giving chai...”

The old man dug into his pockets and took out the soggy notes I’d given

him the previous night. From them he took out a hundred and another fifty rupee note and gave them to the boy. Then he tore out his page from the notebook, grabbed the tea cups from him and poured the tea into the street below. The boy picked up the cups and left as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly, silence descended on us till the old man's mood came back to normal. "You wait here... I'll just be back." His face took on a bitter expression as he made a dash for the staircase. It's funny how old age is often compared to infancy but what most people don't realise is that while one is cute and adorable the other is mostly a pain, both for the one going through it as well as those who have to put up with it. I was now coming around to the belief that this man meant big trouble. For a moment, I thought of quietly slinking away but curiosity got the better of me. I now really wanted to find out what was it that kept alive the music in him.

But I was also scared that this quest of mine would take me to depths that contained very slippery ground, a tangle of weeds and many sharp-edged rocks where I could seriously injure myself. However, despite the risk I was like a pearl diver who, spurred on by a visceral greed for the treasures of the sea, would continue to risk his life and limb. That without realising the essential nature of his desire.

I don't think that I am basically a greedy person. Curious, yes, but not greedy. Or for that matter, small-minded. I think I am just a little mixed up, especially when it comes to people trying to figure out their way around life. Perhaps, I have the gift of understanding confusion.

The wait was turning out to be endless. My head was also heavy from all that nocturnal adventure. Before I knew it I was fast asleep.

I was woken up by his sudden entry into the room. He was standing in front of me with two cups in his hands. The cups smelt not of tea but of a strong flavoured local brew. He gave one cup to me and the other he raised to his lips. In one long swig he emptied all the liquid in the cup into his mouth. Then he wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve and looked up at me very strangely. His red eyes and the wild expression on his face clearly told me that he was in a better shape today than he was the previous night. His other hand, that held my cup, was shaking.

"This isn't my room. It is Robert's. So technically you're his guest. And in the Robert School of Thought the day begins with drinking. So if you want to get initiated in to this School then you'd have to drink up."

I smiled and took the cup from him and like him gulped its liquid in one go.

“Very good... very good. You’re a good man. You and I will be great together.” He then poured two more drinks. And we drank them up like the first ones. It was a great start to a day whose end we had no way of predicting.

The first drink had for me the effect of being lifted by a giant bird. The second one made me feel like an eagle floating on the thermals. I felt I was rising higher and higher without losing sight of the details below. After the second drink, I began to look at the instruments on the wall. This time they looked a bit different as if they now had things to tell me that they earlier didn’t. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends here,” I said pointing to the wall.

The old man was staring into the trembling glass in his hand. He raised his eyebrows and looked up at the wall with a smile that wasn’t quite a smile. He quickly emptied the cup once again and went over to the wall and stood next to the torn *tabla*. “This is Rafiq Khan, the prodigal son of Ustad Salimuddin Khan *sahib*. He began by playing in a brothel at Congress House. Then he moved on to films.” After the *tabla* he moved on to the *sarangi*. “Salim here was also one of his pals. And here I must add that their company also spoiled poor Vasuki Prasad and Jamnadas (he said pointing towards the flute and the *shehnai*). These four were pretty good in what they did but somehow their

life didn’t have the necessary rhythm. In fact they went out of tune totally towards the end. But they were good blokes.” He looked at the four with a sudden tenderness and then abruptly turned to the harmonium on the floor. “This is Nitin Mehta’s harmonium. He was the most cunning of us all. Five years ago he’d come to us to learn the basics and today he is the top-most music director of Mumbai. You know why? Because his fingers quickly jumped from the harmonium to the synthesizer and he, from a musician became a businessman. He started doing all sorts of scores till there came a time when there was no more music left in him. And then he found a Sindhi partner who invested big money in his business. With this money he replaced all the musicians with machines. Did you know that in the past there used to be more than 100, sometimes 150 musicians for a single recording. Now electronic ‘effect’ machines have taken over. Robert and I tried, many times to fight against the electronic terror. We even approached the Film Artistes Association to place a ban on it. But sadly we were alone in our fight and even the Association didn’t support us.”

After what had been a long harangue against the electronic terror he fished out a cigarette pack from his pocket, placed a stick between his lips and lit up. He offered one to me. I also followed him and lit up. After a few drags his

attention was caught by the violin and he turned to gazing at it very intently. "You know, Das Babu had the rawest deal. An A-grade artiste forced to live a C-grade life. He was a shy and serious man. He used to be especially called for tragic numbers. Bastards like Nitin Mehta really abused his trust. He used to make him record four-five songs in one go and then he'd mix and match them in different songs and situations. This really hurt Das Babu, but he never said anything to anyone..."

"Once during a recording he broke down. I had to play a long sequence towards the end but I just couldn't. I couldn't see him like that so I took him out and we left the studio together." Seething at the memory of that day he angrily stubbed out his cigarette and pulled a chair and stumbled on to it. "That night when the whole chawl had gone to sleep Das Babu began to play his violin. From the sound of it I could make out that he was not just playing it but also weeping. I was hypnotised by his playing, I'd never heard such sadness before. And then I picked up my sax and played him a few cheerful notes. I could see that my sax had touched him for after that he was unstoppable. So I just let him play on and on and on. It seemed it would be a crime to interrupt his violin that night. I can't tell you, there was such an otherworldly beauty in his music that night. I still can't get it out of my head. Even my

usually cheerful sax was left speechless. And then out of nowhere Robert from his room joined in with his piano. His notes seemed to rush towards us with open arms ready to calm our ruffled nerves."

"The three of us from our different rooms began to create a beautiful mood in the chawl. And then from another room came the wail of a *sarangi*. It was like a child left behind by its parents. Soon the *sarangi* also became part of our orchestra. Who were we to deny this sweet and sad child an entry into our group?"

"Then it seemed the flute and the *shehnai* too had been woken up by our music. At first they were listless and sleepy but gradually they came into full form, catching up with us, afraid to be left behind. Soon the whole chawl seemed to have been lit up like a cigarette. We were playing without a plan, without music sheets, we were just jamming with each other, trying to break free of all the chains that kept us to the ground. We were like small kids dancing in the rain. Running and chasing and falling and then getting up and running again. The piano was like an elephant towering above us all. But the *sarangi* would pass through his legs and leave him panting. The *shehnai*, however was smarter for she would trip the *sarangi* whenever she wanted. But when the poor *shehnai* stopped to catch her breath the wily flute jumped over her and bounded out

ahead of all of us.”

“I thought I’d teach the flute a lesson so I picked up my sax, but then I realised what had happened. The violin was nowhere to be heard. First I thought the sound of the violin had been drowned out by the others. But the violin had gone absolutely silent. The others probably didn’t notice it because they were having a lot of fun but I was worried. I strained my ears in the direction of Das Babu’s room and then I heard the sound. It was the sound of murder. The sound of an instrument thrashing against the wind. And then everything fell silent. I wasn’t sure what exactly had caused that sound but I was sure of the ring of finality to it. And that it had come from Das Babu’s shack. I put my sax back on the table and came out into the corridor. All the doors across the courtyard were shut. Das Babu’s room too was shut. The only difference was that light was coming out of the cracks in his door. This light was from time to time being interrupted by a shadow. When the shadow seemed to begin moving faster I realised that Das Babu was in trouble. I rushed towards his room first going down my staircase, then up his. My heart was in my mouth for I was sure something bad was happening to him. The door opened in one push and there lay Das Babu sprawled on the floor. His violin was ripped apart and he was clutching at his heart. I leapt towards him and held him in my arms. Seeing

me, he seemed to be relieved but that relief was short-lived for suddenly an unseen arm wiped the weak smile off his face. And I knew that Das Babu had left us.”

Das Babu’s death stayed with me like a movie scene. As did the old man’s voice that kept ringing in my ears like an echo. When I emerged from what had become for me a momentary cage of thoughts and emotions I found the old man too lost in deep thought. I thought it best to not disturb his peace.

I don’t remember how long we sat there in complete silence. We would’ve continued had the mottled pigeon not come and sat on the ledge outside. He kept looking at us with its round eyes wondering what had caused us to be so still and silent. Then like a playful child he flew the short distance from the ledge to the old man’s lap and he absently started stroking its back while his eyes remained fixed somewhere in the distant horizon.

“Why was he so sad?” I finally broke the silence that had begun to get awkward.

“Why? Who?” he looked at me confused.

“I mean Das Babu.”

My question seemed to upset him. His mouth became bitter again and he stood up to go somewhere. His hands were trembling but he clenched them into fists. His face had darkened and his lips had begun to quiver. I had a

strong suspicion that he would erupt any time and start raving and ranting against the world. But he didn't say anything. The mood in the room had suddenly changed. And I was scared, as was the mottled pigeon, who gave us one terrified look and flew out of the room.

I realised my bladder was bursting. So I got up and went to the other side of the room that was parted by a dirty old curtain. This part was the kitchen. Several utensils and odd instrument were thrown around in this part as if a storm had just passed through it. I was not surprised. Moreover my most urgent need was to relieve myself. The toilet was behind an old tin door. When I came out I began to notice the things in the kitchen. They weren't really separate things, for they had lost all individuality and merged into a collective heap of trash. The only exception was the piano which outwardly still retained its shape and form even though it was covered with old clothes and laundry. On closer inspection I realised that both its foot pedals were broken. The keyboard too had many cavities. I lifted its top flap to look inside but quickly shut it. Its inside was as hollow as a well. It had been completely disembowelled. No strings, no flat-hammers, no key cushions, nothing was left behind. There also came from it a stench that reminded me of a dead animal.

I lifted the curtain and came back

to the other side of the room.

"Does that piano belong to Robert?" I asked the old man.

His mood had completely changed now. He was now looking at me with a broad and open smile.

"Er... the piano inside? Did it belong to Robert?" I asked again.

This time he nodded.

"But why is it so badly injured?" I had once again asked a very stupid question. And I was cursing myself for having said those words. The old man's eyes were filled with rage. And I had only myself to blame for bringing it on so soon. He sprung up from the chair, leapt out of the room and stomped down the staircase in a matter of seconds. I don't know what came over me but this time I too ran after him. When I reached the end of the staircase, I could see him turning left, when I reached the end of the lane he was crossing the main road. I made a dash for him finally catching up with him. I was completely out of breath. I grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around.

"Listen, man!"

"What the fuck?" he was white with rage, "Why are you after my life? Why don't you just fuck off and go your own way? I don't need your fucking charity."

