

A Journal of
Mahatma Gandhi
Antarrashtriya
Hindi Vishwavidyalaya

hINDI
L A N G U A G E
D I S C O U R S E
W R I T I N G

Volume 4
April-June 2009

Editor
Mamta Kalia



ज्ञान शान्ति मैत्री

Published by
Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University

Hindi : Language, Discourse, Writing

A Quarterly Journal of Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya
Hindi Vishwavidyalaya
Volume 4 Number 2 April-June 2009

R.N.I. No. DELENG 11726/29/1/99-Tc

© Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya

No Material from this journal should be reproduced elsewhere without
the permission of the publishers.

The publishers or the editors need not necessarily agree with the
views expressed in the contributions to the journal.

Editor : **Mamta Kalia**

Coordinator : **Rakesh Shreemal**

Editorial Office :

E-47/7, Ist Floor Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-II
New Delhi-110 020
Phone : 09212741322

Sale & Distribution Office :

Publication Department,
Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya
Hindi Vishwavidyalaya
Po. Box 16, Panchteela, Wardha - 442 001

Subscription Rates :

Single Issue : Rs. 125/-

Annual - Individual : Rs. 400/- Institutions : Rs. 600/-

Overseas : Seamail : Single Issue : \$ 20 Annual : \$ 60

Airmail : Single Issue : \$ 25 Annual : \$ 75

Published By :

Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya, Wardha

All enquiries regarding subscription should be directed to the
Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya, Wardha

Printed at :

Ruchika Printers, 10295, Lane No. 1
West Gorakh Park, Shahdara, Delhi-110 032

2 :: April-June 2009

हिन्दि

हिन्दि

LANGUAGE DISCOURSE WRITING

April-June 2009

Contents

Heritage

Lal Pan Ki Begum	Phanishwarnath Renu	7
------------------	---------------------	---

Focus

He and the world around him	Amarkant	17
Assassins	Amarkant	38

Short Story

My Option	Rajee Seth	45
The Letter	Akhilesh	52
In The Wilderness	Sara Rai	64
Role Model	Mahua Maji	71
Future Imperfect	Oma Sharma	86
Pinty's Soap	Sanjay Khati	107
Career, Girlfriend and Vidroh	Anuj	115

Poetry

Seven Poems	Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari	122
Four Poems	Kuber Dutt	133

Four Poets	Kumar Ambuj	139
	Vimal Kumar	141
	Bodhisattva	144
	Nilesh Raghuvanshi	149

Discourse

Saaket	Nand Kishore Naval	151
Was Ambedkar Only A Dalit Leader	Lal Bahadur Verma	178
Japanese Sources of Ajneya's Poetry :		
An Asian Discourse	Rita Rani Paliwal	183
The Anti-Colonial Discourse of		
Ramvilas Sharma	Prannay Krishna	194

Films

Hindi films On Russian Screen	P.A. Barannikov	204
-------------------------------	-----------------	-----

Language

Eloquent Parrots	Ruth Vanita	208
Hindi : At Home In Trinidad	Suresh Rituparna	213
Teaching Language : Philosophy,		
Goals And Practices	Susham Bedi	220
Hindi And Urdu Are Being Taught		
In Japan For A Century Now	Harjendra Chowdhary	226

Editor's Note

Not long ago, in the back gear of time, there was a tendency to look to the west for inspiration and guidance in literature, analysis and exploration. Fifty years of effort and opportunity have turned the wheel full circle and the clarion call today is to go East. Dr. Nirmalya Kumar, Professor of marketing and co-director, Aditya Birla India Centre at London Business School, U.K. acknowledges this pull of the east when he says in his latest book 'India's Global Powerhouses' that the world is back to where it was 500 years ago, when, inspired by Marco Polo, explorers such as Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan and Vasco Da Gama left Europe seeking fortunes in the east.

In this issue we have Phanishwar Nath Renu's classic short story 'lal pan ki begum', in our column 'heritage' and Amarkant in focus. Amarkant's presence in Hindi fiction has been insistent and consistent though he defies the tags of trilogies framed by literary critics. He started writing in the fifties when nai kahani movement blossomed but their trilogy hailed Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshwar and Rajendra Yadav. Another set of three writers boasted of Bhairav Prasad Gupta, Markandeya and Shekhar Joshi. Amarkant survived in spite of being in the wilderness by the strength of his memorable short stories like zindagi aur jonk, hatyare, deputy collectory and dopahar ka bhojan. He never lost his nerve and verve. His reflections on his life and times are equally noteworthy.

Our national poet Maithili Sharan Gupta's long poem 'Saket' has stood the test of time despite the debris and it is researched and analysed by prominent literary critic Dr. Nand Kishore Naval. We carry its translation by Prof. Ravi Nandan Sinha. Prannay Krishna, a young academician and professor of Hindi attempts a fresh study of Ramvilas Sharma. Dr. Rita Rani Paliwal has lived and worked in Japan for a number of years. She writes about Japanese sources of Ajneya's poetry. When Ajneyaji introduced 'haiku' in Hindi, we felt quite involved. His haikus were not only short and crisp, they were also accompanied with some good visuals. The professor

historian Dr. Lal Bahadur Verma shares his concerns about the marginalisation of Ambedkar as only a dalit leader.

The poetic scene in Hindi is miscellaneous. Kamalini Dutt and Purva have translated Kuber Dutt. We carry some of Vishwa Nath Prasad Tiwari's poems. This poet with a long name has had longer innings at writing and editing. He has six collections of poetry besides several books of criticism and travelogue. Younger poet Jitendra Shrivastav has made a selection of some prize winning poets and their poems have been translated by Shobha Narayan.

Our short story section has authors from the younger generation who have experimented with the narrative in a different manner. We have short stories by Akhilesh, Mahua Maji, Sara Rai, Anuj, Sanjay Khati and Oma Sharma, Rajee Seth, a senior author, is also there with her short story 'my option'.

Susham Bedi of Columbia University, New York and Ruth Vanita of University of Montana have interesting observations about learning and teaching of Hindi. Suresh Rituparna reflects on the pervasiveness of Hindi in Trinidad. P.A. Barnnikov the Russian-Indo scholar, edits a film magazine in Russia and gives us a detailed account of the popularity of Hindi films in Russia.

During the past quarter a number of writers have passed away: Vishnu Prabhakar, Chandrakiran Sonreksa, Ram Murti Tripathi and Nayeem will henceforward live for us in their words alone. In the previous issue Dr. Kedar Nath Singh's lecture on Nirala was taken from hindi journal Pakshadhar Varta, whose name missed a mention. The omission is regretted.

We request our readers to convey their reactions via our email: editor.hindi@gmail.com. Our journal is now at internet site: www.hindivishwa.org

Handa k

LAL PAAN KI BEGUM

Phanishwarnath Renu

Translated by
Madhu B. Joshi

“Why, aren’t you going to the *naach* Birju’s mother?”

Birju’s mother sat in her courtyard, seething with anger, a small mound of boiled sweet-potatoes in front of her. Seven year old Birju had begged for sweet-potatoes and having received more than his due share of tight slaps, was now rolling in dust. Champia too had earned her rightful share of hiding...the chit left in the afternoon to buy molasses from *sahuain’s* shop, it’s lamp-lighting time now and no sign of her. Just let her return! The dog-flies were eating Baangad the billy-goat alive and he was jumping like crazy. Birju’s mother had found a justification to vent her anger on him: that blossoming chilly bush at the back- who else could have feasted on that? As she picked a lump of mud to throw at Baangad her neighbour Makhni *phua* (aunt) called out-“Why, aren’t you going to the *naach* Birju’s mother?”

“Birju’s mother would go if she didn’t have anyone to control her.”

The sharp, scalding answer pierced *phua’s* heart, Birju’s mother dropped the lump-“ The dog-flies are pestering poor Baangad. Hey....urrrr....aay aay...!”

Birju hit Baangad with a stick. Birju’s mother had half a mind to thrash Birju with the same stick but she heard the laughter of the women near the *neem* tree, she stopped in her tracks and threatened him, “just you wait, your *Bappa* has allowed you to become free with your hands! So you are forever hitting folks! Just you wait!”

Near the *neem* tree old Makhni *phua* was presenting her side of the case in the court of the *panbharanis* (women who fetch water)- “just look at this Birju’s mother! Such pride over the money they made selling four *mun* (a country measure, about 36 kg.) of jute! Now you all do justice! For days now she has been telling everyone in the village, ‘yes, this time Birju’s *bappa* says he is going to take us to the *naach* at Balrampur in the bullock cart. If one has bullocks, a thousand men will be happy to lend you their carts.’ So I reminded her the women are getting ready to go to the *naach*, cooking....May my mouth burn! Why, oh why did I have to remind her? And you know what my precious Birju’s mother said?”

Twisting her toothless mouth Makhni *phua* mimicked, Birju’s mother.

Jangi’s daughter-in-law has no fear of Birju’s mother, she spoke loudly, “*phua* if you too had offered brinjals at *sarbe sittalinti haakim’s baasa* (the land settlement officer’s quarters) wearing a flower bordered saree, you too would have been granted a *rased* (counterfoil) for two-three *bighas* (country measure of land) of paddy fields! Then you too would have had ten *muns* of jute and you would have bought a team of oxen! And then *phua* you too would have had a hundred men salivating after you.”

Jangi’s daughter-in-law has a big mouth. A town girl who was born and brought up close to the railway station she’s been in the village for all of three

months and already has featured in several verbal matches with the veterans of the *kurmatoli* (the kurmi quarter, kurmis are an agrarian community). Jangi, her father-in-law is a well known thief, her husband Rangi the main *lathait* (weilder of staff) of the *kurmatoli*. So Jangi’s daughter-in-law is always raring for a fight.

Jangi’s daughter-in-law’s loud voice hit Birju’s mother like a bullet. She had an equally hard hitting repartee at the tip of her tongue but controlled herself remembering the adage- if you hit a cesspool with a lump be prepared to be splashed with shit...

Swallowing the searing words Birju’s mother yelled for her daughter Champia, “arrey Champia, just you come home, I will twist your scraggly neck and throw your ugly head in the fire! You are getting out of hand....now the cinema-song singing harlots are in the village....I will teach you to sing *baaje na muraliya re!* Hey you Champiaa...You....”

Jangi’s daughter-in-law relished the tang of Birju’s mother’s words. Balancing the pitcher on her waist she swung her hips saucily, “let’s go *didiya!* Lal Paan Ki Begum lives in this *mohalla!* Don’t you know- day and night electric lamps burn bright here!”

For some inexplicable reason ‘electric lamps burn bright’ made the women laugh hard. *Phua’s* gap-toothed lisp rose above the titter, “*saitan ki naani* (you naughty girl)!”

For a moment Birju's mother was mad with rage. 'Electric lamps burn bright!' Three years ago, around the time the land settlement survey was going on, the jealous bitches of the village had spread the story that in Champia's mother's courtyard day and night electric lamps burn bright! In Champia's mother's courtyard day and night the staccato tap of hard boots resounds like horse-hooves drumming the hard earth. Eat your hearts out, you jealous bitches! And you are going to absolutely kill yourselves when you set your eyes on the arm-loads of golden paddy!

Champia arrived licking her molasses-smearred fingers and receiving a tight slap from her mother shrieked, "why do you hit meeee? *Sahuain* takes time delivering orders...!"

"Don't give me this *Sahuain* takes time stuff! Aren't there other shops? I will kill you if I hear you sing that *baaje na muraliya re* again you bitch! You are picking up tricks from these fast *teesun* (railway station girls) girls!"

Birju's mother then tried to gauge if her voice had reached Jangi's shanty.

Meanwhile letting bygones be bygones Birju had risen from the dirt floor and was eyeing the molasses greedily.... Had he accompanied his sister to *sahuain's* shop she would definitely have given him some molasses. But he had stayed back for the sweet potatoes and his mother had....

"*Mayya*, give me a drop of molasses"

Birju spread his palm, "a wee drop!"

"Why a drop? I am throwing the pot away, go and lick as much as you want to! No *meethi roti* (sweet roti) today! ... *Meethi roti* ! Hah...." Birju's mother pushed the mound of boiled sweet-potatoes under Champia's nose, "peel them or else...."

Ten year old Champia knows her mother is going to shake her by her hair, find a million faults with her- "why do you sit with your legs spread, you hussy?" Champia knows her mother's anger.

Birju tried the sweet-talk approach, "*Mayya*, may I too peel the sweet-potatoes?"

"No way!" His mother scolded him, "I know what that means- one in the basket, three in your belly! Go, bring our wok from Sidhu's....his wife borrowed it for an hour and happily forgot to return. Go quick!"

Stepping out of the yard Birju cast a longing eye at the sweet-potatoes and molasses. Champia furtively threw him a sweet-potato.....Birju dashed out....

"The sun has set. It's lamp-lighting time and the blessed cart is...."

Champia blurted out- "no one from the *koiritola* gave their bullock cart *mayya*. *Bappa* said-tell your mother to be ready, I am going to *Maldahiyatoli* (Malda muslim quarter)' to borrow *Miyanjaan's* cart...."

Birju's mother's face fell. No one from

the *koiritola* gave their bullock cart! Fat chance *Maldahiyatoli's* Miyanjaan will give his cart when our own village-folks won't be neighbourly! Why peel the sweet-potatoes?...This man will take us to the *naach*! Riding a bullock cart! Ha.....

Birju returned wearing the wok like a helmet- "see, millatory cap! Hit it with anything. Nothing can break it."

Champia didn't react, she sat peeling sweet-potatoes busily. Birju realized *mayya's* anger still hasn't subsided.

Shooing baangad out Birju's mother grumbled- "tomorrow I am going to hand you over to Panchkauri the butcher, you *raakas* (demon)! Forever trying to gobble everything. Champia, tie him! Untie that bell on his neck! Tinkle..tinkle..tinkle morning to night! I am sick and tired...."

Hearing his mother say tinkle... tinkle...tinkle Birju remembered the bullock carts trundling down the road- "I saw the *babuantola*(big land-owner quarter) carts going to the *naach*....the bells on the bullock's necks tinkled...did you hear...."

"Keep your trap shut!" Champia hissed.

"Champia, pour water into the *chulha*(stove)! Tell your father to go to the *naach* by himself! Let him ride his flying-ship! I have no desire to watch the *naach*! And listen, don't wake me up... I have a headache."

Sitting on the verandah Birju whispered, "will there be a flying-ship

at the *naach* didiya (elder sister)?"

Pulling the duvet around her Champia signaled to him to be quiet, the poor thing will get thrashed!

Sharing the duvet with his sister Birju balanced his chin on his knees and whispered in her ear, "won't we go to the *naach*?...Everyone has left..not even a bird in the village..."

Champia has lost hope now. The evening star is setting and *Bappa* hasn't returned yet. For a month now *mayya* had been telling them there will be *meethi roti* on the day of the *naach*; Champia will wear a flowerprint saree; Birju will wear pantaloons; riding the bullock cart...

A lone tear rolled down her cheek.

Birju's heart felt heavy. Silently he made a vow to offer the first fruit of the brinjal plant he himself had planted to the *jinnbaba* of the tamarind tree- "send *bappa* home with the bullock cart *jinnbaba*, send him soon!"

Inside the hut Birju's mother turned and tossed on the mat. One should never plan in advance, see how God has disposed what I proposed! She is going to ask God why he chose to punish her- why *Bhola baba*, what is my fault? She doesn't remember one vow she made for the settlement land and didn't fulfill....Oh no! She did forget the *rot*(sweet, buttery, ceremonial roti) for *Mahaveerji*! Just her luck!...Forgive me *Mahaveer Baba*! She will offer two *rots* now!