"But where are you going?"

"How does it matter to you? I can go where I fucking want."

This time I was also angry.

“It fucking matters, alright!” I don’t know what came over me but I caught hold of his collar and was shaking him to and fro, “Do you think I am a fucking idiot?”

My sudden burst of aggression had a calming effect on him. He let out a long sigh but I held on to his shirt. “I know you’re a big loser. In fact, you’re bloody useless. And what’s worse is that you don’t know it. ‘Coz you think you’re an unsung genius. I also know that you don’t have very long to live. Coz you have a death wish. You want to die like no one else. You want it to be a fucking Greek tragedy. And I also know that you are in the dumps not because you can’t do any better but because you like it down there. This is your fucking make-up that you put up to lure people to you. You’re no better than a fucking whore who paints her face to go out at night.”

I am not usually given to such strong words but then I had been drinking. And the old man had driven me up the wall. “Go and fuck your art!” I barked at him and turned around and started walking towards the main intersection. I was about to turn from the bird shelter towards the station when I felt a hand rest on my shoulder. I stood still without turning around to see who it was.

“It was not my intention to upset you,” his voice was soft, “I am truly

sorry for whatever pain I’ve caused you... Let this be a lesson never to get involved with crazies like me.”

Something in his voice and manner made me turn around. “Look, I am sorry too. I know how hard it is for you to live with the burden of knowing how Robert and Das Babu suffered. But don’t you think you’re really belittling them by drinking yourself silly and making a fool of yourself. Can’t you sublimate your feelings through your art, your sax?”

He looked at me with bitterness as if I’d asked him to do something that was humanly impossible. I kept looking at him waiting for his face to change expression. But it remained stubbornly immobile. To escape my gaze he turned away and started looking at the pigeons. They were busy picking at the bird-feed, unaware and distanced from the buzzing city around them. He took a few steps and grabbed the iron grill of the shelter and stood there staring at the pigeons, perhaps looking for a solution to his present problems in the feathery flutter of grey, mottled and white.

He stood there for quite some time. Twice he wiped his eyes on his shirt sleeves. Since his back was towards me I wasn’t sure if he was crying or just wiping the sweat around his eyes. Then suddenly he swung around and looked straight into my eyes. He was smiling as he came forward and put his arm

around my shoulder and we started walking together.

When we reached his place he burst into activity with an urgency I had not seen in him before. He took a piece of cloth and started wiping and dusting things around the house. He took a broom and swung it around the wall corners to remove the cobwebs. After cleaning the room in a frenzy he took another piece of cloth and started wiping the instruments on the wall. Throughout this frenzied activity he kept whistling fragments of a tune. It was as if he was trying to recall a tune he had long forgotten. By the time he had finished cleaning up he had fully retrieved the whole tune from the recesses of his memory.

Next he transferred his attention to the part of the room that lay on the other side of the curtain. I could hear the tap in his toilet run for a long time. I was most pleasantly surprised to see the new look of his room. The instruments despite their bad condition were shining. The whole room seemed to have been resurrected from the dead. Everything had been restored to its original beauty, perhaps except for an old album that lay on top of a table in the corner. Its cover was still coated with dust. Since it was the only object that had not been cleaned and dusted I took a piece of cloth and wiped it. Despite my not being too curious about it I opened it and started going through it. It had

some old pictures of him and his friends. Some of them were taken during stage performances and some inside recording studios. There were also some prize distribution and party pictures. Many of these pictures were of his younger days. And I could see that he had been quite a handsome guy in his time.

But somewhere halfway in to the album the pictures started to change. They became quieter, sadder. Towards the end they had gotten so sad that it was impossible not to cry. In the last pages two dead bodies lay surrounded by a sea of mourners. One body was on the floor and the other, inside a coffin. The body in the coffin had his hands cut off. Was this Robert? Did this mean he died a violent death?

Before I could speculate any further, the curtain moved and the old man emerged from behind it. I could not believe my eyes when I saw him. He had shaved and his face now had a strange and ethereal glow. He was wearing brown suede trousers and a clean white shirt. I was very happy to see him like that. It was a good sign. It meant he was ready to face the world. He turned the fan on to full to dry his hair. His silver hair framed his face in a way that it seemed other-worldly and angel-like again.

“You look so much better,” I couldn’t resist complimenting him.

He smiled and ran his fingers through

his hair. "So you're saying I was full of shit before?"

"No, not really. I mean, maybe you were somewhere in between."

He gave his long hair a toss and turned to face me, grinning widely. "Man, you are something. I am beginning to get jealous of your reserve."

"Well, it's actually in my blood," I said laughing, "you see I am a Bania's son after all, so balance and reserve are in my DNA. But if you ask me I really hate that about myself. In fact what drew me to you was your carefree or should I say unbalanced life. Funny isn't it, how I like your 'unbalancedness' and you, my reserve."

I knew he was growing to like me by the way he was looking at me. And then for the first time he asked me something about myself. "So tell me, what do you do?"

"Right now, nothing," I said.

"Nothing? How can I believe that? Right now, you're putting up with an old and crazy fart like me, no?" He started to laugh.

"Nope, not true," I was laughing too, "How do you know that I am not having fun as well. You *are* very good company. In fact, you're so damn good that I'd give anything to be around you."

This time he laughed even more heartily. He then picked up his sax bag, pulled a gift-wrapped box out of a drawer

and took me by the hand.

"Your house, you know, reminds me more of a rehearsal studio than a house," I said while going down the stairs.

"Actually," he said putting his hand on my shoulder as we were coming down the stairs, "we *had* taken up this place for rehearsals. But in time it became a den for us degenerates, especially those of us who had left home or were thrown out of their homes. Robert and I were practically living out of this dump..." Once again he seemed to be lapsing into time-travel, not the fevered and disjointed kind that I had seen him do earlier. This time, he seemed very calm and at ease with the thoughts that were passing through his head.

"No matter what shit life was throwing our way," he continued, "we stood by each other. It didn't mean we never fought. In fact we fought like animals. But when we jammed together we were something else. Then when the market began to change, our 'happy days' got further and further away from us. Our whole group started splitting up. Those who had already made it to the A-Grade club were spared. Despite Robert and me being pretty senior, we didn't have much to do. Most music directors were looking for cheap imitations. No one really had the sense or sensibility of using serious instruments like the piano and the sax."

He suddenly stopped, caught hold

of my hand and started running. We entered a cafe and ordered some breakfast. He was now completely silent. After a long pause he began mumbling to himself. "Bloody Nitin Mehta... you were the smart one. And we were the idiots. Good, you kicked the *tabla*. Good, that you took to the new instruments, if you hadn't you'd also be a loser like us. We were fucking idiots to have cared about our instruments and the purity of sound. Robert, he fucking thought he was god, just because there wasn't a pianist like him in the whole of Mumbai. And that's why he made fun of your new machines. He said they were bloody toys, electronic toys. But look what these bloody toys have done to his jumbo piano. Why only Robert, in those days every artiste used to think no one could take his place. But they were fucking blind not to see the huge gap that was growing between their skills and the market."

The old man was mumbling between sips of coffee and bites of bread and butter. And in this effort to eat and drink and mumble alternately he choked. I quickly offered him a glass of water. The water dissolved the piece of bread stuck in his throat. He cleared his throat and coughed a little and then shook his head vigorously. "It was their fucking pride that took them down. Bloody idiots! None of them survived. They all disappeared without a trace. Now even when our paths cross, they avoid me

like the plague. Like that Vasuki Prasad, who I saw selling flutes at Chowpatti. He was also playing one. I just kept looking at him... and then a thought came to my mind... what if the sax was also made of bamboo. Then I could go around selling them like Vasuki Prasad. But I got no clear answer."

"And not having an answer is not good for me. So what could I do, I had a few drinks, maybe more than a few. Then I stumbled across to Charni Road, and was coming down the overhead pass when right at the bottom of the stairs I saw Robert. He was holding on to the railing and was looking very angry. It looked like he was having trouble holding it all together; his huge body, his blood pressure and his drunk and tired legs. He was in no condition to stand straight, how was he going to climb up? Yet I was sure he would, he was never a quitter, even if it was killing him.

"Then I saw him climb two stairs at a time. And in no time he was right in front of me. So I stretched out my hand and pulled him up and asked him: 'Where are you coming from? Where have you been all these days?'

"But he didn't say anything, just kept panting. Then he looked at my sax bag and asked, 'You coming from the studio?' I shook my head. Had I said 'yes' he would've put his hand in my pocket and taken out all the money. What could

I have done, it was not as if I was making millions. But I am a very bad liar. He just had to look at my face and he knew that I was lying. He grabbed my collar and with the other hand he started searching my pockets. 'You lying to me, bloody bastard. C'mon give me a hundred fast.'

"Leave my fucking collar first.' I was also angry. His grip on my collar eased. I took out whatever money was in my pocket and threw it at him. I was very angry with him so I started walking away from him. But he grabbed my collar again and shoved the money back into my pocket. 'I thought I was borrowing from a friend... but you are a bastard. And you're no friend of mine. Now get lost.'

"This made me madder than before. I grabbed him with both hands and started dragging him down the stairs with me. 'Two fucking years... from two fucking years I've been putting up with your bullshit. Since two years I've been paying for your fucking habit. But now you've just crossed the limit. Now tell me what do you fucking want from me?'

"He looked at me hurt and angry and then suddenly his face lost all expression. He lowered his head and just stood still. His silence made my blood boil more so I slapped him three-four times. But he didn't duck or resist me. He just stood there like a prisoner. Then something came over him and he

grabbed my hand and started pulling me along... we were rushing down the stairs like a pair of madmen, any time we could trip over and fall. He could neither take care of himself nor was he letting me get steady. I wasn't surprised when we both tripped and rolled down the few stairs that were left. We became a sorry spectacle... funny thing was there was no one to see us.

"But Robert didn't find it funny. Nor was he bothered about the cut on my forehead. He got up and then pulled me up by the collar and started to drag me through the evening crowd. I tried to get out of his grip but he was in no mood to let me go. Finally we stopped in front of the One Night beer bar and he shoved me in, like a policeman pushes a prisoner into the cell. The loud music and the flickering strobe lights inside began to give me a splitting headache. I banged into a waitress and tried to steady myself by holding on to a table edge. I was confused why Robert had brought me to the bar. The only thing I could make out was that the music playing in the bar was composed by Nitin Mehta. The same Nitin Mehta that Robert hated with all his heart.

"The music stopped suddenly and there followed a few moments of complete silence before another disco number began to grate on my ears. This song was also from the same film. The brainchild of the great Nitin Mehta, maker of pathetic cocktails of Rajasthani folk,

raunchy Bhojpuri, disco Garba and fake Bhangra. And to that came this beauty who'd set the dance floor on fire with her *filmi* dancing. She was wearing a very tight *ghagra-choli*. The *choli* was more strings and less cloth. She had her backless back to us and she was moving like a seasoned seductress. On the cue of a drum beat she spun around and showed her face. I was stunned. This was Robert's daughter, Vinny. The guys were whistling, blowing kisses and throwing money at her. And she would go dancing to each one and take the money from their hands smiling. The whole scene was so unbearable that I couldn't take it any more. I quickly rushed out of the bar with a bad taste in my mouth. I threw up on the road side. It struck me now why it was so tough for Robert to make peace with himself."

We came out of the café when the morning had already turned to evening. The sun was setting and it was leaving behind long shadows. Robert's memories once again left a dark shadow on the old man. Once again, old memories had made him go totally silent. He soon forgot that I was there walking with him. He was also mumbling as he walked. And this time it was all gibberish to me. He had entered his own sweet Universe—a place that was his own and I or our present time had no place in it.

We were now close to the Portuguese Church and he had slowed down

somewhat. I let him be. I didn't want to disturb him. Instead I kept observing him; His brown suede pants and white shirt and the suspenders crossed on his back, his black cap and his silver hair underneath it and his bag with the golden knob of the sax peeping from it. In fact his new avatar was so attractive that I'd forgotten his former unwashed self.

He stopped by the footpath after taking a left. He bought some flowers from the florist there and stood in the queue at the bus-stop. I didn't find it necessary to ask him where he intended to go. I also stood behind him in the queue. A bus came and we quickly boarded it. After a couple of stops we got down in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. There was cemetery right next to the bus-stop. We entered the place, walked some and stopped at a white marble grave. On it was written in black letters Robert's name, the dates of his birth and death and some lines about his stopover on this planet.

The old man slung his bag off his back and placed the flowers on the grave. After a few minutes of silence he took out his sax and the gift box from the bag. He unwrapped the box and inside it was a bottle of Peter Scot. I guess he must have saved the bottle for a special occasion. His face, I noticed, had taken on the same dark shadow of his past. The only difference was that now his face was clean-shaved and his hair was washed. He opened the bottle

and emptied its entire contents into the sax. The whisky poured out of its keys and mouth piece in tiny streams. Soon it spread over the whole grave like a golden film. He flung the bottle with all his strength to the other end of the cemetery. The empty bottle seemed to fly through the air in slow motion till it crashed against a marble crucifix with a shattering thud. Again he went completely still staring without blinking at his sax. His eyes had the hungry look of someone trying to win a race.

He picked up the sax and blew hard. The sound that came out of it was like the blare of a horn. The old man cursed and rudely shook his instrument. The whisky trapped in its pores came out like rain. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the mouthpiece and then blew hard again. This time his breath worked its magic on the sax. He stretched his breath on and on making a zig-zag line through the silence of the cemetery. He wasn't in a hurry to reach anywhere, sometimes he would touch the highest octaves, sometimes reach out to the lowest and broadest possible notes. It was pure jazz: beautiful and very hard to put into a box. Listening to him I felt that it wasn't really him who was playing, but some wandering spirits that had entered his sax. I had an urge to make him stop but then I realised that he wasn't playing for me alone but for the entire cemetery: its marble crosses, its ancient trees and its dead.

Caught in the frenzy of his performance I lost all sense of time. It was only when the shadows began to get longer and the birds began to return to their trees did I notice that our remarkable day was soon coming to an end. The old man stopped playing. It seemed that some gigantic being had suddenly died after a long struggle with breathing. The old man was breathing very heavily. The veins around his neck were bulging. Then he stumbled across to a tree nearby and sat down resting his back against it. He motioned me also to do the same.

"That was a Beatnik tune," he said catching his breath, "Robert was a big fan of the Beatniks, the kind of life they lived."

"And you? Are you a beatnik too?" I asked.

"Me, I am fusionist.... a fusionist of jazz and Indian classical. It's something I've always done and still do."

"And where do you think you'll go with it?"

"Back again. Back to where I began."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it will find its own course."

"Doesn't look like that to me."

"It doesn't because, my instrument is the sax while my lungs are pure *desi*. And together they make jazz, which is not jazz but quite jazz. Meaning it is jazz but with a *desi* soul. Do you know

what I mean..."

"But what you were just playing, it didn't sound *desi* to me."

"I know it didn't." He was once again lost in his thoughts.

"On another note, don't you think your music has hit a blind alley..."

This seemed to have touched a raw nerve because he jerked his head and turned to me. Once again he had that bitter expression on his face. "I think it started with Robert's death... I was the one who found him. He was lying on the railway tracks... with both arms cut and bleeding... I saw a dog run away with one arm. That scene did something to me. I think it killed the music in me."

"No it didn't," my words came out with much too much force, "you have as much music as any other artiste. I strongly believe no amount of pain or loss can kill the music in an artiste, especially an honest artiste."

"You said 'honest'," he was staring at me now.

"Yes, when we start blaming our shortcomings on 'time', that's an indication that we are not being honest with ourselves."

He flew into a rage and grabbed my collar. I thought he was going to slap me next but the next instant his grip over me loosened and he let go of me. It seemed as if he had suddenly accepted defeat. Let go of an attitude that he

had carefully nurtured for years.

"I have difficulty breathing," he said looking at me with anguish in his eyes, "I can't breathe in as well as I can breathe out..."

"But how," I asked surprised, "can you blow for so long when you can't breathe in..."

"I don't know. I just know that with every breath, I pass out a part of me that has rotted and dissolved."

Those words dissolved all hard feelings that I had for him until now. Instead, I felt a deep sorrow for him. I kept staring at his face for a long time. I had finally understood what rot was dissolving and passing out of him. I took the sax from his hands. "Don't play this for a few days. Just breathe... in and out and in and out. Just get into yourself and heal. Recharge your fire. Then you'll see how restored you'll feel. I'll help you do that... really."

He smiled weakly. "I am beyond all help, my friend. Nothing you do can help me now."

"But let me try... at least."

"Try what... huh? What?" He was getting aggressive again.

"I... I want to try and see..."

"See what? See me rot in misery? See me puke blood and soil my pants?"

"No that's not what I want to see... I just want you to play the sax... not

let the sax play you.”

His eyebrows stood up in angry arches again. He kept staring at me like that for some time and then he looked away at his sax. He stroked it with a lot of love then put it back in the bag and stood up. He came to me and put his hand on my shoulder and we started walking. We left the deepening darkness of the cemetery and stepped out into the illumination of the city.

We were walking on the pavement and his hand was still on my shoulder. The weight and tautness of his hand had reduced and there was also a spring in his step. Then in a low voice he said something that made me very happy. “It seems like I am going home after a long time... seems like I am finally going somewhere.”

“So where is your somewhere?” I asked hoping that he would mention

some old almost forgotten dream that he had given up long ago.

“My sax,” he said and then went silent.

I too became silent for these two words, said lightly, were anything but light. They meant everything that he was and ever wanted to be. It was probably the most serious thing he had said about himself in a long time.

Suddenly, the city seemed like a brighter place and my old friend less angry. Gone was his seething anger that wanted to crush the city like a plastic cup. Gone was the need to rage against the world for all that it had denied him. In its place was a balance that I had not seen in him before. As I bid him goodbye I felt reassured that my old friend and his sax would make it home... someday... somehow... in one piece.

Manoj Rupra, born 1963 and educated at Durg, M.P. He is a novelist and a short story writer. Came into limelight with his very first short story 'dafan'. He has two collections of short stories and a recent novel 'pratisansar'. He lives in Nagpur.

Dhiraj Singh is a short-story writer (writing in English), essayist, journalist, abstract artist and translator. He has translated Asghar Wajahat's celebrated play 'Jisne Lahore Nai Dekhya Woh Janmya Nai' ('Unborn in Lahore', The Little Magazine, 2000). Currently he is Programming Consultant with Lok Sabha Television. He lives in Delhi and his art and writings can be seen on his blog: <http://bodhishop.blogspot.com>

ANITYA : THOUGHTS IN JAIL

Mridula Garg

Translated by
Seema Segal

Someone was at the gate.

'Anitya!' Avijit cried out.

'What's the matter, Bhai Saheb? You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'When did you come?' he asked.

'When you saw me.'

'Anyone else with you?' he asked warily.

'Yes, a friend, Shukla...'

'So, it *is* you...' The words were out before he could control himself.

Disconcerted, Anitya asked, 'Is anything wrong?'

'Chadha is dead!'

'When?'

'Today.'

By then Prabha and Shubha had come out.

'What are you saying Pitaji? Chadha uncle is really.. .?' exclaimed Prabha.

'Yes.'

'You were with him?'

'No, he was in Meerut. I heard only a while ago... after the last rites.'

They fell silent.

'I can't believe it,' Prabha broke the silence, 'he was so full of life... told us such amusing stories when he was here last.'

'About the time he was working under cover. How we laughed! What happened, was he ill?' asked Shubha.

'Yes,' Avijit sighed, 'he had been ill for twelve years.'

'Twelve years?'

'Didn't he tell you about it?'

'I never dreamt he was ill.'

'What was he ill with?' Prabha asked sombrely.

'Something or the other', Anitya butted in. 'Isn't death itself an illness. What did Chadha talk about?'

'About his undercover work mostly. Told us how he broke his leg... that really had us in splits!'

'How did he break his leg?'

'He was working disguised as a Christian priest those days. There happened to be a wedding in the church nearby when the real priest went down with measles. The bride and groom were there eager to be married but the padre was missing! Someone thought of Chadha uncle... what name had he taken those days?'

'Father Chalice', said Shubha.

'Yes, Father Chalice', Prabha recounted the tale with the same gusto with which Chadha had, trying to keep the man alive a while longer.

'Some people came to him and took him to the church. He realized what they wanted him to do only on reaching there. He had mastered baptism but a Catholic wedding! He had no inkling how to go about it. He panicked. All he could think of doing, at the spur of the moment, was to twist his leg on the way to the pulpit and fall flat on the ground. He was saved from the trauma of conducting the wedding but broke his leg!'

'He did not break it that way', Avijit blurted.

'How then?'

'It was in the jail.'