Birju's mother remembers what *Jangi's* daughter-in-law said-electric

lamps burn bright here!Oh alright! Why won't she, wife of one thief and daughter-in-law of another be jealous! Ever since Birju's bappa acquired five bigha of land the brother-eater witches of this village have been tossing and turning. The lush crop of hemp has been a thorn in their side. Like the monsoon sky their field was heavy with promise. That set tongues wagging! And lo, their evil eye did affect the crop- the hemp that should have weighed nothing less than fifteen mun, weighed only ten mun on Rabbi Bhagat's weighing machine...

But why should they be jealous? Birju's bappa had explained to everyone in the kurmatoli, "the land survey is on, gather courage and we may all get some land. Otherwise you will be left tilling other men's land to your dying day". Not one mother's son so much as uttered a word in Babu saheb's presence! And who bore the brunt of his anger? Who else but Birju's bappa. Mad with rage, Babu Saheb raved and ranted, he roared and bared his fangs like the tiger in the circus. His eldest son threatened to burn down their home....In the end Babu Saheb sent his youngest son who called Birju's mother mausi (mother's sister)- 'Babuji bought this land in my name. My education is dependent on the income from that field....' That young man had a way with words-that comes with being the zamindar's (feudal land lord's) son...

"Champia, is Birju asleep? Come in, both of you!... Just let that man come

home!"

Champia went in holding Birju's hand.

"Blow out the lamp....and don't speak if bappa calls...bilt the door."

What a man! Left to himself he never could have got that land. He would often sit on his haunches, holding his head with his hands," Birju's ma I don't want no land. I am better working for others..." And without batting an eyelid Birju's mother would answer, "suit yourself! If your heart is not into it...As they say- a man has to be strong to hold his land and his woman...."

She gets angrier and angrier....it's her bad luck that she is hitched to this moron of a man....What fun has she had? She has worked her bones off in his household, has he so much as bought her a paisa worth of jalebi?....He collected the money at Bhagat's and headed for the bullock-market.... Birju's mother couldn't even look at the hundred rupee notes....The man just went and bought a team of bullocks....and as though that wasn't bad enough, he goes around the village boasting Birju's mother will go to the naach riding a bullock cart! ...He is depending on others to lend him a cart!

Having exhausted her litany against her man Birju's mother vented her anger on herself- and I am no less! God knows what evil hour it was when she expressed her desire to go to the naach riding a bullock cart! Not only that, I have been tomtoming the idea through the day....NAAACH! This is what comes of

speaking out of turn! Tomorrow the loose-mouthed women are going to have a field day. Serves me right!....Oh everyone is jealous of me. Even God, may His beard burn on his funeral pier! Even after having birthed two children my curves haven't changed. My man listens to me. I oil my hair with coconut oil. I have land. Who in this village owns land? They have reason to be jealous-her three bigha fields stand lush with winter rice. May it be safe from jealous folks' evil eye!

Then she heard the tinkling of bells. They lay listening....

"Sounds like our own bullocks, doesn't it Champia?"

Champia and Birju agreed, "hummm..mm!"

"Shu...sh," Birju's mother whispered, "perhaps the cart too...do you hear it rattle?"

"Hummm..mm!" The children agreed again.

"Quite! No cart. Champi, run out and peer through that hole in the reed curtain. No noise, quick!"

Champia pussyfooted to the door and was back in a trice, "mayya, the cart is there too".

Birju sat up. His mother pressed him down- "don't speak!"

Champia too sneaked into the duvet.

Then they heard the rustling sounds of unhitching. Birju's father scolded the bullocks, "yes we are there! We are home!

This is where you were dying to come, weren't you?"

Birju's mother knew they had been smoking ganja at the maldahiyatoli, Birju's bappa's voice had a pleasant twang to it!

"Champia-h!" Her father called out, "give the bullocks some grass Champia".

No answer. Champia's father entered the yard- no light, no lamp, no fire in the stove. He wondered if they had left for the naach.

Birju felt a tickling in the throat, he tried to control it but once he began to cough it didn't stop for full five minutes.

"Birju. Birajmohan. Son!" He called, "is mayya angry and so gone to sleep? It isn't late son. Folks are still on their way to naach!"

Birju's mother felt like yelling at him- we don't feel like seeing no naach! Send the cart back!

"Champia-h! Wake-up girl! Here, take the *panchsees* (ritual offering of five heads of a new crop) of our paddy." He placed a small bunch of paddy ears in the vestibule, "light the lamp!"

Birju's mother came to the vestibule- 'why did you need to bring the cart past midnight? Naach must be over by now."

The sight of green-gold paddy ears made her heart glow— gone was the anger, the frustration...the green-gold warmth coursed in her blood...

"Naach won't have started yet. Just

now the *sampanygaadi* (covered cart) of the Babu of Balrampur has left to bring the *hakim-saheb* (administrator) from the hotel. This be the last naach of this season....here, put this panchsees in the thatching, our own paddy..."

"From our fields?" Birju's mother was excited, "is the paddy ripened already?"

"Not yet. But in another ten days as the month of *Aghan* begins the ears will all turn red and hang low!...I passed the fields on way to maldahiyatoli...the sight of the fields soothed the eye. To tell you the truth my fingers were trembling as I picked the paddy ears!"

Birju plucked a seed of rice from an ear and put it in his mouth, his mother scolded him, "don't be so greedy!...These enemy-chilluns won't let me do any *nem-dharam* (religious rules and rituals)!"

"What has he done, why are you scolding him?"

"Don't you see, he has tasted the new rice before *navaann*(ritual offering of new agricultural yield to the gods after which the family can taste it)?"

"Oh they are gods' own birds,they are allowed to eat things before *navaann*!"

Now Champia too put two grains of new rice in her mouth, "oh mayya its so sweet!"

"And smells so sweet too!" Birju chewed a few more grains.

"You done with roti and all? Birju's father smiled.

"No!" Birju's mother's voice had the merest hint of coquettishness, "why would I cook roti when I wasn't sure we were going?"

"What an idea!...Why wouldn't a man lend his cart to someone who has a team of bullocks? Someday the cart-owners too may need bullocks. Then I will see.... Now you quickly make some roti...."

"Now? Isn't it late?"

"You take no time to cook a basketful of roti, you'll cook half a dozen rotis in a trice!"

Now Birju's mother smiled. She stole a glance at Birju's bappa and knew he was watching her unabashed. Hadn't Champia and Birju been around he would have laughed and expressed his desire too. Champia and Birju too exchanged glances and jumped with joy; mayya was being angry for no reason!

"Champi just go out and call makhni phua!"

"hey phua..a..a! Do you hear me phua.a.a! Mayya wants you to come!"

Phua didn't reply but they could hear her grumble, "now why do you call phua? Phua is the only one with nobody to control her..."

Birju's mother giggled, "oh phua you are still upset? Look what time this controller of mine has returned with the cart! Oh do come phua, I don't know how to cook sweet roti."

Phua arrived coughing and groaning-

“now you know why I was asking in the afternoon-you going to naach? If you had told me earlier I would have brought my angeethi right here.”

Birju’s mother pointed towards the angeethi, “there’s nothing worth stealing like grains or pots and pans here, just Baangad and a few utensils. You brought your hukka? I’ll leave you some tobacco to last the night.”

With enough tobacco phua can sit through five nights. She measured the ball of tobacco in the dark-ah! Birju’s mother has been large hearted! Not like that sahuain who left a pea-sized ball and went to the Gulab Bagh mela telling me there is a canful!

Birju’s mother got busy kindling the stove, Champia mashed the sweet-potatoes and Birju showed his bappa the inverted wok on his head, “military cap! Even if you hit it with ten laathis....”

There was loud laughter. Birju’s mother smiled, “there are some big sweet-potatoes in the niche in the wall, give Birju a couple of them Champia. The poor thing has been.....”

“Don’t call him a poor thing mayya! If only you knew...he had been gobbling them up under the quilt!”

“Heee..hee...hee,” Birju’s lips parted in a gap-toothed smile, “ate five of them in the *bilackmartin*(black market)! Ha..ha..ha..!”

They laughed again. Birju’s mother humoured phua, “should I add half a

pot of molasses phua?”

Phua retorted pleasantly, “sweet-potatoes are sweet enough by themselves. Why do you want to add so much...”

By the time the bullocks were fed and had licked each other, Birju’s mother was all dressed and ready to go. Champia wore her floral print saree and Birju tightened the jute cord on his pants.

Birju’s mother stood in her yard and strained her ears to hear sounds in the village- “no! They had to walk to the naach, why would they wait? They have all left already.”

The full moon is shining in the middle of the sky.... For the first time Birju’s mother has worn a real silver *mangtikka* (an ornament worn in the parting of the hair with a chunky disc on the forehead). What has come over Birju’s bappa, why isn’t he hitching the cart? Gazing at Birju’s mother’s face as though the *laal paan ki begum* in the naach.....

As she sat in the cart Birju’s mother felt a pleasant, warm tingling in her blood. She held on to the bamboo-pole at the side, “there’s room for some more... keep the cart on the southern road...”

The bullocks ran, the wheels rattled, Birju couldn’t contain his excitement- “make it fly bappa....like the flying-ship!”

The cart reached Jangi’s backyard. Birju’s mother coaxed Birju’s father, “just check with Jungi- has your daughter-in-law left for the naach?”

The cart stopped and they could hear

someone weep in Jungi's hut. Birju's father asked," why Jungi *bhai* (brother), who is weeping?"

Jungi sat next to a small fire warming himself, "what to say-Rungi hasn't returned from Balrampur. Who will daughter-in-law go with? ...The womenfolk of the village have all left, so..."

"Arey teeshunvali (from near the railway station) don't you weep!" Birju's mother called out, "get dressed quickly, the cart is almost empty! Poor thing... come quick!"

From the next hut Raadhe's daughter Sunree called, "*kaki* (aunt) is there space in the cart? I too have to go."

Laraina Khawas lives beyond the bamboo grove. His wife too wants to go. She is headed this way jangling her shiny danglers and bangles.

"Come, come! All who want to go, come quick!"

Jungi's daughter-in-law, Laraina's wife and Raadhe's daughter Sunree, all walked to the cart. The ox tried to kick. Birju's father swore hard," saalaa! You want to lame daughter-in-law?"

Everyone laughed hard and loud.

Birju's father glanced at the daughters-in-law, they reminded him of the bowed with grain ears of paddy in his field.

Jungi's daughter-in-law arrived in her marital home three months ago. Her colourful saree is fragrant with the smell of mustard oil and sindoor. Birju's mother remembered her own arrival in her

marital home. She pulled out three sweet rotis out of the bundle, "eat these. You can have a drink of water at the government well at Simraha."

The cart moved along the paddy fields. The magical moonlight of kaatik (traditional Indian lunar month of deep autumn, corresponds with end of October-November)! ...The wondrous perfume of ripening paddy!...Somewhere in the bamboo grove the bottle-gourd creeper has blossomed. Jungi's daughter-in-law lighted a *beedi* (country cheroot) and handed it to Birju's mother. Suddenly Birju's mother remembered that Champia, Sunree, Jungi's daughter-in-law and Laraina's wife are the only girls in the village who know cinema songs.... Wonderful!

The cart path passes through the paddy fields. The air is filled with the crisp rustle of a daughter-in-lawThe moonlight shines on Birju's mother's *mangtikka*.

"Now sing us a cinema song Champia!...Don't hesitate, if you forget something your tutor will help you!"

The daughters-in-law hesitated but Champia and Sunree cleared their throats.

Birju's father challenged the bullocks, "faster brothers! Faster!...Sing Champia or I will ask them to walk slow."

Jungi's daughter-in-law whispered something in Champia's ear, Champia hummed softly, "*chanda ki chandni*..."

Holding Birju in her arms Birju's

mother too felt like singing with the girls. She glanced at Jungi's daughter-in-law who was humming softly...what a pretty daughter-in-law! The wedding saree does have a special musk of its own. She was right. Of course Birju's mother is the *lal paan ki begum*. Nothing

wrong with being a *lal paan ki begum*.

Birju's mother concentrated on the tip of her nose and tried to envision her own person-the shimmering edge of the red saree, the moon resting on her mangtikka.... Birju's mother is above mundane desires. She is sleepy...

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.

Madhu B. Joshi, born 1956, and educated in New Delhi. Poet, translator, editor, her wide range of interests includes education and media. Her books for children have been published by National Book Trust and Rajkamal Prakashan. She lives in Ghaziabad.

HE AND THE WORLD AROUND HIM

Amarkant on Amarkant

Translated by
S.S. Toshkhani

You could call it Nagra as well, the small village of Bhagmalpur in district Balia of Uttar Pradesh, for it looks like a quarter of Nagra, which is located on the other side of the road. In Bhagmalpur there was an Ahir quarter in the north and a Chamar quarter in the south, and between the two there were three families of Kayasths. Amarkant was born in this very village on a rainy day in the month of Ashadh. It was a large house built in mud which had two courtyards. During night poisonous *genhuan* snakes would hang from the beam of the room making hissing sounds. Outside, there was a Kadamb tree in front of the door...

They got his name enrolled in a primary school of Nagra when he grew a little older. He had two names—one was Shriram and the other Amarnath. But it was only the second name which came to be used. Amarnath was the name given to him by a Sadhu. Occasionally, a granny with her heart overflowing with affection would call out, “Hey Amarnath!” and would later giggle with laughter when she would find someone else there. Dhelu Baba, the village- servant would take him to school everyday and also bring him back. Dhelu Baba wore a knee-long dhoti. Sometimes he would carry him on his shoulders. In case Dhelu Baba would not reach in time, he would leave for home with other boys when the school was over, but when they would reach in front of the Neebia pool, all the boys would turn towards right to enter the

village of Nagra, and he would be left alone. A little ahead, along the side of a dusty dirt road, there was a grove of large leafless tamarind trees which was widely rumoured to be infested with pythons. He would be scared to death. At night granny or mother would wake him up from sleep and feed him dal and rice with her own hand. Those very days his elder sister fell ill, and he felt much like crying on seeing her piteous condition. He would bring her some pickles to eat without anyone coming to know. When the funeral of his sister, Gayatri, was being taken out, he was sitting gloomily on the door-sill of the room near the Mahavirji temple...

Later he came to Balia town to live with his father. His father was an attorney. His name was got enrolled first in a Tehsil-level middle school and then in the government high school. Outside his home he was extremely shy and quiet, but inside he was not all that innocent. Rubbing noses of his younger brothers was great fun for him, making them look red as though from flu. When the servant Chhabila, his eyes red after having taken a puff at *ganja*, would pass through the courtyard carrying pitchers full of water, he would try to knock him down by tugging at his leg from behind. He was also very fond of games like hockey, football, *gulli-danda*, *chikka-kabaddi*, playing at marbles, spinning a top and so on. He also very much liked to play with girls, but they would at times tease him and drive him away. He could not bear to see anyone unhappy. He disliked

ill-will. Sometimes women of the family would be in the midst of a situation when children of either side would stop going to see one another. Complaints would become the order of the day. If he would say something in dissent, mother would gnash her teeth, "You sinner!" Such a situation would prevail for a day or two, then every thing would be as usual. And then his happiness knew no end. Everyday distressed, poor, disabled, destitute people would come to their door, groveling and entreating and tolerating everyone's rebukes. After a dinner party, sweepers would fight with each other over the leftovers. Such scenes would make him sad...