'You were in the jail with him, weren't you?' Anitya interposed.

'That was in 1932. He broke his leg later in 1942 in Fatehgarh Jail, when...'

'What else did he tell you?' Anitya did not let him finish.

'The story about Miss Bannerjee was equally exciting', said Shubha.

'It was incredible!' added Prabha.

'Tell us', said Anitya.

'She was also on the run in 1942. Where was she...?'

'Bombay.'

'Yes, Bombay. She was operating a People's Radio there under the name of Shahnaz. The day she found that the police were after her, instead of going into hiding, she went straight to the Collector's house. Told his wife she was collecting funds for a play by the Women's Club. She spoke English fluently... the

Collector's wife was duly impressed and asked her to stay for tea. The Collector turned up a while later. He looked surprised to see her but shook her hand and sat down to tea. When she got up to leave, he said nonchalantly, "Please use the back door, Miss Shahnaz."

"You know my name?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes. Also, that your real name is Kajal Bannerjee."

'She asked him if he had informed the police. "Not yet," he said,

"I'm a student of history. How can I forego the thrill of watching history being made before my eyes? Get rid of the radio and leave town... I'll inform the police after two hours." Miss Bannerjee thanked him, left by the back door and escaped the police.'

'Miss Bannerjee never talks about herself. If you ask her anything, she waves it away with a laugh.'

'Chadha never talked to you about the jail?' Avijit asked. It seemed he had not heard the story at all.

'No.'

'Did you know that all of them were in jail together,' Anitya broke in, 'Chadha, your father, Harish, Chatterjee, who else Bhai Saheb?'

'Saran.'

'That mole too!'

'Pitaji never tells us anything about the jail either', said Shuhha,

'What's there to tell?' said Avijit

feeling a little lighter. 'Chadha was the tough one, ready to fight at the slightest pretext. We were arrested on the 4th of January while demonstrating outside Anand Bhawan. All of us were put in the same barrack.'

Herded like cattle! Thirty people in one barrack. They had heard that the government had created A, B, and C classes in the jail and had hoped to be put in B—if not A—class as political prisoners. But that was for important people. The government wanted to give the rawest deal to the students; after all they were the future of the nation! So they got C class.

The iron gates of the prison closed after them... their clothes were taken away and they were asked to wear the regulation kurta and shorts of the jail. Avijit felt embarrassed. He was finicky about clothes. He washed his khadi dhoti and kurta to such perfection, taking out the wrinkles while drying them that his friends teased him, asking him who his dhobi was! To be forced to wear the crumpled kurta and shorts of C class! The kurta was still all right, but the shorts!

Chadha had laughed, 'Stand in a line, all of you. Let me see, who's the biggest joker of all?'

Avijit could not join in his laughter. It was never easy to join Chadha in anything.

'What did Chadha uncle do there?' he heard Shubha ask and was dragged

back to the present.

'We had proclaimed 26 January as the future Republic Day. We knew we could not celebrate it in the jail, but Chadha was not one to give up...'

He had stood up and raised the slogan of *VandeMataram*.

The boys from his and the other barracks soon joined him. The words 'Vande Mataram' resounded from each and every barrack around them! It was magic! For a while they forgot everything—the walls of the barrack, the iron gates of the prison, the threats of the warden, the disgust on the face of the jailer.

It was magic indeed!

Fleet-footed deer sprinting through the lush green forest... a caravan of wild cranes soaring high into the open sky... letter after letter unfolding its wings... vande matram... eleven cranes, soaring with outspread wings, heads held high, ready to touch the sky! A flock in flight... the beat of melody in space... the resonance of... freedom!

Then the warning bell clanged!

Baton wielding sepoy... whistle blowing wardens... the jailer barking orders! The melody turned into cacophony. But one voice soared on undeterred!

How does one feel when blows rain on the head and one can run for cover only within the four walls?

Ten steps forward, ten steps back... lathi blows everywhere... forward... backward... wherever one turns... no

escape anywhere... yet one continues to run with hands covering the head to save the skull from the blows. With what powerful yearning and hope does the will to live function in each one of us; let the bones of the back or shoulders break... so long as the skull remains whole, one may yet live, though half dead.

The blow had landed right on Chadha's head... no, his leg did not break in 1932. The moment he fell, the flock of cranes came crashing down to earth. A stunned silence followed...

'You were forbidden from saying 'Vande Mataram', weren't you?'

asked Shubha.

Avijit's yes was like a long drawn out sigh. 'There was a lathicharge soon after the slogan was raised; many were injured.'

'You too?' asked Prabha.

'No.'

She did not say anything but he felt compelled to retort, 'Not everyone has to get hurt.'

'Chadha uncle was.'

'Yes. He didn't try to save himself. He kept on shouting "Vande Mataram".'

'What happened then?' Shubha asked guilelessly.

'There was a delay in taking the injured to the hospital, so we went on a hunger strike.'

'You too?' Prabha asked again.

'Why not me?'

'Prabha, go get a glass of water', Anitya came to his rescue.

'You thought Chadha uncle was crazy, didn't you?' she insisted.

'Who said so?'

'I'm asking you.'

'Prabha, didn't you hear what I said? Go get a glass of water.'

'I'm going. What's the hurry?'

'There is. Get it.'

She went in.

'God knows what Kajal teaches them', said Avijit.

'Kajal... Bannerjee?'

'Yes.'

'She is here?'

'Yes, teaches Prabha.'

'Was she involved with Chadha?'

'No, she was involved with me and so is out to punish me. Chadha and she both... as if I did not suffer in the jail...'

Prabha brought the water and said, 'Mummy wants to know why everybody is standing at the gate. Has something happened?'

'God, I forgot!' said Anitya. 'I left Shukla with her. Was he there?'

'There was an odd looking guy.'

'Who's Shukla?' asked Avijit. It was good to talk of something else.

'A friend of sorts. Rather an interesting type. I had another friend

who had a penchant for looking in the distant future. Such farsighted people, as you know, are not good at seeing things close up. He had a clever business project in mind, according to his reckoning. He made some of his friends invest around twenty thousand each in it. It was all above board, nothing dishonest, each an equal partner. The project started with a bang but unfortunately soon went bust. He then devised an equally farsighted plan to save himself from the wrath of the partners. He committed suicide. Shukla was one of the bereaved partners. I don't know how he got my address but he came crying to me. What could I do? A man without money can only offer friendship. So he became my friend.'

'You'll now take him wherever you go?'

'No, I'll leave him here.'

'What!'

'Poor fellow sold off his wife's jewellery to become a partner. Now that he has lost everything, he is afraid to go home. Let him stay here for a few days... you could get him a job as an insurance agent or something... he'd go home after a while.'

'Is this an alms house?' Prabha exclaimed before Avijit could respond.

'No, a mad house', Anitya whispered to her.

'He needs help, Prabha,' Avijit rebuked her, 'of course he can stay for a few days.'

'There must be some four hundred million people who need help. Will you...'

'Let it go,' Shubha spoke up, 'Why do you go on and on?'

Taken aback, Prabha fell silent.

'Let's go inside,' said Anitya, 'Bhabhi must be getting worried.'

But Shyama was fine. She reclined on the bed while Shukla sat in an armchair by her side, reciting the tale of Yayati's devoted son Puru. She was not the only one listening with rapt attention. Khokhee sat at the foot of the bed and wonder of wonders, Sudhanshu was in Shukla's lap!

'He has eight children', whispered Anitya.

Shukla had gone to Swarna himself and taken Sudhanshu from her.

He could be useful after Swarna left, thought Avijit. The introduction and greetings did not last long as Shyama wanted him to carry on with the story. Avijit returned to the drawing room with Anitya. Prabha followed them. Shubha stayed on for a bit as Shukla's narration was rather dramatic... more like a musical play. She was enjoying herself but felt that Avijit might need her. So she went back to the drawing room a while later.

'Why did Chadha uncle and Miss Bannerjee leave you?' she heard Prabha ask as she came in.

Prabha was really impossible; once she latched to something, she hung on like a leech.

'Leave? What do you mean?'

'He left Gandhiji, did he not? Was it because of the head injury?'

'Where was the question of leaving; there was nothing left to leave. The movement was over by the time we were released from jail in 1934. Chadha was not one to leave anything because of an injury. He didn't even stay in the hospital beyond four days...'

He stopped mid-sentence. Why did Prabha have to dwell on the days that he had partially forgotten but was afraid to recall fully?

Chadha had returned to the barrack after four days in the hospital.

They were surprised to see him back so quickly after a serious injury.

'Discharged... so soon?' they asked him.

'Not discharged, but they did not insist on my staying.'

'Why would they? They are doctors, not your lovers', Harish said.

'Don't know about that but I do know there are no patients there.'

'What!'

'All of them are pretenders. They have got themselves admitted to the hospital to escape the hardships of jail. Remember that businessman we met the first day...?'

'The goldsmith who was moaning for the A class?' asked Chatterjee.

'Yes, and all of you so sympathetic! *Sethji, how come you got the C class?*'

'He was bent on boring each one

of us with his story, so we thought he might as well do it at one go.' Harish laughed, 'Remember how he reared up at the sight of the prison roti as if he had stepped on a snake!'

'He's in the hospital these days', said Chadha.

'I thought he must have got his class changed', said Chatterjee.

'He has put in an application. His relatives, friends, lawyer are all trying but can't breach the red tape. They have put the biggie in C class by mistake but can't trace where the mistake was made. So he is hospitalized with the dreadful disease of piles.'

'And he pretended to be a devoted Gandhian; spun the wheel without fail.'

'Still does that to pass time. He's not fortunate like us to have twelve seers of wheat to grind, and not know when the day began and when it ended.'

'Fine,' said Avijit, 'but what has that to do with your leaving the hospital.'

'An emergency case came in today. Everyone suddenly developed bad stomachs, afraid they might be asked to give up their beds to him and return to C class. I said shame on you all and walked out.' 'Piles is actually quite a dangerous disease', came from Saran.

'You have it too?' asked Chadha.

Saran was embarrassed momentarily but soon found a way out. If not piles, an itch would do! He got hospitalized now and then by giving a small bribe. But none of the others did. I passed

my full two years in C class. What right has Kajal to cast aspersions on me? It is true that I did not get beaten up like Chadha... after all I was not competing with him.

In any case he was crazy. If one man wanted to bash his head against a wall, did that mean others had to follow?

That day...

The jail Superintendent was to make his rounds to inspect the jail, so it was being thoroughly cleaned up. The prisoners were moved from the grindstone and put to washing floors. The Superintendent was rumoured to be a fiend for cleanliness. He inspected the floors and walls inch by inch and was especially disgusted by cockroaches and rodents. The prisoners were to keep the cockroaches and rats out of his sight. He was also known to never speak to a prisoner.

Chadha had the temerity to step up to him, throw his broom on the floor, and bellow, 'Political prisoners are not meant to sweep floors!'

Everyone, from the warden to the Superintendent, was dumb-struck. The other prisoners stood petrified. Chadha had turned and looked at them but no one had stirred. He was on his own.

'Twenty lashes', barked the Superintendent.

They had held him down and...

No, he did not want to remember.

They had warned Chadha that once

he entered the jail, it was all the same whether one was handed the loom or the broom. The great politician, Kamalnain himself had come down from his B class quarters and explained to them that chanting 'Vande Mataram', protesting, or inciting revolt had no place in the prison. All one had to do was to follow the rules and regulations; other things did not matter.

Everyone had tried to make Chadha understand that but he did not care. He thought he just had to raise his voice and the others would follow, the way they had when he had chanted 'Vande Mataram'. He had forgotten that seven or eight months in jail were enough to cool people's ardour. In any case they had been burnt once. Moreover, every other day the warden came up with a fresh rumour. They had no access to newspapers. Trapped in a cauldron, they clung to whatever filtered through the holes in the lid. Sometimes it was a letter, sometimes a chance remark of the warden. A few days ago, he had told them that Gandhi planned to go on a fast to protest MacDonald's Communal Award. The agenda of Independence had been shelved and he was intent on improving the lot of the untouchables. The Congress had accepted the principle of participation in the Governing Council. What possible ardour could be left and for what after that?

If Avijit had moved to Chadha's side, what then? He too would have suffered the lash...

The lash whistling over the naked back ... one, two, three, the blood spurting from the torn flesh, mingling to form bubbling streams! Four, five, six, seven... the streams merging in a rivulet, screams challenging consciousness. Eight... nine... an ocean of blood... a last burst of heightened consciousness! Fifteen, sixteen... delirium pounding on the sand of impending prostration... the broken mass of flesh hanging from a wooden board...

From the board hung Chadha... not Avijit but Chadha!

'Miss Bannerjee was saying' he heard Prabha, 'Chadha uncle was tortured in jail.'

'So,' thundered Avijit, 'what's new in that? What can you expect in jail if not torture?'

'Pitaji', Shubha cried out terrified.

Blind to his surroundings, his bloodshot eyes turned from Prabha and came to rest on her.

'By the time you were released from prison in 1934, the movement had been called off. Wasn't that why Chadha and Kajal Bannerjee drifted apart?' said Anitya.

'All of us did. Gandhiji called off the Movement', Avijit took hold of himself, then added austerely to Prabha, 'You should try to understand a situation fully before passing comments.'

He remembered that day in April 1934 when jailer Brown had personally told them that Gandhiji had called off

the Satyagraha.

If you told someone to jump into the river blindfolded and he did so believing that the river was full and landed on sharp rocks, how would he feel?

Jailer Brown usually did not think it worthwhile to talk to the prisoners' in C class. But he could not keep that stupendous piece of news to himself, so he had delivered it to them personally.

'Impossible!' Chadha had said.

'Impossible?' Brown smiled mockingly and placed the day's editorial on the table.

A newspaper!

A dozen hands grabbed it.

The pages came apart. The front page reached Avijit's hands. He began to read it aloud to prevent others from snatching it. Every word broke his heart over and over again.

Gandhiji had called off the Satyagraha. Avijit read the reason he had given but could not understand it. The listeners were equally puzzled. He read it out once, then started all over again.

The information I received in the course of a conversation about a valued companion of long standing was a revelation. He was not ready to perform the full quota of work in the jail and preferred instead to engage in his private studies. This was undoubtedly contrary to the principles of Satyagraha. More than the imperfection of the friend whom I love dearly, now more than ever,

this made me see my own weakness. My friend told me that he thought I had known of his weakness. I was blind. Blindness in a leader is unpardonable. I saw at once that I must, for the time being at least, be the sole active Satyagrahi.

That was all! Gandhiji had called off the movement for an insignificant reason like that. A single person made a mistake and he used it to bolster an ephemeral ethical principle and withdrew a National Movement, leaving thousands of people stranded! At the end of his statement he had counselled the Congressmen that they should try to learn the art and beauty of self-denial and voluntary poverty. They should engage in nation-building activities; promotion of khadi through spinning and weaving; spread of communal unity through irreproachable personal conduct towards one another in every walk of life; eradicating untouchability in every form; total abstinence from intoxicating drinks and drugs while working with addicts; and scrupulously cultivating personal purity. The performance of these services would mean living in poverty. Those who did not want to live in poverty could take up jobs in the cottage industry sector and earn minimal wages.

They looked at each other stunned.

'Will we get Independence by doing all that?' asked Harish.

'Gandhiji has always believed that if one's personal life was pure, other things will follow', said Saran.

He was unshaken as always.

'How?' asked Chatterjee.

'What's our aim, Independence or charity?' an infuriated Harish asked.

'Gandhiji says take care of the means and the end will follow.'

'Shut up!' said Avijit. 'Don't repeat his words like a parrot! Whatever Gandhiji may say, the question is what would happen to our goal of Independence now that the Movement has been called off?'

'Nothing', said Harish. 'This is the end.'

'No', Chadha spoke up. 'This is the beginning of the end. The end of slavery! We don't need Gandhiji. We shall fight and win freedom!'

The determination in his tone lit a ray of hope in their hearts when Brown broke in with, 'Why do you people need Independence?'

They had forgotten that jailer Brown was in their midst.

'What do you mean?' asked Avijit.

'This Gandhi of yours is really astute. He knows that India won't survive for two days once the British leave, that's why he talks of reform, not war.'

They fumed at his words but swallowed their fury and remained silent as no one had an answer.

Jailer Brown had said in a fatherly tone fit for dealing with errant young men, 'Why do you want to rot in prison? You are young; your future is before you; go home and study. There'll

be no dearth of jobs under the British rule.'

'We want freedom, not jobs.'

'Who cares what you want.' Brown had laughed contemptuously. 'Thousands of mad people like you have been hanged. We understand and the Congress understands that the British and India can never be parted.'

'Shut up!' Chadha had shouted.

There was dead silence in the barracks.

The mask of decency dropped from Brown's face and a flush of contempt and cruelty suffused it.

'Twenty lashes were not enough to bring you to your senses, need more, you bastard!' he said sharply and kicked him hard. The heavy boot caught Chadha, who fell on his face.

Then...

No, he did not want to remember; nor become a stranger in his house again.

Ever since he had met Kajal... something had happened which called for every ounce of his will power to stay in touch with the present.

How could he live clinging to the past like this?

Twenty years was not a short time span especially if one did not want to remember it. He had kept things in limbo for as many years... choosing to remember only that which was pleasant and comforting and did not weigh on the conscience, as Anitya would say...

but he had not said anything... It was Avijit himself who could not forget; with whom the past lived every moment of the day...

He did not want to remember but did. Kajal had visited him in jail for the last time, twenty years ago...

The people seated in the room became invisible to him and leaving them there in the present, Avijit walked out to the verandah and back in time.

Ten steps forward... ten steps back... then forward... he kept pacing, trapped within the four walls.

A man trapped in the jail eagerly looked forward to the Visiting Day... contact with the outside world could make him feel human for a while. That was where his thoughts lay day and night... in the outside world! The companions inside could never fill the void; they only increased it.

Ah for a touch of the outside world, however ephemeral!

One night, around ten, he happened to see a plane framed by the patch of blue that the prisoners called the sky, from the skylight of his cell. The outer world in flight! The prisoners ran as one man to the window... if only they could see the plane disappear far into the horizon! But how? The sky within the bars of the window was too miniscule an area. Avijit had not moved from the window for a long while, his strong arms pushing the others away... he had stood and stared into the distance... till the

adversary of the wind disappeared somewhere from his view.

He had left the window then, ran wildly to the door and started beating on it. He would not stay shut in a moment longer! Don't release us from the jail but let us at least go into the compound! Let us fly for a while with the plane in the sky! But no, the prisoners were locked in at night and let out only in the morning. A huge lock hung outside the door.

'Are we pigs to be locked up like this!' he shouted.

'Why are you ranting?' Chadha rebuked him. 'The plane did not come for you.'

He had gone listlessly back to the window and stood staring at the void spread across the sky.

Then came the Visitors' Day... he heard the warden say, 'You have a visitor.'

'Who is it?' he asked and hoped it was Anitya, not Pitaji who was always whining and complaining.

'It's one Kajal Bannerjee.'

Ecstasy... then terror! He wanted to refuse to meet her but the yearning for contact with the outside world made him go to her.

Had there been no grill between them, he was sure she would have run to him and thrown her arms around his neck as she had done two years ago... and equally sure, he would have held her tight and kissed her. The touch of her

warm body would surely have inflamed him! When he saw a female form approach him from a distance, he wanted to tear down the grill and run to her impetuously— as he had on the night he saw the plane— and take her in his arms! But the grill stood between them. They were saved from a great injustice!

Avijit from committing it and Kajal from bearing its burden! They were on either side of the barrier; not man and woman, but Kajal and Avijit.

She had never looked uglier. Sallow rough skin pitted with deep pockmarks!

A foul smell from the toilet nearby filled him with disgust. There was so much commotion in the room that he could barely hear her or himself. If they spoke loudly, everyone present would hear them.

If they dropped their voices, not even the other would hear. What Kajal had to say was not something to be shouted from the rooftop. But it did not deter her. It was Avijit who was embarrassed.

They had to talk standing as there was no place to sit.

'How are you?' she had asked.

'Fine.'

'Ma and Baba are going away to Patna.'

'Oh.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'What can I say?' he had pretended not to understand.

'Should I go with them or remain here till you are released...'

'What does Baba say?'

'Never mind Baba. What do you say?'

'What can I say? It's for you to decide.'

'I have given it enough thought; I'm asking you now. This is not the time to act coy. Tell me, will we be married after your release?'

He could not say yes or no.

'This is not the time to talk of these things.'

'Why not?'

'I'm in jail. Even if I'm released now, I'm sure to be arrested again, soon. My life is committed to the nation. I can't think of marriage.'

As he said this, he could see the pockmarks on her face deepen, turning the skin coal black.

'You don't want to think or there's some other problem?'