There was no literary atmosphere prevailing in his home. His father had read Urdu and Persian, but he also had a working knowledge of Hindi. He lived in great pomp and show. In his youth he had engaged wrestlers at home to get trained in wrestling and physical exercise. He ate well and dressed well. He had no ambitions about his children, except that after high school the boy should get married and secure a job for himself. As for the daughter, she should be soon married off. Yet, father was a very emotional and generous person and this emotionality of his would often border on theatricality. He was awfully irascible, but he would soon feel remorse and melt with compassion. Then he would cry like a baby and ask from even the smallest child his pardon. And then you had to hear a very long and touching lecture from him. Once or

twice a year he had to listen to a different kind of lecture from his father, the main topic being the exhortation to regularly attend school and never to skip it. After lecturing, father would sing aloud a few lines on the subject. In fact, father had a wonderful voice and he sang very well. His loud, smooth, gliding voice could be heard from a distance. When he sang a *bhajan* in the temple, the whole place rang and resounded. He could say with certainty that had father received a good training, he could compare with Fayyaz Khan in music. He would lay great emphasis on truthfulness, candidly telling you the truth on your face, though without any malice. Once, his younger brother lifted a raw mango from a greengrocer's shop in the market. When father came to know about it, he scolded him severely and asked him to return it to the greengrocer and after he returned home, father called him to his side and wept bitterly and also delivered a long lecture in the end. Father spoke very well, very effectively, like an experienced actor, leaving a deep impression on your mind. In fact, he was one of the aristocrats of that small town— tall, well built, strong, impressive. He had been the president of the local town club which would stage at least one drama in a year, with father invariably playing the role of the hero.

A Panditji would come to give him tuitions at home. Amarkant was very thin and lean, with the veins prominent on his face. More than teaching, Panditji would relate personal anecdotes of scuffles and boorishness in which he was

always the winner. It was the Pandit who had once said that Sumitranandan Pant was a woman poet. But there was certainly one thing from which he benefited. His father was made a member of the mobile library, or may be he himself became one, from where two books were regularly delivered to him at home. His father barely had the time to finish a book, but Amarkant would read those books stealthily. Surely, some of it was cheap, romantic and detective stuff, but there were some good books as well which had a good influence on him. When he got books like the Mahabharat and Sharatchandra's '*Charitrahin*' to read, he even forgot food and drink. The entire house would be asleep, the buzzing of the mosquitoes would pierce the silence of the night, and he would be devouring the books in the dim yellow light of the lantern, in a small room, or in the verandah or lying in a bamboo cot in the open courtyard...

Those days he lived in "Machhar Bhavan" on "Machhar Road". This innovative and original nomenclature was given to the road and the house in an invitation card printed on the wedding of one of his sisters. He can't say whether it was meant as a satire on the municipality of that time or invitation to the relatives to bring their mosquito nets along.

A deep drain ran in front of the house, covered here and there by stone slabs. Outside, there was a fine verandah where there were three *chowkies* (rectangular wooden seats). Two of the

chowkies were joined together to form a larger seat. These rectangular seats would remain covered with floor-mats for all the twenty-four hours. Sweeping and scrubbing the verandah brightly, the servant Chhabila would spread a carpet or a *durrie* and a milky cotton sheet over the smaller *chowki* and keep a box on that. Over the joint seat also a large white *jajim* was laid and a dust-coloured bag was kept on it. At about 8 O'clock, having taken his bath and arranged his moustache, his father would come after performing his *puja-paath*, with a sandalwood *tika* on his forehead, clacking his slippers or wooden sandals, and sit on a small square carpet spread for him. There would be a crowd of clerks and clients on the larger *chowki*.

He had a close relationship with these wooden *chowkies*. Everything from studying to leaping and jumping and scuffles would be easily done there. During the rainy season he would love to spread a cot on the *chowkies* and sleep. He had already passed class eight. One day, sitting on the large *chowki* he was reading a novel by Premchand. Just at that time Uncle Mulu emerged. He belonged to the same village and was one of his father's clerks. Uncle Mulu regarded his father as an elder brother and called him "*Bhaiyya*". He would come to his house on Sundays. His father would lay down on a bed in the inner verandah and Uncle Mulu would sit on a stool at the head of the bed, massaging him with oil for about one and a half or two hours. At that

time the two would chat and engage in unending gossip, sweet and syrupy. Uncle Mulu was an ease loving person and he had picked up many of father's speech mannerisms and expressions. Everything he said was full of tall-talking and absurd seriousness.

"What are you reading, *ji*?" he asked, glaring at me.

He told him plainly.

"Reading a *nabhel* (novel), eh?", he became very angry. "I see that you do not keep good society. It is vagabonds and blockheads who read *nabhels*. It contains amorous tales. This is how you waste your time? *Nabhels* will ruin you, man. If I see you reading one again, it won't be good for you, I tell you. Note what Uncle says— *nabhels* make you a vagabond. I am not like uncles of these times, uncles of these times are idiots. I am very strict. At this time you should have been practising good handwriting, learning your spellings. A friend is nothing more than a fly on your dinner table. Look at me; I was very bright in my studies, very bright indeed— miles away from such things as *nabhels* and loafing with friends. I would practice good handwriting for full two hours, would do my sums for full four hours..."

What he had heard was that Uncle Mulu was educated only up to class seven or eight, but right now he had to listen to his anti-novel lecture for about half an hour or so...

There were many things he had inherited from his father and many things that he hadn't. But he didn't have much influence of Premchand on him. He had read only a few of his works. Tagore too, he had not been able to read yet. Of course, Sharatchandra's works were easily available to him. Sharatchandra's works had a great fascination for him.

He recalls what had happened one night. The weather was a bit cold. He had just finished reading a powerful short story of Sharatchandra. It had started getting dark. As soon as he finished the book, he felt a strange change in himself, as if a current had passed through him. He came out of the verandah. There was a nice stretch of open space between the house and the road opposite. He began to pace up and down in that space. Suddenly he felt a voice arising from inside; "I can write... just like this ... in a similar style..." The thought excited him. It was an impossible dream. Totally unbelievable. In the grey sky in front of him, an unstained moon had come out. Above his head, leaves of the Peepul tree were stirring in the light breeze. He felt an indescribable tenderness, compassion and joy overflowing inside him. Tears began to well in his eyes...

He began to write in a romantic vein. How could it have been otherwise? He was emotional just like his father. He was born in a backward region. Moreover, he was inexperienced and immature too.

After that day's incident, a change began to take place in him. He was growing up. He would often be lost in a world

of fantasy. Short stories started taking birth in his mind, in a very slow, almost unknowing and childish manner... somewhat like Sharatchandra's short stories ... a bit strange ... but he himself was their hero— a hero in love with an imaginary mistress and passing through a period of distress and despair. He was completely possessed by these fancies, but this confirmed his conviction that he could write high class short stories like Sharatchandra. He began to imagine himself as a hero everywhere, in every sphere...

He had a classmate named Chandrika in his school. He was very bright in Hindi as well as English. Chandrika would obtain the highest marks in Hindi. In the daily Aaj of Benares short stories of 'Pahadiji' and Narmada Prasad Khare would appear with a bang. Chandrika would write short stories in their style. He doesn't know from where he got his inspiration to write short stories, from Babu Ganesh Prasad or someone else. Babu Ganesh Prasad taught Hindi. He was a lover of literature. He had a great regard for Chandrika. He himself was also good at studies, but he didn't get marks like Chandrika. Still, he was not prepared to accept that Chandrika was brighter than him in Hindi. He could write better short stories than Chandrika whenever he liked.

Babu Ganesh Prasad was simple, straightforward and hardworking. He would always be absorbed in the world of Hindi. Working for Hindi language and literature was not something that

would bring one honour. Babu Ganesh Prasad had a natural love for Hindi. Other Hindi teachers were more pedantic. Babu Ganesh Prasad was a young man and had done his M.A. He taught very painstakingly and came out with a lot of literary information. He recollects, he had once related to them the plot of Mulkraj Anand's famous short story '*The Lost Child*'. He had told them that the technique of short story writing was changing and the way Mulkraj Anand wrote was indeed the modern technique.

He feels like laughing. Sometimes mentally raw, arrogant youth are very unjust to great writers. He still remembers, after hearing the plot of Mulkraj Anand's short story this is what he had thought of it— what's there in it? He himself could write a better short story than this one. One day, when his short story will be published, all his friends and Babu Ganesh Prasad too will be surprised, and so on.

He was still in class nine when a friend belonging to his locality brought out a hand-written magazine. He was one class ahead of him. That a handwritten magazine could also be brought out, he didn't know. In that magazine his friend's name was given as the editor. How did such an innovative idea occur to him and why is he giving his name as the editor? As he thought about all this, he had a mixed feeling of jealousy and challenge. Didn't a great future writer like him live in that locality, so was it not proper to give his name as the editor?

He too was asked to write something

and he wrote a short story with great self-confidence. He does not remember the title of that short story, but it was indeed a wonderful story. A young man loves his friend's sister in his heart, keeping his feelings to himself. And one night when robbers attack her house, the young man reaches the spot the moment he comes to know about it and loses his life in an encounter with the robbers. Next day newspapers carry the news that a young man...

Later, one more issue of that handwritten magazine came out, for which he wrote one more short story. He does not remember the plot of that short story well, except that all the members of a family renounce the world at the end. Perhaps the renunciation business starts with the young son of the family who was in love with a girl. When that young man becomes an ascetic after being dejected in love, his father sets out in search of him and becomes an ascetic too, and after him the mother. The short story was or could have been some stuff like that. The thing to be pondered is that a young man who wanted to write like Sharatchandra, what sort of a creative talent he possessed.

The years when he studied in class nine and class ten had brought with them many challenges for him. Today even the smallest child knows the names of Nehru and Gandhi, but in the British era Gandhiji's name was not as widely known to children. In the school there was nobody who had the courage to tell them about all this. At home also no

one was interested in politics. May be he might have heard Gandhiji's name sometimes, but he must have not understood its significance. He had never read any book on Gandhiji. If he can recall any event of the time it is the breakout of Hindu-Muslim riots. Then he was reading in class seven or class eight. The police had opened fire on a large procession carrying the flag of Mahavir. His father was in the forefront of the procession, reciting some religious song. His father's clerk had taken him to show him the procession, but panic had broken out when they were just near the railway station. He did not know what it was exactly like to open fire. His father had somehow managed to sneak away.

Of course, he had heard the names of Bhagat Singh and Swami Shraddhanand in songs. One song on Bhagat Singh was very current, one of its lines being— '*Bam case mein pakda gaya mardaana Bhagat Singh*' ('The manly Bhagat Singh was held in the bomb case'). For days on he just couldn't make out what 'bomb case' meant. Similarly, there was a song on Swami Shraddhanand also '*Shraddhanand par goli chalayi gayi*' (They have shot Shraddhanand'). Here too he mistook Shraddhanand to be Shardanand. Babu. Shardanand was an attorney who lived next door. Whenever he would hear the song, Shardanand's face would come before his eyes.

In class nine, many of his illusions were shattered. At that time three-four boys came very close to him. When they would all meet they would talk a lot.

Together they would go for a walk, have a bath in the Ganga, and exchange books and periodicals with each other. Some of these were very good books— from Swami Shraddhanand's '*Brahmacharya hi jeevan hai*' (Celibacy is Life) to books by the revolutionaries. He remembers in particular Manamath Nath's book '*Bharat Mein Sashastra Kranti ki Cheshta*' ('Efforts for an Armed Revolution in India') and the files of '*Viplav*' edited by Yashpal. These books had changed his entire world. The meaning of life was becoming a little clearer. Now he understood what a bad thing was slavery. He was not prepared to tolerate servitude even for a moment. He became ready to go immediately to the gallows for the sake of the country's freedom.

Those very days he got *Chand's Phansi Ank* (Special Number on Hanging) to read. These books were smuggled in secretly. From where did these books come? Many local revolutionaries worked clandestinely. They also made efforts to carry the youth along with them. Many of them were indeed funny; they would talk mysteriously about pistols etc. in the midst of children in order to inspire awe. He was not in personal contact with anyone of these, but one of his friends knew an extremist local revolutionary from whom he had got several books to read. Later, that man was arrested at the Police Lines for raising slogans against recruitment in the Army. Certainly, literature, writing etc. had become secondary for him now and the country's freedom more important than

anything else.

After this, he and his friends had together displayed political caution, which was indeed ridiculous, but when he thinks of the excitement, enthusiasm and anger of those days his heart is deeply moved even today. Remembering the country was in bondage, he would conjure up the image of an imaginary Mother India who has been imprisoned, who is sad and distressed, millions of whose children are in immense misery. It was this very Mother India for whose freedom numerous people had rendered sacrifices and he and his friends were also prepared to do so.

He and his friends became subjects of discussion for their activities. A friend of his, notorious in these circles, was rusticated from school. The headmaster had called his father to the school and given him a warning. Soon after the high school examination, the police carried out raids at many places and arrested three of his friends. He had a narrow escape, that too because his maternal uncle was the district commander of the Civil Guards. It should be remembered that in those days the World War II was at its height and the British Government was passing through grave crisis. Recruitment to the Army was going on at fast pace and paramilitary organizations like the Civil Guards had been set up for civilian security.

Several of his friends got dispersed after the high school examination. In fact two of them got married. Fortunately,

he came to be associated with some good people. One of his classmates happened to be in the organization of these people. Even before the examination this friend had told him several times, "I'll introduce you to some people". He took him to the political class conducted by the Congress Socialist Party. Mr. Narmadeshvar Chaturvedi was in charge this class. He didn't know that Mr. Chaturvedi was a Hindi writer also. Politics of those times didn't give you any time for literary writing. Chaturvediji was known in local political circles as a revolutionary who followed the socialist ideology. It was later that he came to know that he was the younger brother of that profound scholar of *Sant* literature, the revered Mr. Parshuram Chaturvedi.

Mr. Narmadsehvar Chaturvedi would conduct the class of the Party expertly. He would do his work very peacefully, patiently and energetically. There were six or seven young men who attended the class. On the other side, the Communist Party also conducted a class for the students and the youth. Sometimes one youth would break away from his class and join the other. But for this reason alone contact was not broken with him. He was recalled to his class for persuasion and discussion. In fact, there were only two political parties there who had formed a united front some years back, which was later broken. He recalls an incident. Once a young man, who was earlier in the Socialist class broke away and later joined the Communist class was somehow

persuaded to return. He was questioned with great patience and an attempt was made to explain things to him, but like some arrogant, bold rebel sitting in a royal court, he remained firm with his neck crooked and argued to the last. Surprisingly, though the two parties were opposed to each other, there were some books which were given in both the classes for compulsory reading. It was in the Socialist class that he got some of Rahulji's books to read. The manifesto of the Third International was also obtained from this very source and some books on Soviet Russia as well. True, the two parties were badly disposed towards each other, but there was also a healthy competition going on between them.

Those were wonderful days. How many books must he have read? He doesn't remember the names or the numbers. Some of the books were very small—booklets in fact. For the first time he understood what was meant by the country's freedom, scientific socialism, the difference between socialism and communism, Soviet Russia as a socialist country. He still remembers some of Acharya Narendradev's and Rahulji's books. Both of them were in politics and also unique as scholars. He was amazed at Rahulji's energy. He wrote voluminous books and along with them published some small books in Bhojpuri language as well, which were very useful for peasants and workers in the villages.

During this very period he got autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to read. These

autobiographies had a deep impact on him. He got to know Gandhiji well. His English and its style were inimitable. His language was a product of the truths he had himself experienced. Pandit Nehru had a different style altogether. Many times he thought that if Pandit Nehru had not been in politics he would certainly have been a great poet and writer. Yet on the strength of whatever he had written, he had carved a niche for himself in literature. In his autobiography Nehruji has explained what Mother India means. The country did indeed need political independence, but that was not enough. It needed economic independence as well which would end man's exploitation by man. What he had read about socialism was supported by Nehruji's views. He was surprised to know that Nehruji was also a socialist and was very happy for that.