'Gandhiji says we should be celibate to devote ourselves fully to the nation and...' , he began but Kajal interrupted him.

'Forget him. What do *you* want?'

'I want the nation to be free. I want to get out of jail. Will it happen because I want it?'

'So ... should I ... go ... to Patna?' she asked in a tremulous voice.

He knew that any other woman would have been in tears.

He took refuge in cruelty.

'You are free. You can do what you want. I'm a prisoner. What advice can

I give you?’

‘I was also in jail, Avijit,’ she said, ‘but unlike you I did not turn into...’

‘Time’s up!’ A loud voice shattered the environs. Kajal’s sentence was lost in the cacophony.

Avijit returned to his barracks but dwelt on what the unheard words might have been.

What exactly had she said? Unlike you I did not turn into a coward... into a hypocrite... into a selfish wretch...

Avijit came to a stop before the cupboard in the wall. He opened the door gently and peered in. He saw all his things, the needle and thread, the scissors and knife, the shaving kit, the plate and cup arranged neatly. He felt a sense of relief and turned back.

Why did I feel a sense of relief? Why would it not be arranged properly? This was not the jail after all, where the neat arrangement of his razor and mirror on the shelf, had angered the authorities.

The warden had confiscated his

shaving brush and soap, and devil take him, his razor and even his precious mirror, saying, ‘This is a jail. You are not here to indulge your whims.’

Bastard! Avijit would never forgive him! He trembled with rage. The endless list of people he would not forgive! Not that anyone had ever forgiven him either.

He returned to the cupboard from the other end of the verandah.

If I were to be imprisoned on this verandah, I could last for years!

True, Kajal, I found a good job and married on being released from prison in 1934 but I was not to blame! Gandhiji had withdrawn the movement.

I could not run the movement alone, could I? He tried to lift his spirits by persuading himself to believe he had been right. It was another matter to convince Kajal.

He could not return to the room. The evening turned to night. He kept pacing, never more than ten steps each way...

Courtesy : Oxford University Press

Mridula Garg, born 1938, contemporary Hindi writer. She is the recipient of a number of prestigious awards, including the Vyas Samman for her novel *Kathgulah* in 2004; the Sahityakar Samman awarded by the Hindi Akademi; and M.P. Sahitya Parishad’s awards for her novel *Uske Hise ki Dhoop* and her play *Jadoo ka Kaleen*.

Seema Segal, runs the Munshi Premchand Memorial School in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, focusing on the underprivileged.

MEENA KUMARI

Kanan Jhingan

Translated by
Ghanshyam Sharma

*“Zindagi kya isi ko kehate hain
Jism tanha hai aur jaan tanha”*

(Is it what they call life?
alien to each other is the body and the soul.)

A very restless Alibux was waiting for the arrival of his third child at the doorway of the clinic of Dr. Gadre in Mumbai. ‘Blessed’ as he already was with two daughters ‘Khursheed’ and ‘Madhuri’, his sole desire was ‘only if Allah can show him the face of a son; when news broke he tried to come to terms with the third girl child but could not. ‘This girl I shall not take home’, he said to himself. He headed straight to an orphanage after his wife was discharged. They abandoned the newly born, derelict, on the staircase itself. Soon, within a couple of hours or so, the tears of the mother and his own self-reproaching conscience forced him to go to the orphanage. The child was brought back home.

The helpless body of the little child, while it lay inert on the staircase, had been infested with ants. Alibux condemned himself, and the mother embraced the baby to her heart. Later, whenever the girl committed any mischief, the vexed mother would shout at her, “Why did not those ants devour you.” Father christened her ‘Mehjabeen’ — the one whose forehead is like the moon.

Thus, ‘Mehjabeen’ set about her excursion of life on August

1, 1933. Father Alibux was familiar with the cinematic world, playing harmonium and writing *nazms*. Occasionally, he was offered some mediocre roles. However, he could not carve out a potential place that could sustain his family and his household. Wife 'Iqbal Bano' was a stage performer. Very few people know, in fact, that 'Prabhavati' also known as 'Iqbal Bano', the mother of 'Meena Kumari', hailed from the family of Rabindra Nath Thakur. Her mother Hemsundari was married into this family. When her husband died, she had to step out of the four walls. For survival of life, she had to enter the world of dance and drama.

Alibux and Iqbal Bano were privileged that they lived close to Roptara studio, where they used to send the elder daughter 'Khursheed' as a child artist. Having come of age, now she stopped getting work. Then, the mother started taking 'Mehjabeen' along with her. The child of six years wished to go to school, but her wishes could not prevail.

She debuted as 'Baby Meena Kumari' in *Farjande Vatan*, a film by Digvijay Bhatt. Her role in the scene was not to utter anything as she was supposed to let a cat lick her cheeks silently. The child shrieked in fear. But gripped with another stronger fear of the wrath of the mother, she completed the scene. At such a tender age, she could not make out anything of acting. There was a film in which she had to call out someone as 'father'. Baby Meena said many times that the person before her was not her

father. The role of brother was also beyond her understanding. She had no brother of her own. And if the fellow out there was her brother, why did he not live at her home with them?

The pain of not having attended a school for education pinched her all through her life. At an age when kids go to school, enjoy themselves, when their pains and pleasures affect the pride and happiness of their parents, Baby Meena Kumari delivered dialogues given by directors unknown to her, wearing artificial smiles and shedding glycerine tears. While talking to President Radhakrishnan much later she had said —"Poverty never condoned me from life of destitution and want. The beautiful years of education passed in vain for me."

Post shooting in the evening time, she would invariably enjoy the fun and frolics of childhood with sisters at home. Her elder sister recalls how they all would say that Munna (nickname) was haunted by some spirit; how she would scare them all, wearing rags of clothes like a rosary round her neck. How once, when she asked her to do some domestic chores, she smashed her (sister's) thumb in sheer mischief during grinding turmeric on a 'sill', and then she wept so bitterly herself, that all rushed to her rescue, rather than her sister's. Her sister's bleeding thumb was noticed later. A master was there who would teach her English. After the teacher would leave, she would play a teacher herself forcing

them all to learn by rote; say MAT—mat. If the sister did not say, she would threaten. Even when she was grown up enough, she would play hide and seek, hiding herself behind the closed doors, and then she would weep. Then she would come after a while and fight, “why didn’t someone come to find me.”

Films such as ‘Ganesh Mahima’ or ‘Veer Ghatotkach’ and ‘Aladin and the wonderful lamp’, with which Meena Kumari started her career, were legendary in nature. It was ‘Baiju Bawra’ with Bharat Bhushan as its hero that fetched her the ultimate renown as an actress. Released in 1952 this film ran for a hundred weeks. She got ‘best actress’ award in 1953, and her price soared to rupees 1 lakh from a paltry rupees 15,000. Meena Kumari had a narrow escape from drowning during the shooting of this film. During the picturisation of the song ‘*tu ganga ki mauj mai Jamuna ka dhaara*’ her boat was trapped in a whirlpool. Many people from among the unit jumped into the lake and she was rescued. In films such as ‘Dayraa’ and ‘Parineeta’ she played the roles of conventional Indian woman, as an embodiment of sacrifice, so alluringly that it become her own identity. In ‘Dayraa’ we have a 16 year old girl in the service of her ailing husband who is old enough to be her grandfather. the dialogues were fewer, but her eyes spoke a lot of her pain. In ‘Sharda’, ‘Ek Hi Raasta’, ‘Aarti’, ‘Dil Apnaa aur Preet Parayee’ she played the roles of

the same docile woman suffering in meek silence which qualified her to be more popularly known as ‘Tragedy Queen’. She also played some comic roles occasionally, such as in *Azad* and *Kohinoor*. ‘Mai Chup Rahungi’, ‘Aarti’, ‘Dil Ek Mandir’, ‘Kajal’, ‘Phool aur Pathar’ fetched Meena Kumari awards in quick succession.

‘Parineeta’, ‘Saheb, Biwi aur Gulam’ and ‘Chitrlekha’ are novels that are known to be classics of Hindi and Bangla literature. Meena Kumari breathed life into the roles of ‘Lalita’, ‘Choti Bahu’ and ‘Chitrlekha’. Blessed with physical charm externally and cerebral elegance internally, she was a poetess at heart. That is why, she could infuse life into the imaginative projections of Sharatchandra, Vimal Mitra and Bhagwati Charan Verma.

Production of ‘Pakeeza’ that began in 1958 had to be packed up halfway. Her separation with Kamal Amaroahi notwithstanding, Meena Kumari decided to restart the production. The blatant rejection by society, of a dancer and prostitute has been filmed very sensitively. Ghulam Muhammad’s music, Kamaal Amaroahi’s dialogues and the portrayal of Muslim society, together take the art form to its zenith. Meena Kumari had grown very feeble. So much so that she would collapse when dancing to the tune of, ‘Thade Rahio’ and ‘Sare raah chalte chalte.’ Kamaal Amaroahi would make her sit in front of him to take close-ups so that the dance

performance could be taken from Padma Khanna. Meena Kumari, even in this weakness, helped Padma rehearse her walking style upto her own satisfaction. Meena Kumari herself had designed the costumes of 'Pakeeza'. The Film was released on February 4, 1972. The film received a cold response. Death laid its icy hands on Meena Kumari in Saint Elizabeth Nursing Home on 31st March 1972 at 3:25. The film became such a huge hit as the news of her death broke out that it looked as if people were desperate to have one farewell glimpse of the departing Meena Kumari; who knows after all whether or not they will get an opportunity again to see her face.

Having reached a certain height of art, most artists find themselves automatically associated with scandals true and false. Meena Kumari was no exception to it. The pages in her diary cast light on her personality. Children who are rejected since their very birth, who are pushed into strenuous work are like bonded labourers, who have stepped the ladder of innocent childhood amidst false glamour away from the cozy ambience of family life, who have been victims of lustful predators from their own acquaintances, are injured for their life time, gripped with the feeling of insecurity.

On one occasion, during a meeting with film journalist Narendra Rajguru, Meena Kumari had given details of the indecent advances of director Mehboob.

During the shoot of 'Amar', Meena Kumari found his misdemeanours too excessive to put up with. When she rebuked him naggingly, she was expelled from the film, and Madhubala was called in to supersede her. The feeling of revenge did not subside even after this, and Mehboob in league with Zia Sarahadi the director of 'Footpath', hatched a conspiracy. A scene was devised in the film where Dilip Kumar was to slap Meena Kumari in her face. So many 'retakes' were taken for the scene that her bludgeoned face swelled. Jankidas, a character artist, had disclosed to Narendra Rajguru that Meena Kumari had been a victim of rape when she was 11 years old. (Dard ki khuli Kitab/ Rajguru)

Once Meena Kumari's arm was seriously injured in a car accident when she was on her way back from Mahabaleshwar, and her fingers were smashed. In every film after the accident she would wrap her injured fingers very nimbly with her dupatta or the pallu of her sari. When some one asked her once about how her fingers were injured she replied, "This is only the fingers, I have given away my whole life to films."

It was during these days when Kamaal Amrohi dropped in at the hospital to see her. Meena fell for him at this gesture of affection. Against the will of the parents she married him furtively, when she was 21 years and he was double her age. They fondly nicknamed each other as

'Chandar' and 'Manju'. Meena Kumari showered a lot of affection on Tajdar, the youngest son of Kamaal Amrohi. He still recalls fondly how he had gone to his *Abba* for a short trip of 15 days and when *Chhoti Amma* would not let him return till one and a half years.

The marriage lasted for 13 years. There was no clue regarding how the spouses were distanced from each other. His envy with the growing fame of Meena Kumari, his capricious attempts to govern her life forging his rights of superiority as a husband, and Meena Kumari's own insatiable thirst for love, all these together turned the love between Chandar and Manju into hatred and animosity

Writer Madhup Sharma (Aakhri Adhai Din) has referred to the excesses of Kamaal Amrohi. Meena's wish to experience motherhood remained unfulfilled because Kamaal Amrohi was not prepared for this. When she conceived once, he took her to a doctor on the pretext of counselling. She was injected and aborted in unconsciousness. When Meena conceived a second time, she kept it a secret for five months as Kamaal Amrohi had started living in Mahabaleshwar in the name of script-writing. Though he had deployed a manager named 'Wakar' to keep espionage on her — to note the people she would meet, the places she would go — and he was briefed about each and every detail. This time when he returned he caught hold of her hair, and dragged her down from the palang, beating her

mercilessly till she fainted. He also had her thrashed by his agent 'Wakar'. He told the doctors in hospital that she slipped in the bathroom many times, and therefore, was injured. When Meena Kumari gained her consciousness, she came to know that her desire to be a 'complete woman' was crushed again.

She was a champion of man-woman equality. Meena, in spite of her propensity to fight for her rights, withstood all this atrocity in silent resignation. If she would be late from shooting, Kamaal Amrohi would beat her again with a flog and she would collapse into injury and pain. But the very next day she would resume her shooting as per schedule. And those who knew it would be left with their eyes wide open. On one such occasion, Meena Kumari grabbed the flog in her palm and her whipping husband was all disbelief at his wife's audacity. Vigilance on her was strengthened. Wakar would stand at the doorway of her make up room. Once he prevented 'Gulzaar' from entering in. Meena ran out to hear the scuffle. When she rebuked 'Wakar' to know his limits and behave accordingly, Wakar slapped her in the face in front of all present. She did not go back to her home that day, rather she went to her Behnoi Mahmood's home for shelter. Kamaal Amrohi came up with many overtures of persuasion, but things had crossed their limits.

Did divorce take place between the husband and the wife? According to

Meena Kumari—

*“Taqdeer ne mara wo patthar,
meri kanch ki duniya toot gayee.”*

(The stone of my destiny shattered
the marble hopes of my world)

Kamaal Amaroahi and his son reject this version of divorce outright. Meena Kumari did not mention either of the two in her will. Her last rites were, however, performed in line with the wishes of Kamaal Amaroahi, and she was buried into the place of her choice. All rituals were performed in conformity with ‘Shia’ community’s conventions. Kamaal Amaroahi’s claims of ownership on Meena Kumari are grounded in this. He also claimed that he could have invalidated her will in the capacity of her husband, but that he kept silent giving respect to her wishes. Meena Kumari completed ‘Pakeeza’ with whatever power was left in her body even after being estranged from her husband. She did not want Kamaal Amaroahi to bear any loss on account of her.

While talking of love, She had said once

“I tasted the honey of love in the lap of my mother, thereafter my share of love in life was evaporated and was lost in the farthest skies.”

Spicy stories of Meena Kumari’s fondness for Bharat Bhushan, Pradeep Kumar and Dharmendra were talked about notoriously in the world of films and

magazines. Curious Journalists looking for spicy news made much fuss about these rumours. Some even dared to christen her ‘nymphomaniac’ because of her lust for insatiable love.

Dharmendra was a new artist. Meena Kumari tried her utmost to help him succeed. She believed that “when a newly born baby learns to walk, his toddling steps need the support of an elder’s fingers. Every artist coming to film industry is like that newly born; he gets firm footing when someone extends his help to him.”

Having attained success once, Dharmendra sidelined the supporting hand. After all, he was married. Meena Kumari would have written these lines under similar situations:

*‘Hans–hans ke Jawan dil ke hum
kyon na chune tukde
Har shakhsa ki kismet me inaam nahi
hota.’*

(Why won’t I pick the ruins of my heart and yet smile,
Reward can’t be, after all, the kismet of all rank and file.)

*‘Tukde-tukde din beeta, dhajjee-
dhajjee raat milee.
Jitna Jiska aanchal tha, utni hi saugat
milee.’*

(We lived our days in fractions, we had our patched nights,
We all had our endowments, though with our fated rights.)

Bitter experiences of her life endowed

beauty, delicacy and sweetness to her tongue, behavior and her overall personality. She never foul mouthed anyone. She was always the Meena Didi in the studio. She called everyone by their names, be it lightman, waiter or anyone else. People would remain wonderstruck to find her prodigious memory remembering so many names together. At their surprise she would laugh and say, "If I can cram the dialogues of Khalil Saheb, then what is so special about these small names." She loved to address Nargis as 'Baaji'. who extended her solacing shoulder to the aggrieved Meena Kumari whenever she needed it.

Narendra Rajguru has underscored some idiosyncrasies of Meena Kumari's nature. If someone, for instance, happened to touch her even unintentionally, she would immediately retaliate by touching them back in the same part of the body. She believed that all her diseases would pass on to the person whose nose she would touch first.

She was so fond of eating stale roti, cooked the previous night, with green chilly that she would weep like a little child if she were not given the same in the morning.

She was an all time Samaritan. In an instance, a man asked her for 500 rupees for the treatment of his daughter. She gave away 5000/- rupees. How ironical that, on the death of such a magnanimous and bountiful princess,

there was no money in the account for the payment of hospital bills. It was Dr. K.M. Shah who paid on her behalf. "Live or die whatever I must, it will be only by your hands Doctor." She would say to him. It still pains him to recall that he could not save her from the disease of 'liver cirrohsis'. Such a fatal disease was coupled with equally dangerous habits of Meena Kumari. She never took a '*paan*' without '*zarda*', when spicy meat and wine joined the fray, the trio destroyed her heart irrevocably. Often she would remove the oxygen pipe from her face and say, "*Jara paan ki gilori dena.*"

If Meena Kumari were not an actress, she would have been a complete *Shaira* (Urdu poetess). She always considered the art of poetry superior to acting. "This acting that I do has one disadvantage about it — this art was not born in me from within the imagination. The concept belongs to one person, the character to another, script to a different writer, and the direction to someone else. Only what I write is originally born from within me, representing what I wish to say." In her will Meena Kumari has entrusted Gulzaar with the onus of getting her *nazms* (songs) and diaries published. Gulzar still wonders why he was chosen for it, though he carried out the responsibility very well.

In fact, her poetic couplets, and *lyrics* are attempts to give voice to pain. The pain that had thawed in her heart like a Himalaya, and melted out like a river

in the streams of *nazms*. She was a dreamer by instinct. She would say, "I would catch every star of the milky way." How unfortunate that there was not even a single shining star in her share of life. But this could not prevent her from dreaming.

"I weave dreams. I embrace them and go to sleep.

I join them in their fanciful flights, and wander across the unlimited skies."

She was a self-annihilating woman who had taken pain as the sole object of her life, heading towards it with deliberate steps, like a 'thorn bird' that sings sweet melodies, though itself sitting

on some thorny plant piercing every pore of its soft existence, and bleeding.

"Chand tanha hai, aasma tanha Dil, mila hai kahan kahan tanha Raah dekha karega sadiyon tak chhod jayenge ye jahan tanha."

(The moon is lonely, and the sky a wilderness

And all along this heart has been alone

The world will look for me down the ages, but

I will leave it for good, and leave it all alone.)

Courtesy: Kadambini monthly

Kanan Jhingan, born 1938, Karachi (undivided India), educated and worked at Delhi. Kanan was reader in Hindi at Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi from 1961 to 2003. Author of seven books, she specialises in writing on films and philosophy. Kanan lives in Rohini, Delhi.

Ghanshyam Sharma, is rajbhasha adhikari and deputy manager, State Bank of Hyderabad. He translates from Hindi to English. He lives in New Delhi.

ABBU NE KAHA THA: STORIES UNPACKING SWAG OF PANGS

Rohini Agrawal

Translated by
Sanjay Dev

The evaluation of literary contribution of storyteller Chandrakanta who carved out a special niche in Hindi storytelling by poignantly depicting the sufferings of Kashmiri migrants, is particularly important from two angles. One, for an attempt at capturing the woman's destiny, pains and imagination by taking them beyond their immediate, routine surroundings and judging them in the context of stark, subjective, politically and socially sensitive situations, where she encounters more the grotesque, horrific faces, activities and apprehensions than the experiences restricted to the safe confines of her home and family. And two, for the evaluation of body blow to Kashmir which remains ever fragile because of international political equations. Thus the ambit of Chandrakanta's concerns is wider, so much so that it stretches beyond the known feminine caustic writing and conventional prescription for communal opposition. May be today poet Agnishekhar, story teller Sanjana Kaul and Kshama Sharma may have registered their presence in Hindi literature, but it was Chandrakanta who first took up the gauntlet of presenting the Kashmir problem, passing through critical phase in the turbulent eighties, with courage and stout convictions. This socio-political, cultural journey of Chadrakanta reaches its culmination in Katha Satisar, a voluminous novel conferring Vyas award on which is as if the intelligentsia underscores the density of and demand for solution to the Kashmir problem. The journey

is made via novels like 'Eilan Gali Jinda Hai', Jahan Vitasta Bahti Hai and spans numerous stories. Chandrakanta's recent story collection, 'Abbu ne kaha tha' is an extension of the sensibility depicted in 'Katha Satisar'. A collection of eleven stories, this book touches and moves human sensibilities from various angles. While from factual viewpoint, these stories provide a glimpse into the tormented, alienated mindset torn between one's own and aliens in the utterly impersonal and informal climate of foreign soil, they also keep introducing us to the dying, innocent, human intimacies turning into victims of nefarious designs born of terrorist insurrections, political chicanery and blinding cavern of selfishness within the country's borders. In fact the diversity of Chandrakanta's story writing is the periodic extension of the same situation that is unavoidable and urgent. 'Abbu ne kaha tha', 'Shayad Sanvad', 'Jalkund ka rang aur Nusrat ki aankh' and 'Lajawab' these four stories bring alive the sufferings of bruised ego, shattered dreams and disorientation of Kashmiri Pandits' lives in exile. Ending up at a dead end, these stories make the situation pitiable and horrific; complex and unresolvable by depicting the sufferings as desperation; bruised ego as martyrdom and shards of shattered dreams as petrified melancholy. A stubborn situation of making dialogue impossible despite desire to hold one, where nobody is allowed to open the blocked doors of pact or

agreement, peace or brotherhood.