Today these things may appear to be very ordinary, but in those times of servitude, they were extraordinary things. They would stir an ambitious, emotional and sensitive young person. Who knows how many youths were swept away by this gale like him. The pervasive and deep hold that Gandhi and Nehru had on the minds of the people of the country can not be imagined nor can be understood even if you happened to have witnessed it. In many ways they complemented each other. Gandhiji's impact he had once seen with his own eyes. He was passing through his city when he was returning from Bihar after taking part in some convention or meeting of the Congress Working Committee. The

news of his arrival had spread like wild fire. People had become crazy, No body was in his senses. Everybody was headed towards the railway station. People had come rushing from the villages also. He too rushed to have a glimpse of Gandhiji. When the train stopped, he doesn't know how he reached near Gandhiji's compartment. But in a few moments the entire crowd surged towards that compartment. He got caught in that crowd maddened by faith and was about to be trampled. Somehow someone spotted him. He was a tall and hefty person. Displaying immense strength, the man spread both his legs and shoved him backwards through them. He had remained panting there for some time and then had gone up to the bridge and seen Gandhiji from a height. He managed to catch a glimpse of Gandhiji and the train left. Slogans rent the sky. Countless people mounted the footboard of the train and went along. They could have his *darshan* wherever they got a chance. But, so far as he was concerned, he didn't see Gandhiji again.

There was great turmoil within him. For him freedom did not now mean something mysterious like 'freedom of Mother India', but economic independence of millions of peasants, workers, and exploited and suffering people— a free order in which there was no difference of caste or creed but the assurance of establishing an exploitation-free society based on mutual brotherhood and equality. He was filled with joy, enthusiasm and energy. He

was thankful that he was born in an age when for the first time in history an unprecedented sense of nationalism had awakened the country and united it— a country where revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad, Ramprasad Bismil and Ashfaqullah, and great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were born— in such an age of national struggle to which he was prepared to contribute his mite with all his heart and soul. He had become an opponent of whatever would take the country and its people backward. His contact with serious and revolutionary-minded people increased, and he began to come into conflict with old, rotten and hackneyed views, conventions and situations, within and outside the family.

He had undergone a rapid transformation after his high school examination. He became a member of the Congress Socialist Party! For this, one had to fill in two forms— of the Congress and the Socialist Party. He began to wear Khadi. By now he well understood that in a vast country like India there was no need for taking recourse to acts of terrorism for attaining freedom. What was needed was to reach out to the people, to unite them, to make them aware and combative. The fact is that Gandhiji had a pervasive influence on the freedom struggle. Even the Socialist Party people were not free from Gandhiji's influence. Whatever was being done for the country's freedom in those days, it was impossible to think

of it without Gandhiji.

His political education was not very deep, but of an elementary kind, yet it made him think of himself as a very important person. Those days he was under a strange mixed influence of Gandhiji, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Jayprakash Narayan and the sincerity and sacrifice of the revolutionaries. Although an anti-Communist atmosphere prevailed in the Socialist Party, he was glad to think that there was a country in the world where there was workers' rule, and one day there should be workers' rule in this country also. Some ideas of Gandhiji he didn't quite understand and some he regarded as impractical, but many of his ideas touched deep chords in his heart. The capitalists are the trustees of the people, this statement of his was severely criticized in the Socialist circles and he too could not believe in this. But the extent to which Gandhiji had bonded with the common masses, no body else had. The language, the idiom and the technique that Gandhiji used, moved even the most ordinary person. In no time Gandhiji freed the entire nation from fear, instilling the spirit of freedom in it, and took politics, in a simple idiom, to the sweeper and the spinner, as a result of which the ordinary people started becoming somewhat conscious of their existence and showed the courage of raising their head high, shook off their fear of centuries and for the first time in history started dreaming collectively. It is true that the dreams that Gandhiji gave to the

people were not the modern age dreams of economic freedom, but they were certainly the dreams of national freedom, national unity, equality, secularism and moral elevation. This was an unprecedented event in India's history. A country with no history of its ordinary people available, people who were groaning under the burden of feudal injustice, war, slavery of higher castes, and hypocrisy of Sadhus and Sanyasis, started to stretch its limbs.

What he liked best in Nehru was that even as he accepted Gandhiji fully, he had the courage to criticize him and to express his differences of opinion with him. It is true that it was Gandhiji who had created popular leaders like Nehru, had established him and made him rise to eminence, yet Nehruji had his own personality and that personality was surrounded by a halo. Nehruji was handsome; he was educated in England, the country of Englishmen and was born in a high class and wealthy family. Yet he had given up every kind of comfort and luxury and adopted a life of hardship for the sake of the country's independence— and this was something greatly attractive. Nehru possessed a remarkable sense of self-respect, courage, knowledge, discernment and humanity. What is astonishing is that it was because of him that the Congress had adopted the resolution of full independence and laid stress on the economic freedom of the people. Gandhiji, who had transcended the limitations of religion and community, sometimes appeared to

be a kind of religious leader or a village saint, but Nehruji was a modern person. Nehruji wanted to accept good things of the West, particularly its economic and scientific qualities. Still, Nehruji understood the character of western imperialism and was strongly opposed to it. The fact is that Nehruji complemented Gandhiji in many ways and it was because of Nehruji's influence that the Congress organization could save itself from tendencies like obscurantism, incivility, and revivalism.

He recalls an interesting anecdote about Nehruji. He had seen Panditji many times, but that day he got a rare chance to see him. He doesn't remember exactly when, but perhaps it happened on the 1st of August, 1942 when Pandit Nehru was about to leave for Bombay to participate in a session of the All India Congress Committee after having made a speech in Purshottam Das Park. Anyhow, a small procession set out for Purshottam Park from the Ghantaghar Chowk in Allahbad. He too had reached Ghantaghar. He had seen Nehruji in a crowd, but he was astonished to see him here accompanied by only a handful of people. Surprisingly, Panditji was wearing a half-pant— perhaps of red colour— with a white shirt over it. He was in front of the procession. He was having the privilege of walking in the company of Nehruji— the same Nehruji who had bravely faced *lathi* blows in Lucknow, of whom the entire country was proud, whose public meetings were attended by a sea of people... He began

to think of himself as someone extraordinary. He looked at Nehruji again and again— an embodiment of energy, enthusiasm and freshness. Bravely, he came close to him and his wonder knew no bounds when he deliberately measured his own height with Nehruji's height and found that Nehruji didn't look much taller than him. This alone helped him overcome much of his feeling of inferiority and his self-confidence got a boost.

One of the reasons of his being impressed by Jayprakash Narayan was that he was regarded as the highest leader of a party of which he himself was a member. And then Jayprakash Narayan's personality was surrounded by a halo. He had gone to America and studied there for seven years on his own strength and jumped into the freedom struggle on his return. Among Socialist leaders Jayaprakash was regarded as a Marxist. This could not be said about other leaders. For instance, Dr. Lohia was regarded as a socialist influenced by Gandhism. His (the narrator's) own knowledge of Marxism was but rudimentary, yet he did have some basic knowledge of Marx's interpretation of history of the human race and his view of life, and this had made a tremendous impact on him. In a world plagued by racial, religious and economic disparities, Marx has presented a vision of human freedom, equality and progress which is considered as one of the greatest achievements of humanity. The contemporaneous policies of the Communist Party of India were criticized in the Socialist camp, but Marx was never

criticized. Marxism was taught in the Socialist Party class and the difference between idealist socialism and scientific socialism was also explained. However, as a national leader who was at that time detained in the Devali Camp, he had utmost respect for Jayprakash Narayan.

It was with such a mental make-up and thinking that he was moving ahead. A muddled mentality, a muddled thinking. Since national independence was a burning question, all thoughts tended to merge with the great current of nationalistic thinking. In fact, everything else paled into insignificance before the idea of national independence. After doing his high school he began to dream. Night and day he would be lost in strange reveries. But many of the dreams would be personal and romantic with ambition tending to dominate. The dreams were of course of India's progress, and it was for this reason that in these dreams he would sometimes become a great revolutionary, sometimes a great athlete, sometimes a great musician and sometimes a great leader. And a beautiful girl would be invariably present in these fantasies. The fondness and love with which he had been brought up in a middle class family, the kind of backward, stagnated and rustic society in which he lived, the immaturity of his age, the period of misery, pain, injustice and slavery through which his country was passing and the sort of impractical and dreaming person he was—these were circumstances which

invariably led to romanticism. Romanticism makes things move in such an inert, stagnant and backward society and consequently plays a progressive role. Sharatchandra's novels worked wonders in India through their deep romantic sensibility. Sharatchandra made young men and women aware of their personality at the level of sensibility, gave women an unprecedented dignity and unlimited dreams. Sharatchandra's romanticism is not based on individualism, mere fictitiousness, formalism or pseudo-modernism. His works stand on the strength of a deep understanding of the progressive realism of his times and give an intense expression to the desire for change.

After taking admission in the Intermediate class he wrote several long stories in Sharatchandra's style. Those stories overflowed with love and compassion, but they were generally based on plain imagination and therefore bordered on the un-natural and the absurd. He can't recall the names of those stories; but they provided great satisfaction to him in the midst of the impact of the political storm.

In fact it was not clear to him as to what he had to do. It is true that he had imagined that he would become a great writer like Sharatchandra and had decided to serve Hindi literature, but these fantasies looked insignificant before the national movement or appeared to be a part of the national movement. He was feeling a certain

agitation and ache inside himself, a certain restlessness, which he could not understand properly. It was a situation which would sometimes make him totally incapacitated. He would lie wallowing in a world of laziness, depression and sadness. In such moments he felt that he could do nothing in the world, and that he was devoid of any qualities. His frustration was as intense as his enthusiasm. When he returned and his reading and writing would start, nationalism would take hold of him and intense feelings of hatred and anger against slavery would dominate him. In such situations he would head for some open field or a distant and desolate place, or sit alone on the roof or in a room of his house. And then his eyes would brim with tears. These were tears of enthusiasm and love for life. At that time the world appeared to be very beautiful. On such days he would laugh a lot or even sing, have discussions with people, challenge the existence of God, read new books.

In Intermediate itself, when he left Andrews College, Gorakhpur and joined Ewing Christian College, Allahabad, one of his friends took him to the Holland Hall hostel where a relative of his lived. A companion of that relative was also sitting in that room. Both were M.A. Final students and members of the Student's Federation. Those days there was only one organization of students in which both Communists and Socialists worked. Both of them were very polite and cultured and supporters of the

Communist ideology. From them he got a number of books to read. He remembers a book by M.N. Roy in which 'civilization' was interpreted from the Marxist viewpoint. Such books certainly extended his mental horizon. Sometimes he would also have discussions with them. They were senior to him in age and treated him as their younger brother. They were not provoked on hearing his views, nor get annoyed, but patiently explain or try to explain things to him.

In 1942 Gandhiji launched the Quit India Movement. The Second World War was at its height. It came to be heard that because Soviet Russia had been attacked, Nehruji was not in favour of hampering the war effort by launching agitation at that time, but later he came under Gandhiji's influence. He doesn't know what truth there was in it. Those days Gandhiji was spewing fire in the language of non-violence. No other leader wielded the influence that Gandhiji exerted on the ordinary Indian masses. Those articles of Gandhiji alone had brought the country on the brink of a revolution. He too decided to give up his studies on the 'Do or Die' call given by Gandhiji. This was the state of mind of countless students. What happened after this is known to everyone: large processions, *lathis*, bullets, uprooting of railway tracks, snapping of wires, running away from home, police raids on homes. He had become a problem for his family, and his younger brothers also came under his influence...

An underground agitation continued

for two years. Gradually the fire had cooled down. An atmosphere of fear and terror prevailed everywhere. There was nothing for one to do even in the villages. Old leaders, who were not arrested, had fled the district or remained in hiding in sugarcane and *arhar* fields. At some places even the people had turned against Congressmen. He remembers an incident. To establish contact with a certain leader who had gone into hiding, he and two of his companions had arrived in his (the leader's) village, but the village folk—some of them—chased them away with *lathis*. That day he and his two companions gave a good account of their ability to run in a marathon race, running through sugarcane and *arhar* fields. After running for miles and miles, they had stopped at a shop and eaten *sattu* in brass *thalis*...

He came back home. Several of his companions had been arrested. Some were absconding. Many had joined higher classes at Benares and Allahabad to study further. But he was not prepared to study further now, because he considered it pointless to study in a colonial disposition.

After this, he began to pass through a phase of extreme despair. Those days he was under a strong influence of Gandhiji. It was after reading Gandhiji's articles that he had not resumed his studies. But he was surprised to know that many leaders were sending their boys to study in foreign countries. What he had gained or lost by giving up his studies is not possible for him to tell.

It was because of Gandhiji again that he got caught up in a dilemma of virtue and vice. He wanted to keep himself perfectly pure and virtuous both in body and mind, but emotions would overpower him. The more he wanted to scale heights of greatness, the more he found himself sliding towards the abyss. He was constantly fighting with the feelings of sex and love. He tried to rid himself of every kind of ambition and for this took recourse to naturopathy, Gandhian experiments and even *hathayog* etc. Sometimes his state would be that of clear water whose impurities have settled at the bottom and sometimes he would become dirty like turbid and frothy water. This took a terrible toll of his mind and body and he began to dream about suicide.

For two years he kept fighting with himself, deciding everyday to commit suicide. Strangely, it was in these very days of depression that he began to write his diary. It would be a strange kind of diary, in which he would note down his 'sins', his weaknesses and failures, along with a review of the day's events. Whatever he went through from morning till evening, physically and mentally, the people in whose contact he would come, the places he would visit— he would sit down and write about all that at night. Even the smallest thing was noted, the clash of ideas, movements of people, their ridiculous talk, their boasts, their expressions. About himself, he would write: "I am moving fast on the path to downfall". In such self-destructive circumstances he became cut off from

everyone. He had continuously ignored his father's directions; he was hardly concerned about his bothers and sisters; he had become useless in every way. His only support was his diary. He had made his brain accustomed to noting everything. For the whole day he would become an aggregate of ideas and events. He became frail and looked like an invalid. He had set out to fight British rule, but now he was fighting with his own self. He thinks— but at that time he had not thought so— that one of the main reasons for India's weakness was that it was fighting an unscientific and wrong war or rather fighting a war in an unscientific and wrong way.

Those very days he came to see a very horrible face of his society and its history. During war days, when servants and menials were getting themselves recruited in the Army, Rajua had come out from God knows which hole. Black-skinned as a cobra, dwarfish, dirty, stinking, cowardly, funny, prepared to live under any circumstance, a person accepting every situation with the cautiousness of self-surrender— one per cent human, Half a percent you get on just possessing the human body and the other half percent is made up of one's rights, awareness, emotions etc. For centuries this is all that history has given him and with just this capital to cherish he has learnt the art of living. Why is there such a terrible self-contradiction in society? Rajua can dream. He would watch him every day, would think about him for hours together, and look deep

within himself. And in this all-pervading misery and appalling darkness he would see one light flickering. And what a light it was! The process of transformation had started within him and this process went on for years...