Of course, the pangs of displacement are sharp as needles, sharpening the realization of having been rendered rootless and rudderless. Don't the same pangs offer the reasoned passion to unite humanity, know the core of humanity and play a human innings full of human responsibilities? Unlike the 'indian' refugee who migrated to northern India upon being displaced from Punjab in Pakistan following drawing of new geographical borders during 1947 partition? They lived every bit of having been robbed and beaten, terror and everything, the moments and shades of them all, without letting their beings get subsumed by the riverine flow of time. They picked themselves up, dusting off every suggestion of grudge and rankle, evolved themselves anew, and made themselves necessary in changed state of affairs and environment. This is the way civilizations get on, and shape past by putting it alongside new changes in the name of culture. Whatever in present is our own; what lies beneath our feet is our home. The resilient human strength of aligning doesn't stay anchored to ancestral soil, smell, air and other boons, rather it extends the symbolic home and keep spreading humanity. Stories of Chandrakanta deeply underline the characteristic structure and obvious distinctness of Kashmiri migrants and Punjabi refugees. Nostalgia emerges as the leitmotif in Chandrakanta's entire writings and what remains is an attempt

at justifying it. As the female protagonists in 'Jalkund ka rang and Nusrat ki Aankh' get back to grandeur of Kashmir valley, don't they have reasons to rejoice? They have justified reason to rejoice as they recall" I have passionately loved every nook and corner of the valley; have cried with falling leaves and kept dancing with the smell of rejoice. The feeling of insouciance coming from" May the plains welcome those..whose.." is also justified, so what if this feeling was tinged with shade of contempt? Contempt is in fact a projection of our insolent ego that tries to prove itself to be superior by getting entrenched. " The air of plains only robs the face of glow...with us Kashmiris, neither air of plains, nor water agree; and as food, what ? Dal, Roti, Bhindi, Tinde. Oh, Allah don't have me tell a lie, I feel a certain dryness. Am pining for my 'hakh bat'. And moreover it is hot. Ajhad bile, itchiness, oh no. As if someone has nettled with 'bicchubuti'. Besides there is also this feeling of having the distance stretched by alluding to maintaining a certain distance with 'other'. In such a case, aloofness born of isolation is not wholesome matter, it wears thick with the sense of insecurity and stress. Whether it is master Ratanlal, held haplessly captive by terrorists in 'Abbu ne kaha tha' or the oldie Neelkant who has returned to the valley upon getting released from Jammu refugee camp after a twelve- year gap, in search of their roots,relations, home land and sense of

belonging, both have found in the valley only killing, estrangement, chilling silence and life creeping in the dense, black eternal abyss. One can derive the pleasure of creating a sharp contrast by placing the picture of throbbing, vibrant, soft,verdure of the valley against this drab, dreary scenario, but those salutary human options cannot be explored which implant new life in the parched existence of Hiroshima tragedy. Perhaps the writer in Chandrakanta doesn't want to see this side as she herself wants to play-act the part and live in nostalgia to keep her sufferings alive. Perhaps she is familiar with her emotional weakness, therefore particularly in story collection 'Abbu ne kaha tha' she rises above the lamenting emotionality and creates characters like Nusrat (Jalkund ka rang aur Nusrat ki aankh) and Rahamatullah(Shayad Sanvad) and Fatima(Abbu ne kaha tha) who unlike displaced pandits are facing the curse of terrorism, and coming in for a lot of flak as terrorists from international community.

The pangs and sufferings of the displaced Kashmiris of this remarkable story bear a wonderful parallel with isolation of the Indian family in the story 'Raat mein sagar.....Since there are our physical compulsions behind the opted isolation in America, it becomes easier to lacerate the isolation-encouraging American culture in place of momentary foolhardiness of returning to one's roots. Taking recourse to minute observation

in an imaginatively artistic way, the way the authoress has captured the loneliness, compulsion and guilt-conscience of man, is indeed commendable. The dying human relations in pursuit of mirage of material comforts in today's globalized era, present a supplementary on Kashmir problem where human relations have little value in fulfilment of one's supremacy and existence.

But the authoress wants to maintain the beauty and strength of human relations in all her stories. She feels hurt that towering ego of the individual wants to trample each moment of this boon of human life. Whether it is story like 'Lagatar Yuddha' or 'Is daud mein kahani'; 'Puraskar' or 'Sapne mein Gulab'- somewhere the feudal structure in marriage institution has trampled the woman's existence; elsewhere red tape has broken man's ego. Feudalism exists not only within the system, but deep inside man too. It finds echo in placation, sycophancy and nepotism, and together they take no time to trample a talent that dares to stand on its own. Thus the story 'Puraskar' turns into an attempt to trace the origin and solution of all problems of human society.

Among the interesting stories of the collection, two stories 'Lagatar Yuddha' and 'Chuppi ki dhun' need mention. The story 'Lagatar Yuddha' attempts to reveal the cracks within a happy, successful and wealthy divorcee, and belittle her entire achievements, history of triumphs, in the same breath. Evaluated from

feminist viewpoint, this story can possibly be considered a misogynist story but what is required is to psyche out what all goes on in the mind of a woman, or for that matter, any reasonable man is not any 'ism' or ideology, rather a reasonable human insight. Who wouldn't want to live a fulfilled life of mutual harmony, consent and intimacy? Who wouldn't want to resist the unwanted brutal invasion of feudal, domineering forces on one's self respect? Who wouldn't want to establish one's own self in the battle of existence. Who wouldn't want to shape future to strengthen the ground beneath one's feet? Having been broken nobody wants to suffer the pains of self-exile in isolation, but if left with no option, if the suffering comes to one's lot why not make it one's strength? Gurpreet of 'Laughter Yuddha' couldn't free herself of the horrendous memories of her husband despite shaking off the brutalities of her husband, but she is so conscious that she doesn't allow herself to be a poor dab even after shedding blood. It is this positive assertiveness of hers that finds creative expression in doing excellent work. This assertiveness makes this story including Gurpreet special and different from other Kashmir-centric stories. The obstinacy to live on one's own conditions against the piercing adversities; the obstinacy to make one's surroundings full of life and carefree.

'Chuppi ki dhun' is not a superficial love story, rather it is a mature story

suggesting the kernel of love. Love is neither stark attraction, nor oblivion of self. Love is the main factor of deliverance. But with the ultra-mundane feeling of deliverance, it links the glorious sense of man's responsibility towards humanity to a tenuous link of intimate relations; it is here that fetters and deliverance, relation and interaction lose their physical meaning and start creating a

new lexicon. Here silence speaks; distances unite, and absence makes its presence felt every moment and permeates the existence of the lover to every part of the beloved.

All told, this story collection of Chandrakanta is worth reading. Repeating the momentum and style of the author's writing for which she is known!

Rohini Agrawal : born 1959, Emerging as an important literary critic, Rohini has written widely on contemporary Hindi fiction. She is professor of Hindi at Rohtak University.

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.

CONTRIBUTORS' ADDRESSES

1. **Neelabh** : 219, Bhagat Colony, Block A/2, West Sant Nagar,
Delhi-110084
2. **Jairatan** : C-12/14, DLF City, Phase-I, Gurgaon-122002
3. **Badri Narayan** : G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad
4. **Mausumi Mazumdar** : G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad
5. **Ravinandan Sinha** : 202, Preeti Enclave, Chandni Chowk, Kanke Road
Ranchi-834008
6. **Mridula Garg** : E-421, Ground Floor, Greater Kailash-II,
New Delhi-110048
7. **Seem Segal** : C-2/4061, Eros Garden, Charmwood Village Road,
Faridabad, Haryana-121009
8. **Subhash Sharma** : D-71, Nivedita Kunj, R.K. Puram, Sector-10
New Delhi-110 022
9. **Bharat Bharadwaj** : C-60, I Floor Shivalik, Malviya Nagar,
New Delhi-110017
10. **Ravindra Mishra** : A-26, Shakti Apartments, Sector-9, Rohini
Delhi-110085
11. **Manoj Rupra** : Rabnoor, Plot No. 165, Christian Colony, Bhikoos Bagh,
Nagpur, Maharashtra
12. **Dhiraj Singh** : 1/7D, Block C, III Floor Express View HIG Flats,
Sector 105, Noida-201304
13. **Rohini Agrawal** : 258, Housing Board Colony, Rohtak-124001(Haryana)
14. **Manisha Kulshreshtha** : manisha@hindinest.com
15. **Ishita Siddhartha** : 537/121, Puraniya, Near Railway Crossing,
Aliganj, Lucknow-226024
16. **Sanjay Dev** : A-9/38, Sector-18, Rohini, Delhi – 110085 Mob: 9971008165
17. **Kashinath Singh** : B-61, Brij Enclave Colony, Sundarpur, Varanasi (U.P.)
18. **Minu Manjari** : C/o Sri Vinod Anupam, B-53, Sachivalay Colony, Knkarbagh
Patna – 800 020; Tel - 09835699558
19. **Ghanshyam Sharma** : Deputy Manager, State Bank of Hyderabad,
Karol Bagh Branch Delhi
20. **Prof. Satya Chaitanya** : 151 New Baradwari, Jamshedpur 831001.
21. **S.S. Toshkhani** : Flat 8050 D-8, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi
22. **Kanan Jhingan** : 48 Swastik Kunj, Sector 13, Rohini, Delhi-110085