In '46 when it became certain that India would get freedom, he resumed his studies, did his Inter and gave his consent for marriage. Certainly, Independence was a great event, an entirely new turn in Indian history, but the way it was obtained shocked him immensely. Imperialism and imperialistic alliances began to lead to catastrophic happenings and nobody had any control over anything. The whole country was writhing in pain. One war had just been fought with the real forces of Hitler in which the democratic forces had won, and here was another war in which a country was being partitioned into bloody parts. Night and day he began to hear the cries of innocent women and children. He was surrounded by nightmares and began to be very afraid of himself. Another process was going on inside him along with the first process. Perhaps these processes were closely related and also complementary to each other. It was indeed unfortunate that all the leaders had expressed views against the partition, and yet were compelled to accept it. It wouldn't have mattered if the partition had taken place peacefully, but the terrible bloodshed that accompanied it, the frenzied dance of inhumanity that came to be seen, that is a great blot on the history of mankind. Why does

a partition take place? It takes place because of collaboration between imperialism, communalism and vested interests, and until their influence comes to an end, the danger of a partition will present itself again and again.

A third kind of process began inside him at a time when after the attainment of independence he saw many people changing their guises. Some of them were those for whom he had great respect. On one side there was an army of refugees, events and stories vitiating the whole atmosphere, stoking the blazing fires of communal riots, and on the other side there was a scramble for power and pelf. The dance of casteism, regionalism and communalism made itself visible on all sides. Black marketing, corruption, groupism, pursuit of permits, the pushing and shoveling. Many reactionary, feudalistic, communal elements also found their way into the national organization, Congress, in disguise. Luckily, the reigns of the country were in the hands of a progressive man like Nehru. Otherwise the country would have perished in the fires of communalism. Yet several reactionary elements started taking undue advantage of Nehru's democratic attitude, liberality and humaneness. The Socialist Party too was heading towards disunity.

All three processes started working inside him and the colourful veils of romanticism began to lift. India had just got independence. He also started slowly to become carefree. He now began to have a look at himself, that is, it had

now become clear to him that politics was not his cup of tea, literature and literary work alone could be his field of activity. He was trying to get more and more acquainted with Indian and foreign writers. He finished reading Premchand, Ravindranath Tagore, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Maupassant, Romain Rolland, Turgenev, Hardy, Dickens, Jainendra Kumar, Ajneya, Ila Chandra Joshi, Pahari, Rangeya Raghav and many other writers. He can't forget how impressed he was by Gorky and Dostoevsky. He had already read Gorky's novel *The Mother* and Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*. Both the works had deeply shaken him. Gorky's novel is a unique novel on the proletariat class. The extent to which Gorky was involved with his society is evident from this and other works of his and this is what will always keep inspiring writers. As for Dostoevsky, he had ripped apart romanticism's web of illusion through his works and uncovered many layers of life. Reading Dostoevsky's works is a profound experience. They make us understand life, endow us abundantly with experiences, make creativity productive and takes us ages ahead mentally. Two other writers also influenced him greatly, namely Tolstoy and Chekhov. But he had read these two writers only after Gorky and Dostoevsky. Whatever is great in humanity has found expression in Chekhov. Tolstoy had really amazed him. Such a great writer is born only after centuries. Reading the works of Tolstoy, an advocate of the ordinary people's

genius, their anti-imperialistic feelings, their love for freedom, their self-respect and their combativeness, makes one feels proud of the achievements and greatness of the humankind and evokes a deep faith in its capabilities.

After doing his B.A. from the Allahabad University, he decided to work for Hindi language and literature. He could have easily got a government job, but deciding to take up journalism as his career, he began to work in the editorial section of an Agra daily. But the way he spent his time could be described as 'vagrancy'. His uncle (Late Mr. Sadhusharan Verma) got worried and wrote to his father to remove him from Agra. Yet, in his heart he was determined to become a writer. Perhaps it was because of this that he had become a bit careless and inconsiderate and was wrongly wasting his time. However, during those very days (perhaps 1949) *Babu*, one of the stories he had written earlier, was published in a special number of *Sainik*. There was no way he could know about what response it evoked in the literary circles. Later, someone took away that special number from his home and no record of it remained. In that story he had ridiculed the clerical outlook of the middle class. In that paper, founded by Mr. Krishnadatt Paliwal, another person Mr. Vishvanath Bhatele, who had already published a short story collection, was now working with him. Bhatele began to take him to the meetings of the Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh. It was with Bhatele that he had gone to the

house of Rangeya Raghav a number of times. When he saw Bhatele's short story collection, he felt that it was a kind of challenge to him. Then he came into contact with new people at the Pragatsheel Lekhak Sangh. Of course, he was not taken seriously by people at first. At the end of the meeting he would be asked to recite a *ghazal*. This was what they thought of him. Dr. Ramvilas Sharma, Rajendra Yadav, Ravi, Rajendra Raghuvanshi and many other writers would take part in the meetings of Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh. One day he quietly wrote a short story. To write the story he reached for his diary. He had participated in an interview and had noted a detailed account of it in the diary. He wrote a short story entitled *Interview* and read it out in the next meeting of Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh. The story was unreservedly praised. This was the first occasion when a short story by him was praised in a meeting of writers. In just one day he became a writer or came to be regarded as such. He himself had never hoped it would be so. Now people began to look at him with respect. Or one could say he began to look at himself through their eyes.

His life changed completely. He gave up the company of his old friends and kept the company of his literary friends. Earlier he thought wistfully about writers, but now he was amidst them, he had himself become a writer.

He abandoned old associations. He now seriously began his life as a creative writer. He wrote many other short

stories— *Baba* (which was later published under the title *Savaa Rupaya*), *Gale ki Zanjir*, *Communist*, *Naukar*, *Suhaagin* etc. He read out each of these stories at the Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh and was praised for them. Among old writers the late Prakashchandra Gupt, Shamsheer, Pahadi, Shyamu Sannyasi, Bhairav Prasad Gupt, Shrikrishna Das, Amrit Rai, Nemichandra Jain and several others were there. There was no division among writers in Agra; people of different views would take part in the meetings of the Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh. But there were two groups active in Allahabad. One was the Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh and the other was Parimal. There was keen rivalry between the two groups.

Living at Allahabad was not a very happy experience for him. There were many kinds of pressures on him. The main pressure was economical. The excitement of serving Hindi as a journalist had evaporated. The condition of Hindi journalists was pitiable although their contribution to the development of Hindi prose was significant. They laboured night and day for a pittance. They were humiliated everywhere and sermons of 'service to humanity', 'service to the nation', 'service to literature' were always heaped on them.

Apart from economic pressures, he would also remain restless and agitated. He just couldn't sit at ease at any place. Economic war had started at his press. Apart from that he would also take part in literary meetings. He was also wasting his time in many other ways. He was

neither practical nor could he sit anywhere and work in a disciplined manner. His literary writing had also stopped. And whatever he had written, he was not satisfied with that. All told, he was in a bizarre situation.

Even a little before his debut in writing at Agra, he was trying to free himself mentally from Sharatchandra's romanticism. With all the events that had occurred in the country and the kind of reactions that these were evoking in his mind, he had moved away from many of Sharatchandra's influences. In its place, he started getting more attracted by Premchand's historical insightfulness and progressivism. Premchand made literature a sphere accessible to the lowest strata of the society in India. Description of people suffering from centuries of exploitation and injustice was altogether a new development. It was a tradition of progressive revolt, of struggle against injustice, exploitation and poverty, of constant endeavor for social and economic justice, and of democratic values opposed to backwardness, revivalism, elitism, vagueness and reactionary ideology.

He fell ill in January 1954. He developed heart-trouble. Giving up his job, he came to Lucknow. His condition continued to deteriorate. He lost all hope of his life. As he was hanging between life and death, his only regret was that he couldn't write what he wanted to. How he loved life. How he loved his country and its people. Everything will now come to an end and a life will

be wasted. Perhaps it was because of such sentiments and thinking that he was able to struggle with death and was once again on his feet – alive! But now it was a tottering life that he had to lead. This life shall have to be preserved with great care. There were all kinds of restrictions on this life now. How could this life be saved? It was necessary to live to be able to write. He can no longer play with his life. He can't allow himself to rely on the props of emotions and intermittent enthusiasm. He shall have to pass through a period of strict discipline.

He came back home and sat idle, doing nothing. He didn't think that he had recovered yet. It was difficult for him to sit for an hour or two at a stretch and work. In the meanwhile he went to his brother's place at Azamgarh, and it was from there that he received an invitation to contribute a short story to a special number of the journal *Kahani*. He was not in the mood to write a short story, but writing was the only pre-condition for him to stay alive. He had not given up the habit of writing his diary until he had fallen ill. In that diary he had scribbled a few lines somewhere. Those lines expanded and began to take a large shape. He tried to write that short story in two or three ways, but it didn't click. Then he wrote that short story in altogether a different way and gave it the title *Dopahar ka Bhojan*. He read out the short story to his younger brother Radheshyam (Kedar). Kedar was very happy. Kedar has got the heart

of an artist. He would talk with Kedar for hours. He has got plots for many of his stories from Kedar and Kedar had contributed a lot in encouraging him.

He then came to Balia. Unemployment was a very painful thing, and it was creating trouble again and again. But he had not been still able to recover from his illness. There was also a fear that had crept into his heart. He did not want to let himself die yet. The thing is that he had still to write and write a lot. But alas, his body was not capable of doing so. He could not afford to work hard at that time. However, it was at Balia that he saw an ad announcing an all India short story writing competition in the journal *Kahani* itself. He thought that at this time he should write something that could surely fetch him the prize so that he could make whatever little monetary gain was possible in that time of unemployment. He decided to put his entire energy into it. But how much energy did he have? There is no need to be nervous. Things can't be done in haste. If one writes for an hour or two every day, one can easily write three good short stories in a month. The best among them shall be sent for the competition.

After taking his breakfast in the morning, he would sit for an hour or an hour and a half. He didn't deliberately sit for more time. He couldn't. First he started writing Rajua's story— Rajua who had been haunting his mind for years, who had first made him experience history. Rajua had now been completely

revealed to him. It must have taken him ten or twelve days to write that short story, which was later published under the title *Zindagi aur Jonk*. Then, the short story *Deputy Collectory* was written in the same manner. Lastly, he wrote a very long story, but it didn't come up well. He read out both the short stories to Kedar and his friend circle and it was decided that the story *Deputy Collectory* should be sent for the competition.

What happened afterwards? He did not have many physical, mental and

economic capacities, but he did have the satisfaction that he was with the common people of his country, he was involved in their struggle— the struggle for freedom from injustice, exploitation and poverty. He loved the people of his country. In them he had found a meaningful support. Their courage, their wonderful vitality, their sacrifices, their endurance, their liberality and humility, their laziness, their habit to turn defeat into victory, their courage and their amazing talent— in all these he had found the basis for living.

Amarkant, born 1925, is a prominent, progressive author whose short stories and novels have influenced an entire generation of writers. He has been honoured with Soviet Land Nehru award and Sahitya Akademi Samman. This short story like 'dopahar ka bhojan', 'deputy collectory' has been adapted for television. He champions the cause of the common man. He lives in Allahabad. He has numerous published works.

Toshkhani, freelance writer, researcher, poet and translator. Writes in both Hindi and English. Published more than half a dozen books in both Hindi and English. Has also published several books in translation. Book on Kashmiri rituals and ritual arts under publication from IGNCA. Editor-in-chief: Malini, quarterly journal. He lives in Delhi.

ASSASSINS

Amarkant

Translated by
Gordon C. Roadermel

On an October evening two young men met at a paan shop. The clear sky was blue and lovely, and the stirring breeze was a gentle reminder of the approaching winter. One young man was fair, tall, brawny, and very handsome, though his eyes were unusually small. He was wearing a white shirt, and a pair of pants so fashionably tight that his buttocks seemed to be trying to break through. There were shoes on his feet but no socks, and his hair was combed back. The other young man was dark, short, and robust. He was clean-shaven like his companion and was similarly dressed except that he wore a Kashmiri cap on his head, his pants were grey rather than chocolate colour, and his undershirt was clearly visible because of the two buttons open on his shirt.

“Hello, brother.”

“Hello, son.” The fair one walked up alongside.

“Why so late, my boy?”

“Brother, it was a bore.”

“Anything special?”

“Just that Nehru! There was another letter from him today.”

“I see.” The curves of a smile appeared and then vanished in the corners of the dark one’s eyes and mouth.

“Yes, that man’s giving me a lot of trouble. I’ve told him time and again, ‘Look brother—give the prime ministership to someone else. I have bigger things to do.’ But he just won’t listen.”

“What does he say?”

“The same old tune. This time he’s written saying he’s grown tired, that he wants to set the burden of the country entrusted to him by Gandhiji onto my strong shoulders. He says that I’m the only one worthy and wise enough to handle the job in this miserable country these days.”

They burst out laughing but a moment later became solemn, like two tops spinning swiftly and then suddenly toppling over.

“Aren’t there other leaders?” the dark one asked.

“Nehru thinks the other leaders in the country are all lazy and talk too much. You know, don’t you, that the last time I was in Delhi, Nehru came to see me at the Ashoka Hotel?”

“No! Son of a gun, you never tell me anything.” The dark one’s eyes gleamed like buttons.

“Nehru took my hand and burst into tears, saying, ‘The country’s passing through a great crisis. All our leaders and politicians are corrupt and narrowminded. Those who are honest have no brains. My leadership’s weak too. My officials deceive me. I’ve started five-year plans for the welfare of the people, but the officials are just lining their own pockets. I know that people all over the country are out for loot and plunder, but I can’t take any action against them.’”

“Good god!”

“Don’t tell anyone, you scoundrel. So at the end he said, ‘The only hope for the country today is you. You can wipe out the conspiracies of the capitalists, the ministers, and the officials, and establish socialism!’”

“What do you think about it?”

“That sort of piddling work is not for me.”

“You really ought to stoop a little, friend, for the sake of the country.”

“Come now! I’m a man of principles. I just called Nehru long distance. That’s why I’m late.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I told him straight out, ‘Brother, I’m not willing to be prime minister of the country. I have bigger things to do. First of all I have to establish world peace.’”

They both laughed.

“In a way your reasoning is quite right. Oh, I just remembered a little incident too. Yesterday I got a cable from President Kennedy in America.”

“What did he say?” The fair one’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s asking me to come there. He writes that there’s no one in the world these days as courageous as I. With me there, America will definitely defeat Russia.”

“Did you send a reply?”

“I cabled back that I’m a patriotic

young man and that during this time of severe crisis I could, under no circumstances, leave my own country and go elsewhere.”

“You did the right thing! He’s a good man, though. Holds me in great respect. I was the one who recommended you to him.”

At that they both lowered their heads and began smiling, as though pleased at the sight of their own broad chests. Hearing the laughter of a gentleman alongside, however, they immediately became solemn again. Their eyes narrowed, their lips tightened, and their necks grew rigid. Then the fair one stepped forward with great ostentation and bought a pack of Capstans from the paan vendor. Both lit cigarettes and then, puffing smoke as casually as shunting railway engines, set off down the road.

Handsome stores lined both sides of the broad clean street. On the sidewalks, a busy crowd of all ages, occupations, and appearances was flowing in opposite directions. The two young men moved down the left-hand pavement, their hips twisting vigorously and their hands swinging out as though they were swimming. Frequently, they glared angrily at the people alongside them. When a group of girl students decked out in glittering costumes passed by in a wave of perfume, the boys pursed their lips and let out kissing sounds. Reaching the far end of the market, they stopped at a sardarji’s stall and had an almond drink,

then went to the Benaras paan shop and ate four rolls each of Magahi paan, and finally started back on the other side of the street.

“Do you recognize the broad?”

“No.” The dark one turned to look at a slim girl walking along.

“You numbskull! When I’m Prime Minister, I’ll make you the Secretariat sweeper. That, my boy, is Chandra Sinha. She got the highest marks in M.A. English and is now working on a Ph.D. She’s picked me as a husband.”

“Or as a son?”

“It’s no joke. Many a time she’s fallen weeping at my feet. But as you know, I’ve taken a vow of celibacy.”

“Your father was a celibate too!”

They both grinned from ear to ear.

“My friend, you turn everything into a joke. For the good of all classes of people in our country, I appeal to you to become serious and keep yourself under control.”

“All right, speak up, O Emperor, Bastard of the Nation!”

“Then listen, O Arjuna! One day Professor Dixit came pleading to me.”

“The head of the English Department?”

“Naturally—what other Professor Dixit is there in the world?”

“My mistake, Your Honour!”

“Approaching me with folded hands he said, ‘You’re the only person in the

world who can help me. I can't live for a moment without Chandra Sinha. She was just an average student, but I got the top grades for her. I've told her several times that I'll get her a doctorate in just two years. I'm ready to sacrifice at Chandra's feet all the thousands I've earned writing textbooks and cramsheets. But she won't even look at me. She just repeats your name like a rosary. If you intervene, she'll take your advice."

"You must be scared, man. After all, you have a class with him for a period every day."

"Poof! Would one who's worshipped by the nation be afraid of that insect? I scolded him and said, 'Look, you make a big show of your textbooks, but can you deny that all of them were written by your students?'"

"What did he say to that?"

"What could he say? He started shaking and then fell at my feet and began pleading with me not to mention this to anyone. I thundered back —'I know you butter up the officials and the ministers. And you've ruined the lives of countless girls this way. Chandra is a virtuous woman. If you so much as look at her crosseyed in the mirror, I'll be forced to make a basic change in the educational system of the country!'"

Suddenly their attention was drawn to a bookstall in front of which stood a young lady, fair and beautiful. Her braids were fastened at back like the

coils of a snake, and a reddish-brown sari was draped with deliberate casualness over her shapely figure, making her look like some Buddhist mendicant. She was intently going through the pages of *Eve's Weekly*, the expression on her face reflecting a hope that people would think her very modern and intelligent. The young men moved in close, whistling softly, and began turning the pages of some magazines. One by one they flipped through such journals as *Rekha*, *Gori*, *Reader's Digest*, *The Illustrated Weekly*, *Life*, *Manohar Kahaniyan*, and *Jasus Mahal*. In between, they kept staring at the lady and making comments over which they laughed loudly.

"That Laski was a strange person too, pal," said the fair one. "Why?"

"You know of course that he came to see me before writing *The Grammar of Politics*."

"I vaguely remember now." The dark one looked at the woman out of the corner of his eye and chuckled.

"One night he quietly showed up at my house and began pleading that his book wouldn't get written without my help. I felt sorry for the man—he was a decent fellow and I thought I should do something for him. So I said, 'Brother, I don't have time to write the whole book for you, but all right, every evening for two hours I'll dictate and you take notes.'"

"Did it get done?"

"Oh, he was very pleased. In just

ten days I dictated the whole book. He said that since I was actually the author of the whole book, my name alone should go on it. But, I answered that I belong to a country of truth and nonviolence, and that my services were never intended for self-glorification.”

The woman turned her head with dignity and gave him a piercing look. Then she paid for the Eve’s Weekly and left with an air of indifference. The two young men guffawed. Then the dark one turned serious and began humming — “Let me live in the shadow of your eyes...”

They made two more rounds of the bazaar. By then it was dark, but the shops were sparkling with bright coloured lights, as though in some mysterious dream-world. They came back and stood at the same paan stall. This time the dark one bought the cigarettes.

“My friend, we’ve traveled abroad enough,” the fair one said with a yawn. “It’s time we gave some attention to our own beloved country.”

“Right. My pure soul is eager for some action here at home, too.”

“Let’s go,” came the response in English.

A little down the road, they went into The Prince. A middle-aged man with a huge mustache and an air of detachment and humility was seated at the counter. He leaned forward and greeted them with a salaam. To the right were four

private booths. In the first, four people were talking and laughing loudly, at which the two young men became very sober, an expression of superiority and indifference on their faces. They entered the last booth and sat down.

“What will you have?” the fair one asked.

“The social and moral level of the country needs to be raised. Make it brandy!”

“A half-pint, and some hard-boiled eggs,” the fair one ordered.

When the bearer brought the things, the fair one poured the liquor equally into two glasses. The dark one quietly poured some of his into the other glass and then laughed in embarrassment.

“Wretch! You’re a coward!” the fair one snorted. “I was thinking that when I become Prime Minister, I’d make you the President of the Society for the Prevention of Corruption and the Society for the Abolition of Casteism. But if you can’t drink even this much, then how are you going to take bribes from the officials? How will you make forgeries? How will you tell lies? How then are you going to serve the country, scum?”

They burst into laughter. Then they lit up cigarettes. After a sip of the liquor, they ate the eggs, stared straight ahead meaningfully, and then, drawing heavily on the cigarettes, blew out the smoke.

Their faces were flushed as they stepped outside. The crowds on the sidewalk had thinned out. The fair one

raised his hands and stretched. "Your leadership has been no fun. Today there should be some creative action."

"Then prepare yourself! The assistance of young men like you is needed in the step I'm about to take for the all-round progress of the country and for the establishment of world peace. If you'll take on the task with courage, it will please My Eminence to appoint you Home Minister."

"Whatever you command, Your Honor."

"Then come on, get in this rickshaw."

Some time later the rickshaw came to a halt in a small settlement of some fifteen or twenty small shacks inhabited by such people as rickshaw-pullers and pot-scrubbers. The place was located about a mile from the university, at an edge of the city a long way from any other habitation. On the corner was a shop selling paan and some other small items. Dim lights were visible from some of the shacks. The night was dark but the weather was beautiful, and the cool, fresh breeze blowing gently as stimulating to mind and body.

They went up to the nearest shack. Leaning against the wall on the left side of the small porch was an old bamboo cot, sunken like a boat. In a corner to the right, a woman was sitting in front of a clay firepit preparing dinner. She stood up, startled, but then, recognizing the fair one, began to smile politely. Dimples appeared in her cheeks.

Her age must have been about twenty-four or twenty-five. Her coloring was almost black, but her body was firm and she was not unattractive. She was wearing a dirty sari, the top part so disheveled that one could see her firm, bulging breasts. She seemed an honest and simple sort of woman.

"You're putting in an appearance after a long time. Please have a seat."

"What's the good of sitting outside?" the fair one laughed.

"Then come inside." She began laughing too.

"Today I've brought one of the great leaders of the world to be of service to you."

"I don't understand. Who is he?" She looked respectfully toward the dark one.

"He's the president of the Universal Loafers Association. You must do everything to make him happy."

"To me everyone is equal. There'll be no cause for complaint." She laughed again.

"Where's that two-legged animal of yours?"

"He must be out grazing somewhere," she chuckled.

"Then what's the delay?"

"Nothing. The food can go on simmering. Suddenly busying herself, she squatted in front of the fire. Her lips were spread in a light, refined smile. She removed a piece of wood to reduce

the flame, stirred the pot of dal with a ladle and finally stood up.

The fair one remained outside, lounging on the cot. After some time the woman came back out, took the pot off the fire, and returned inside. Now it was the dark one's turn to sit outside. Meanwhile the clay lamp in a niche on the porch flickered like an invalid's weak smile.

"Two rupees each, right?" the fair one said with a smile as he emerged.

"Today I'll take four each. You people really gave me a bad time." Her eyes were twinkling.

"You're a regular capitalist. You have everything in the world. All right, eight annas more a piece. But all I have is a ten rupee note."

"I don't have any change."

"I'll break it at the paan shop."

"Give it to me," she said. I'll get it."

"Hey—you're an important worker for the nation. Why should you have to go to all that trouble? I'll be right back."

Leaving the shack, they headed for the paan stall. The woman stood on the porch watching.

"O.K. friend—take off your shoes and hold them in your hand," the fair one whispered.

"Why?" the dark one asked in surprise.

"Do what I say, and quietly. The time has come for our young men to

act with wisdom, originality, courage, and devotion! I want to direct them in a fully nonviolent way."

At once they both removed their shoes and held them in their hands.

"The moment of economic and social revolution is at hand. Run, brother!"

They took off at a gallop, snickering as they ran. The woman rushed out of her shack, beating her chest, and wailing. "Help! I've been robbed by those sons of bitches. May lightning strike them!"

Some men dashed from their huts and took off after the young men. The paved streets were deserted. The two young men were running like Arabian horses. Sometimes they turned to the left, sometimes to the right. Among the pursuers, one swift runner was gaining on them like an arrow. He had come close. Before long he could have sprung forward and caught the dark one who had fallen behind. But suddenly the fair one stopped and stepped to one side. Out of his pocket he took out a knife and opened it, gleaming, in his hand. Lunging forward, he plunged the knife into the man's stomach.

"Aay, they've killed me." He staggered and fell.

After that they both dashed away at full speed. Passing under a lamp-post, their strong bodies, drenched with perspiration, looked handsome in the light. Then they became lost somewhere in the darkness.

MY OPTION

Rajee Seth

Translated by
Raji Narsimhan

The spots for this morning will be Raj ghat and the Red Fort. It is decided. Why not Palika Bazar again today, I suggested.

Yesterday had been a fiasco. The lights had failed. The humid evening, the airless corridors, the misgivings about the drinking water available, the reek of human bodies– in that air-conditioned fortress the failure of lights over and above all this simply killed everything. Not that Ashwini had gone off mood or temper. With the two children he had loitered happily enough around the makeshift tea-stalls to the right of Palika Bazar: moving off, now to the fly ridden push carts selling cane juice, now towards the dug up roads, now gazing with interest at the four-seater drivers spouting abuses non stop.

In the shade of the stairway roof Nilima stood watching silently.

“Call the children over, why don’t you? Mucking around in the dirt!” I said.

“Let them muck around.”

“Are those tea stalls any place for lazing in?” I persisted.

“Don’t ask me. Ask Ashwini. He’s the one lazing.”

Dirty water sluiced out of the tea stall opposite. Brown and brothy after washing cups and saucers, it sent the two children skittering. But not before Sonia’s expensive frock was spattered with mud by Sunny’s wet shoes. Sonia set up a scream. Her screams left Nilima unmoved, the baby in her arms.

“Go on. Tag along some more behind your father”, she flared.

“Neeloo! Is anything the matter between you and Ashwini?” I gathered the courage to ask. Since yesterday I had been postponing the question, even though nothing could be postponed, really. There was no time for postponements. Three weeks they had, a precious three weeks in which they had planned trips to Kathmandu, Bhopal and Agra over and above their Delhi round. There were relatives to be visited. Friends. And shopping of course. Neeloo was here after thirteen years. Gone away that long ago, and coming again now, with three children. She’d gone away plump and come back thin. Ashwini had gone away thin and come back plump.

“Nothing’s the matter between Ashwini and I.” She changed my question into an answer, and handed it back to me. With a dry, detached voice.

I was embarrassed. Ashwini came back with the children.

“Why is there no light in there, Uncle?” Sunny looked at me, eyes limpid.

“That’s the way it is over here.” Ashwini.”

“Not uncle, say Maamaajee”, Nilima almost shrieked. “Making an uncle of everyone.” In her voice blind hatred stirred, reined in tight.

I thought she was worked up for nothing.

By consensus one more day was not to be sacrificed for Palika Bazar. So now, Rajghat and the Red Fort were to be done— via the Ring Road.

“Stop! Stop!” Ashwini happily humming in the car whizzing down the

Ring Road, suddenly calls out. The car brakes with a screech.

“What is it now?” Neeloo rears up like a policewoman. “Why have you stopped the car? What do you have to do? Let’s get to Rajghat fast...”

“Come Sunny!” Ashwini is rapt, not hearing. He’s opened the car door and taken Sonia in tow too. Round his neck dangles his camera, ever there. “Hurry”.

The three hurry out, forgetting us. Us meaning me, Mother, Neeloo, and the baby. Neeloo’s face suddenly goes still—hard, stony, rock-like.

“Relax. Why are you so tense?”

I am always forced to say such things in English. These faceless, staccato expressions cannot be made in Hindi, ruining Mother’s peace.

On Neeloo’s face is a raging but mute agitation. She looks in front sometimes, sometimes behind. And then, she gets out of the car and stands leaning against the bonnet.

Out there across the road Ashwini is dashing along, holding the children by their hands. He climbs up one raised spot after another. He adjusts his camera standing on one. And then, he seems wanting to leave the spot. Opposite where he stands, runs a wall made of dented tin sheets straight in front, stretching far down, cheek by jowl with the electric pole. From where we are, the scene on the other side of the wall is hidden. What could be there? What is it that is holding Ashwini in thrall thus? I too want to see the source of his excitement, and get ready to seek a proper place

to look out from, when Neeloo pulls me back by the arm. She rebukes me.

“Have you too lost your head like Ashwini?”

“Why? What have I done?”

“Nothing.” She goes quiet, seeing me stop, and gets back into the car to be with Mother.

Far away, standing on a carefully selected height, Ashwini is seen photographing the scene behind the wall of tin sheets. Sunny seems set on making him lose his footing, for he keeps pulling at him by the belt of his jeans. Ashwini wards him off again and again. In a fit of sulking Sunny thrashes his hands and legs. Suddenly, he pushes extra hard at Ashwini just about to click his camera, which makes him lose focus.

Perhaps the shot has shaken, or Ashwini loses patience. In a rage he smacks Sunny hard, setting him howling. The boy prepares to run towards the car and Ashwini pulls him back by the hand smacks him again. From behind his face another face has reared up.

“That’ll teach you to listen to me”.

Neeloo comes running out of the car and arrests Ashwini’s hand midway, about to strike again. “Stop hitting him! And stop venting your spleen upon him! You think I can’t see?”

“So what if you can see? It’s these blighted idiots who have to see! How will they ever know what they would have got in life, and what they are getting now! They will never wake to their blessings!”

Neeloo fondles Sunny, fully ignoring

Ashwini. Rocked within by a fit of god knows how many rages. Lightened after the outburst, Ashwini goes back to his camera, all concentration.

I see everything in scattered, disconnected scenes. There’s no running thread. Something stirs and flaps within me. I can’t put my finger on it.

“Neeloo, come out”. I don’t know this person within me ordering thus my sister two years older than me. Neeloo doesn’t seem roused to any kind of movement. She leans out a little from the window, and keeps sitting where she is. Rooted.

“Don’t you hear me?” I think saying this should be enough to shake her out of her coma. But she stays bland, stays seated beside her mother. This stubbornness stirs a quick flash of anxiety within me. It has to go, of course, because Ashwini is back with a bounce and has sat in the car. Pleased. Satisfied. Humming away.

Everybody is rapt, drinking in the lovely grassy expanse of the Gandhi Memorial at Rajghat. Green, downy lawns, spotless and tiled pathways, the soft nudge of bare feet free of shoes. The crackle of gravel underfoot. Flowers and fragrance. ‘He Ram’— the two words etched and still on gleaming black stone. The cross- legged posture of Gandhi.

“Ashwini, come here. Take a photograph of this.” Neeloo is suddenly warm. Her face softens, tensed up all this while.

But Ashwini is not there. Neeloo had taken a full about-turn to look at him. He is not in sight anywhere. Where has

he wandered off again? Again and again?

Mother seems to have found a rare holy task to perform in her life, a task kept in readiness for her. Bending her head again and again, hands folded, circumambulating, she is in a trance. I am unable to do anything. I can only gaze at Neeloo, Neeloo lost of hope, Neeloo drained out, Neeloo sobbing away within.

“Come, let’s walk on.” I hold her hand. She lets her hand be in mine—perhaps for some ease—but when had solid bridges of ease ever been between us? How could they have been? These past thirteen years we have lived in our own spheres, in our own ways, reposing a simple trust in the natural bond of our relationship. She had been married off thirteen years ago, the same year in which father’s illness had been diagnosed as cancer. I remember to this day her weeping and sobbing. She saw a cold unfeeling connection between her father’s grappling with death and her being married off. She wanted to live on at home. Father was stubborn. He was getting a rare gem in Ashwini.

The two of us came over from one cemented pavement of the memorial to a second on the other side. We kept within view Mother urging the children again and again to bow their heads.

“How do you feel here, tell me.” I wanted to distract her attention.

“Very good! But why think about feeling good here when it’s there that you’ve got to live. Ashwini is better off than I. Forever in search of newer and newer reasons for liking that country. He searches for them everywhere. Here

especially. In his own country. Doesn’t spare it. No conflict disturbs him. I can’t bear it. You tell me, can anyone set fire to the hut he lives in, seeing other peoples’ mansions? And what mansions are they anyway? Everyone there seems like a work-hand to me, a labourer. There’s no real concept of vintage living there, nothing with roots...”

“Why do you get so personal about it?”

“Isn’t the problem of my children personal?”

From behind the incline Ashwini came into view, loping down. The camera danced round his neck and in his hands was a reel of film.

“Where did you go?”

“Just here and there. Went to the dump behind. I want to take photos. I want to tell these little rogues here what good luck it is that we don’t live here. In this country of slums.”

“Ashwini!” Neeloo screamed. “You want your alibis for living there, fine! But do you know at what cost...”

“See that? See how, touchy and irrational your sister is?” Carelessly he began beating a tattoo on my shoulder.

The fog was lifting from my head. Meaning and coherence came up now, linking scattered scenes. Something like this had happened at the airport too. The moment he was through the gate he’d held his throat. “It’s choking!”

God knows what he’d seen in the half-lit dark. Perhaps, the roads dug up for making the international airport. And just then he found a bag missing from

his pile of luggage.

He went off balance instantly. "I knew exactly these things would happen here. Now it'll never, never be found".

I tried to pacify him, told him that no porter or visitor was allowed inside, so there was little chance of its being stolen. He would get it back. But he flung aside my attempts at pacification like flinging aside a pebble with the tip of his shoe. Neeloo was standing at a distance, detached from it all. In a grey skirt and maroon scarf. I was seeing her after years. "How is Mother?"

"All right now."

"Thought of coming at that time but..." She fell silent, not mentioning Father.

"I understand." The dialogue could have gone on if she hadn't been locked up in some turmoil within.

Ashwini came back with the missing bag and burst out: "What makes you so blissfully blind to your surroundings?"

Neeloo didn't reply. She got into the car.

I couldn't tell if his bristling was because of the bag or because of his inability to be untouched by the grime and dust around.

Once more, on the Ring Road coming away from Rajghat, Ashwini bade the car. 'Stop! Stop!' He leapt out. His hurried exit set the thermos at his feet rolling. At a level below the sweep of the wide road were rows of jhuggis for labourers. Nearby was an expanse for making manure from the city's garbage. And next to it ran a stench-filled, stomach-turning, open drain. Ashwini came back with his

photo.

"What rare find have you made, bhai saheb?"

"Everyone gets what he looks for." Not Ashwini but Neeloo answered my question.

Something hardened within me. Neeloo's eye, my eye. Her psyche becoming mine increasingly. She must be enduring these mean, sneaky acts of his, alone and by herself. In alien country, alien air. Far away from her own folk.

I said to myself that I would speak to Neeloo. But what would I tell her. She might well turn a blind eye to the sights of the alien country. But what about attitudes, the attitudes of the person she was living with? The person who was the only one she could turn to in an alien country. For the first time, I saw that a sense of belonging did not come from just a person, but from your own air, your own soil. Without these a man hugs close to his heart matters not worth a thought.

Ashwini's hand brushing my shoulder startled me.

"What's this, pal? Have you turned your sister's brother with a vengeance?"

"No Just a bit of a headache I have."

He opened the zip of his leather pouch and handed me a packet. "Here, this is Tylenol, an antidote to the addictive use of aspirin. I bet you people in these parts don't even know that aspirin is to be avoided."

What does 'in these parts' mean, I wanted to ask, but I'd never been on

that kind of wavelength with Ashwini.

"It'll get all right", I turned aside his hand.

"Come on yaar", he pressed the flap of the packet and let the tablet slide into his hand.

"There's no water. The thermos broke." I put the tablet into my pocket. The scene ended there.

Now Ashwini began humming a tune. Some crisp and fast Western tune. Slapping both thighs and keeping beat. His tone blended with the tune, became one with it. His saying of the words hadn't yet struck this blend.

"You too, Sonia", he urged the girl sitting at the back to join in. Immediately her thinnish voice rose, trying to chime with the voices of her father and brother.

Now he was beginning to tap his foot too, and was swaying. A picnic-like atmosphere set in. I don't know why, I began to wish for Neeloo's voice to sound in this pleasing family togetherness.

"Didi, don't you know this song?" Didi I wanted to call her, not Neeloo.

"She does but she won't sing", Ashwini said and got back to the singing.

Suddenly his palm clenched my wrist. "Stop, please, stop the car. And back it a little. Back to the spot we've just come from".

"You can't stop here", I was already a little off balance.

"O come on yaar, who cares here, who sees?"

"What do you mean who cares? We can be challaned". I kept the car running, even if slowly. And then I speeded up.

"O, all right, some other time then", Ashwini shrugged, relaxed.

"I'm told there's a regular sound and light show at the Red Fort", Neeloo said.

"About the history of the Mughals and the struggle for independence".

"Yes, Didi. We are headed there".

"What did you call me? 'Didi?' Well, well, something I've gained all right, by going out there", she laughed for the first time.

As soon as the car went past Daryaganj crossing Ashwini's eyes got their savage gleam again.

On the bricked footpath bisecting the road in front, was a row of shelters minus the walls on the sides. The shelters were slung over two poles. Keeping the roofs in place were sheets of tin, canvas and thatch, torn and faded rags, pieces of plastic. There were naked children, there were women with knees and breasts bared. Young girls picked lice from each other's hair. Boxes of tin and aluminum cooking pots lay around.

A wave of sickness rose within me. Everything showed itself at one glance. Gave more than what it showed. It gave material to Ashwini to feast his eyes on, and to me to sink more into my own pit. My breath wavered. The black wet and dark world sprawled before me and had me by the neck –held me clamped between countless whirls of guilt and shame within me. The pain of stumbling upon this world so suddenly, without

warning, was so sharp that I almost blacked out. How I would grapple with myself after this was a far off question. At this time the question was only of shutting out Ashwini's eagle eye.

If only, if only, I had a vast sheet to hang as a curtain between Ashwini's irreverent eyes and this sordid world of mine, sprawled naked before me. But I felt disabled, incapable of anything.

"Stop the car, yaar, stop it dead",

Ashwini crowed, insistent. "You're just not listening".

"I am listening." I speeded up the car more.

I was incapable of doing anything, all right. But I could use the steering wheel in my hands. The way I wished. This wheel was no more now to go to the places Ashwini wanted. It was to go to the places I wanted.

Rajee Seth, born 1935 is a major author of short stories, novels and poems. She has translated Rilke's letters into Hindi. She has numerous books to her credit. She lives in New Delhi.

Raji Narsimhan writes in English, translates from Hindi. She lives in New Delhi.

THE LETTER

Akhilesh

Translated by
Madhu B. Joshi

I had to reach The Hermitage by half past seven. At seven I was walking in the chill wind after the first winter rain. Winter tends to shrink our bodies in proportion to the ambient temperature and that slows our gait. How then could I reach my destination by a half past seven?

I pulled and stretched the muffler to cover my head and knotted it under my chin so only my eyes and nose would have been visible. Safeguarding myself against the chill I bravely walked towards The Hermitage.

This was our farewell to ourselves and to this town. We were supposedly going home for the Christmas break but this was not the usual 'going home'. This visit home had no trace of excitement. The intervals between the moneyorders from home had been increasing systematically and none of us had cleared a single competitive exam. We visited the newspaper offices and the radio station but all they promised were short term assignments backed by the popular principle of much labour- little money.

Raghuraj was the first to buckle in, "I am returning home. I can't even fill my belly in Allahabad."

Krishnamani Tripathi sermonized, "have patience. You must keep your faith in God. The Lord of the heavens feeds every mouth he creates."

We roared with laughter. Krishnamani, with a soft face and hairy arms was a non- believer who always invoked God's name

to laugh at Him.

One by one every member of The Inner Circle (to be referred to as the circle henceforth) confessed he had been planning to call it quits.

That day we decided to return to our long suffering families.

Vinod protested this 'going gentle into the night' way. He said he would host a drinking session at his room before we bade adieu to the town.

Vinod had christened his room 'The Hermitage'. We were assembling there tonight. Tomorrow, we will have departed for our respective home towns.

After this the story is devoid of pleasure, it's slow and succinct, so permit me to go back to a time preceding this. That phase is dressed with freedom, joy and activity. Just how things took this hundred and eighty degree turn is something I will explain after I have recounted this freedom, joy and activity containing phase...

I first met Vinod at a reading session where he read his poems and I tore them apart. The session turned into a merry hare chase where Vinod's poems were so many hares and I, an excited hound. That session laid the foundation of our friendship. We became so close that I even recommended him to the inner circle. That event coincided with my landlord insisting on being paid the long overdue rent in full. In cash! I tried to laugh the whole thing off, "wait another couple of months. Deliveries in

the seventh month sometimes prove fatal for both mother and baby." The landlord whom I had never credited with a sense of humour anyway, spat out a big gob of spittle.

I reached the conclusion that seven months of rent free stay with this humourless man wasn't such a bad deal after all. The inner circle including the novice Vinod got busy searching a room for me.

Now the landlords are a principled lot. They stick to certain principles— rent your house to a married man, preferably one with a transferable job; no drinking on the premises (some extend the ban to eating meat-fish-poultry-onion-garlic), no late nights... the list went on and on!

Though I failed on every single score, I had always managed to find a room. The fact is, we were not to be written off just like that. I and the inner circle had our own criterion for suitable rented accommodation- it had to have plenty of natural beauty around in the form of easy- on- the- eye females. We had developed our own remote sensing technology for zeroing in on hot spots. We surveyed the tea and paan stalls, short- listed the ones with the most dudes, found a room nearby. Well, we didn't always find a room but the technique never failed to throw up cool females. Another foolproof indicator of easy- on the-eye female population was women's fancy clothes and underwear on the clothes line. We always checked

those spots.

Vinod showed plenty of enterprise on this issue. He just had to set his eye on natural beauty or her clothes and there he would be, knocking at the front-door. "Have a room to rent?" Never discouraged by a negative reply he would then solicit advice and information about rooms for rent in the vicinity.

Our relentless search yielded a house with girl's clothes on the balcony and three models of natural beauty on the roof. And it had a room to let! We paid the landlord a generous advance and promised to be there on the first day of the next month.

We arrived on the appointed day and realized the deal had been a major scam in our lives. The inner circle went into collective mourning- the three graces had been visiting relatives who had acted like the three fates as far as my existence in this room was concerned.

Raghuraj exploded, "the bitches' happy rags are hanging in another place confusing the youth of that village, town or city." Pradip ran his fingers through his beard philosophically, "it's Maya- everything is illusion." We chorused:

*Dangling the three stranded noose
deceiving Maya roams the universe
Sweet tongued Maya is Kamala to Keshav
to Shiva she is Bhawani...
Says Kabir Maya is a great deceiver*

The inner circle consisted of Pradip, Raghuraj, Krishnamani Tripathi, Vinod,

Deenanath, Triloki, Madan Mishra and yours truly. We were the well read ones in the university. Our education had nothing to do with personal initiation by the dons, nor were we the cubicle-bound, stricken- with the-unmentionable- disease types. To tell you the truth, we were the bane of their lives. And, we were politically aware to boot!

We were crazy for girls. Hearing our private conversations anyone with the least trace of decency would have considered us rowdies and potential rapists. But, we definitely were not so low. This craze for girls had been mere curiosity and sport. Crossing the limits was taboo. Believe me, we had been so morally upright that at times we even turned down opportunity when it presented itself on a silver platter. And, several girls angled for us. We had been stars of our departments. And let me make it clear right here- we hadn't been stars because of chocolate goodlooks or because we were loaded with money. As a matter of fact, most of us wore shabby clothes (we couldn't afford any better) and had grown beards. And we often solicited contributions from the girls. Triloki was something of a pioneer in this respect, he took contributions even for personal expenses. He would confront a girl, "Vibha, no money for food. Give me some." A girl once asked him, "How come you always ask girls for money?" "Because they are kindhearted. Men are

cunning and cruel.”

His princely habits regularly landed Triloki in this situation. The week following the arrival of the moneyorder from home was nothing short of an orgy - no trudging on tired feet, feasting with friends on non-vegetarian food, trips to cinema halls, also sizeable spending on public-good (our code for drinking sessions). On the eighth day, Triloki would be back to square one.

This applied to almost all members of the inner circle. Our tragedy was that we hankered after the good life but the moneyorders pushed us towards a monastic existence. Decidedly not all of us were reduced to penury by the end of the first week but we certainly had to live by our wits by the end of the month. Krishnamani would check the eatery's register and count the number of his guests, then he would eat at his relative's to balance the account. Madan Mishra often economised by cooking some rudimentary gruel in his room. Raghuraj had distinguished himself by never letting a frown mar the smoothness of his brow, he laughed the merriest laugh one ever heard on an empty belly. Pradip who had no such distinction would visit friends and relatives at mealtimes. Pankaj Saxena was shy so Vinod took him under his wing. Vinod was good at extracting reasonable sums out of acquaintances which he never returned.

We were back at the campus after a long break, the faces around us looked

fresh and happy. Though, both happiness and freshness were somewhat less than the occasion called for, the reason being the first winter rain the previous night had added a keen edge to the air.

I stood in the lawns of the Department of Hindi enjoying the weak sun. I was actually waiting for Triloki to arrive so we could go and get some tea. Mohan Aggrawal's classes were a solid waste of time.

I only attended Sadanandji's classes because the rest of the teachers treated these classes as an exercise in the dying art of declamation- they either recited books or dictated notes copied out of some halfway decent thesis. My boycott of their classes worked to their advantage because then they could talk all sorts of shit without any fear of questions being asked.

I was beginning to get irritated, once he begins to talk Triloki forgets the world. Talking was his major addiction. Legend had it that when Triloki spoke, he would be just a mouth and the listener a mere ear.

He visited the Department of Hindi regularly to ogle at the beauties found in abundance here. This department had the maximum number of girl students and consequently, became a centre of pilgrimage for students from other departments. Though they also called it Meerganj, Meerganj being the place where the morality brigade made hasty, secretive entries and exits.

Sadanandji arrived. His helmet

dangling in his hand. The inner circle respected him but was on very informal terms with him. Once we had even taken money from him to drink. He was popular with us because he was intelligent and a leftist, and also because although he had a love-marriage he was also carrying on with Sunita Nigam, a teacher in our department. Neither gave a damn for public opinion and were often seen holding hands in the department. Many of us had also seen them at a fine restaurant in Civil Lines. I really shouldn't be talking dirty about my Guru, suffice it to say that they were a couple.

Sadanandji smiled at me and began to praise a recently published poem of mine. I was beginning to miss the presence of beauty at this rare moment when Upma Shrivastava, the fresh entrant to the Hindi master's program zoomed in. We were mildly interested in each other. I introduced her to Sadanandji, then prodded him, "Now Sir, you must point out the flaws too. You have praised the poem enough."

He grinned, "No, the poem is really good"

"Pranam Sir!" Triloki butted in. The four of us stood drinking in the pleasant warmth of the sun. Then, Gobar Ganeshji, the fat Head of the Department of Hindi walked past like an elephant in a hurry and this caused a refiguring of groups. Upma Srivastava moved a few paces away from us. Some others too changed positions. Sadanandji and Gobar Ganeshji were sworn enemies. Gobar Ganeshji's

claim to a place among the litterateurs was backed solely by the fact that he headed the department of Hindi, Sadanandji, on the other hand, had earned his wings within that charmed circle. Then too Gobar Ganeshji was part of the Pro-VC lobby and Sadanandji belong to the anti-VC clique.

The fact was the University was ruled by two castes, the Kayasthas and the Brahmins. Sadanandji was one of the rare few Kshatriyas in the faculty. Gobar Ganeshji regularly pointed out to Sadanandji's lower caste Yadava origins and his pretension to Kshatriyahood. This was the root cause of the enmity between the two.

As Ganeshji passed by us I and Triloki bowed to him. He didn't deign it fit to accept our salutations and moved towards his chamber. Triloki followed him in, "Sir, we must clear that point today."

I dashed after them and stood with my ear glued to the reed curtain.

"Which point?" Ganeshji panted

"The social reasons behind the Bhakti Movement..."

"What is there to explain? Didn't you attend my lecture the other day?" he barked

"Oh! That lecture? That day you were trying to spread communalism in the name of social reasons behind the Bhakti movement."

"And why do you think I owe you

any explanation? You don't belong to the department of Hindi. How dare a gross outsider enter my department?"

Triloki menacingly grabbed the edge of the table and bent forward, "Hindiwallahs don't have a monopoly over the Bhakti Andolan. Have they? And you dare call me an outsider, have you ever tried to stop the goons who come to the department to ogle at girls? Have you? No. You would never do that because you are scared shit of them. You all have turned the department of Hindi into a courtesan's salon. Worse, it is like the city bus where rowdy men rub their hard ons against the nearest female body."

"Enough! Get out of here!"

"So you are throwing me out. I may not be a student of Hindi literature but I challenge you to an open debate on any issue relating to world literature."

"Get out! Get out of here I say..."

"You want me, a serious reader of literature, to get out of your room but you welcome and shelter rogues. One final question- How come only girls top the examination since you became a head?"

He walked out triumphant. I slapped his back, "Wah Guru! This was some feedback! Let me treat you to tea at Lalla's..."

"Abey, give me a cigarette first."

"Of course, here..."

We breathed hard at our cigarettes.

The studious darlings of dons threw us appreciative glances but dared not join us. These sweet kids had set their eyes on high scores which they believed required the blessings of Ganeshji.

Upma Shrivastava stood at the outer edge of the small crowd of students. Triloki leered, "For how long are you going to exhibit me to her. Though, the one next to her would make a decent Mrs. Triloki."

"Stop dreaming Mr. Much Married", I retorted.

"Lenin said everyone must dream."

"He was asking folks to dream of a better future for mankind, to dream with open eyes, you are dreaming of lascivious nights."

"You virgins never venture past wet-dreams..."

"Ha ha hah!" I roared with laughter, "We will decide that at Lalla's."

Lalla's tea shop was a favourite haunt of oglers. Strategically located opposite the women's hostel, it was actually part tea-house and part general store, so one always came across girls there.

We entered the shop to find a lively discussion about the recent students' union election. We surveyed the general store area where some girls and some general public were shopping. Triloki poked me in the rib, "see that one in the yellow saree?" I trained my eyes on her- fair complexion, sleepy eyes, the yellow saree imparted a sandal-paste

paleness to her skin. Her abundant hair was curly and neatly styled.

This one was unpredictable as far as her sartorial tastes were concerned, sometimes she would be in a salwar-kameez, at other times she wore pants and men's shirts. Then suddenly, she would appear wearing a western style skirt, sometimes she wore loose and flowing outfits and at other times skin tight clothes. In a yellow saree she was a vision.

"Seen her boss", I informed him

"What's your opinion?"

"Undoubtedly she is India's answer to the Monalisa..."

"Stop right there. Pankaj Saxena has staked a claim on her. They'll marry some day and treat us to dinners and lunches all our lives. Pankaj is planning to marry as soon as he finds a job."

"May God grant her eternal marital bliss", I intoned piously.

We joined the debate. The party the inner circle had supported had sponsored a candidate for the presidentship of the student's union who had bitten rather more than a mouthful of dust. Since independence the union had religiously maintained its tradition of electing a Brahmin or a Kshatriya as president, the publication secretary had invariably been a eunuch-pimp type. For the past several years the presidents have been satellites of one of the brightest stars in the nation's political firmament. The trick was simple- the star picked the

two front-runners, supplied them with everything necessary to win a university students' union presidentship and take the winner under his wing. Once our party was determined to smash the star's vicious hold on the union. And why only the star, Hooch Mafia Sitaram Baranwal, Industrialist Hafiz.... in fact we were going to beat the unholy trinity that manipulated the union elections at its own game. Only on the eve of voting the star's candidate who happened to be a Brahmin visited all the hostels, met groups of Brahmin students and holding his thick-as-a-rope sacred-thread fervently begged them, "save the honour of the sacred-thread." Naturally we lost the election.

We were dissecting the voting pattern and the role of the caste factor when a breathless Raghuraj arrived and demanded six *samosas*.

So, we knew he hadn't eaten anything. He sounded tired. Triloki interrogated him, "And where has your highness been?"

"Comrade, a rickshaw carrying two beauties passed the field of my vision. I followed it and found myself at the cinema. What to do? I was left with no option but to watch the movie..."

It was difficult to divert Raghu's attention once he started a yarn. I boldly intervened, "How was the movie?"

"O.K. Could have done with a generous shot of obscenity though," sex was the sole criterion by which Raghuraj

measured any and every business in the world.

“And the girls?” Triloki inquired,

“Forgive me dear friends. I ought to clarify this right at the beginning - *one* was a girl, the *other* a young matron.”

“But who were you after?”

“Both, Yes, undoubtedly both. Though to be sure, the young matron was at the top of my priority list.”

“I have observed Raghuraj that you exhibit a decided preference for married women. Be so kind as to explain the logic behind this pronounced perversity...”

“The young matrons are very generous. Brimming with the milk of human kindness, they are very liberal in their favours to freelance beggars.”

“Wow! you have a wonderful grip over things Raghuraj, you should write. Why not write a novel?”

“I have been working on this novel which is nothing if not a livid document of sexual desire. And, I have just finished this epoch making story-Delhi girls revolt! Chase three Allahabad boys in the nude!” He laughed so hard tears rolled down his cheeks. “You think I could write? I couldn’t write to save my life... Me? Write? Ha... ha... ha.”

When Raghuraj talked in this vein one never knew where it may end. Raghuraj on the topic of girls was like a river in flood-dangerous, threatening

to break all barriers, we decided to leave because most students thought we were simple, studious young men whose thoughts were unsullied by female presence.

We walked towards the library. Raghuraj indulged in his favourite pastime of ogling at girls. It was embarrassing and could lead to serious trouble. We tried to stop him but he protested, “you wouldn’t so much as allow me to look at them? I wish God had given me another set of eyes at the back of my head then I wouldn’t have missed the ones at the back...”

“I suggest you sit in penance to demand that.”

“That’s it— never did more inspiring words trickle off the human tongue. I will sit in penance right here.” Bang opposite was the women’s hostel, I warned him, “now, don’t you dare utter a word about the women’s hostel.”

“And why?”

“After sundown this hostel looks like some fantastically mysterious world, it has something positively holy about it.”

“Look here son, I am not trying to corrupt your longing for holiness, “Raghuraj admonished, “but I must tell you that holiness born out of ignorance carries no weight, so if you want, I could remove your ignorance and impart knowledge that...”

Triloki blurted out, “Yes! O enlightened one...”

“Well, then listen” he stopped and gave us a searching look, then speaking slowly continued, “Before I tell you anything, I want you to answer one question - why do the girls from this hostel join the Elitist-Marxists? Why aren't they attracted to our party?”

“Enlighten us O Master! Let your brilliant reason pierce our thick skulls, let it disperse the darkness of ignorance residing there”, Triloki almost doubled with reverence. “So be it. The Elitist-Marxists are a cultured, genteel lot. These girls hang about them because it makes them feel special. Nowadays the fad is for members of the well-heeled class to join NGO's. The NGOs basically act to take the edge off people's struggle. This point works as a bridge between the Elitist - Marxists and these social climber females.”

“Raghuraj we haven't requested you to explain the relationship between girls and Elitist-Marxists.” I interrupted him, Triloki seconded me, Raghuraj exploded, “now this is exactly why you haven't developed into good writers.” His voice rose, “You elaborate on the reality without developing an understanding of the core content. This hurrying will lead you to premature ejaculation and result in dissatisfied wives hankering after other men...”

We capitulated, “continue your sermon brother.”

“Forced by my innate magnanimity I forgive you fools. So, in the light of

the above mentioned facts one can safely conclude that girls in this hostel come from economically sound families. But then, this economic soundness too has several layers. Now, it is very possible that the money available to the daughter of a sub-inspector incharge of a police station is much more than what is available to the daughter of a Deputy Superintendent of Police, or the money available to the daughter of a junior engineer is more than what is available to the daughter of an assistant engineer. In this situation, one will be proud of her father's money and the other of her father's status. On the other hand their feeling of inferiority will also be rooted in the same situation-one will feel that despite being the senior my father has much less money, the other girl will be frustrated because despite all his money her father has to take orders. This is a major reason of discord between girls. As you know, these girls are highly competitive- lipstick or love- they want to be able to boast of their things and experiences. Girls from comparatively non affluent backgrounds often stray from the straight and narrow path. They go after some flush with funds guy. And when even that is insufficient they slip...” Raghuraj was silent.

After sometime I asked, “would you be imparting any more knowledge?”

“What time is it?”

“Forty minutes past three.”

“In that case let us prepare to leave.”

At four thirty we join the protest against cultural masturbation.”

“Kindly elaborate on the use of the term cultural masturbation.”

“The healthy development of any art demands its healthy interaction with the society but the gang we are protesting against do it solely to pleasure themselves.”

We left for Alfred Park with the intention of lazing in the sun for half an hour before the protesters collected.

We were going to protest against the theatre festival organized by Kalabhavan. This was a government sponsored organization that presented programmes for the bureaucrats, its artists looked towards the decadent West for inspiration. The highlights of its presentations were the cocktails and flirtation.

The ever resourceful Vinod had somehow acquired a free invitation to the do. He was going to smuggle protest handbills into hall and distribute as many of them as possible. The rest of us were going to shout slogans outside the hall. We were determined to smash this cultural nexus...

The inner circle was a group of fearless, aware young men in tune with their times.

We were against all that was evil and unfair. We never forgave the wrongdoers, not even ourselves.

We pasted posters on walls. We shouted slogans.

We participated in protest marches,

organized corner meetings and strikes.

Our names figured in police and civil intelligence documents. But, we were like so many vivid gas balloons. Floating higher and higher we had reached the rare height where our internal content made our fragile skins explode and now we were falling...falling...falling... Below was a chasm pulling us as ephemeral rags to its depths.

Jobs would have been our life lines but there was a terrible shortage of them.

Upma often advised me to study harder to qualify for competitions and that always raised my heckles. Our relationship was developing fault lines...

Sadanandji's voice now lacked the friendly warmth. He sort of pitied the inner circles.

We no longer had the heart to borrow money or cadge food out of anyone. We often slept on empty bellies.

Simple, run-of-the-mill questions like 'What are you doing nowadays?' made us shudder. The very idea of meeting somebody made us apprehensive.

Now, we even avoided meeting one another. Oh, we were as close as ever but our conversations invariably turned bitter. We returned from the summer break tired and beaten. We had let down our families and friends and this had irritated them. We had seen contempt in their eyes. That contempt had defeated us.

And yet, we had decided to return to our families. Where else could we have gone? This town had finally let us down.

The final part of the story is like this—

We descended on The Hermitage. It was a modern structure but Vinod's life-style had screwed all modernity out of it. Clothes and books everywhere and colourful pictures on walls. Next to Che Guevara was a buxom beauty in an advanced stage of undress...

Triloki was the first to get high. He stood holding his glass and began the address, "Sisters and brothers!"

"Where are the chicks, revered leader?" Pradeep protested. He was just beginning to get high.

"Terrible! A great misfortune for India that great ones like us have no girls and no jobs. How are we to live?" Triloki was turning maudlin. "O.K.! I shall speak no more. The public is becoming smart, it raises questions..."

"No. That's exactly what it's not doing. If the public had questioned the goings on, we wouldn't have been in this pit..." Deenanath spoke to himself.

The rest of the inner circle hadn't gotten high yet. We were at the stage where we felt pleasantly mellow and full of an abstract, all-compassing love.

"Why are we gathered here?" Madan Mishra inquired philosophically.

"We are here to bid farewell." I told him.

"No." Pradeep protested, "this is a condolence meeting for our happiness. Our happiness breathed its last, right before this gathering. Tomorrow we join the ranks of the sad citizens of this sad world."

"We are no citizens. Workers and farmers, the ones whose labour is exploited, are the citizens of the sad world. We don't even have the right to do physical labour." Triloki was outraged. "Work gives one the right to call oneself human. We are not human. The system has dehumanized us... we have been deprived of our rightful existence..." He hung his head and sobbed.

We were stunned. Krishnamani broke the silence. He pushed a cigarette into Triloki's mouth, "Have faith in God O revered leader! He is bound to grant your wishes some day. Meanwhile, continue with your lecturing, the sobbing part is quite attractive too. Only take care never to shed genuine tears. God-willing you will become a real politico by and by and have your unfair share of the fat of the land."

"By and by we will be dead. And nobody will even notice."

Vinod was in the solicitous host mode, "Kindly empty your glasses at the earliest. Your host is eagerly waiting to refill them."

"O if only we had some beauty doing the honour!" Raghuraj sighed.

"Thrash the bastard", Pradeep too was high. "Thrash him", he repeated.

I inquired, "who do you want to thrash?"

"Not my friends. Never them. No! Just thrash the bastard, beat him to a pulp."

We refilled our glasses. The night was turning colder. Deenanath rose and shut the windows. Soon the room was

overcast with cigarette smoke. Madan took a sip then dragged hard at his cigarette, "I die everyday. I die several times a day. Someone asks," what do you do?" and I die."

"Thrash the bastard", Pradeep was really high by now. Who did he wish to thrash?

"You are probably thinking I am drunk, I am not. I am in full possession of my faculties. Unemployment has made me weep time and again. Last Rakshabandhan I had nothing to give to my sister. My other brothers had gifted her clothes and things. I gave her nothing. She slipped a hundred rupee note in the book under my pillow. I put the note in my wallet and wept. I hadn't been able to give her anything. I still keep that note in my diary. Every time I see it, I weep." Krishnamani slowly rubbed his face.

"And parents don't love all children equally", Vinod blurted out, "my parents lick the boots of my well-settled brother but the very sight of me irritates them."

"And I don't speak to my father. He once yelled "folks ask me what your son is doing? What do I tell them? Tell me? Why don't you speak?" We haven't spoken since." Deenanath gazed at the wall.

"My turn to confess", Raghuraj's eyes were red. "We are going back so why hide things. I never chased girls. I worked part time at a clothes shop and a medicine shop. My employers treated me like a lowly servant. I...I..." His voice broke.

We fell silent. Raghuraj hid his face between his knees.

All of us had our individual tales to tell. We had our third glasses, and with fourth we rolled on the floor.

Vinod worried, "how will we eat?"

"We are going to be hungry in future, let us begin the practice tonight", Madan rose and stumbled.

We stood outside the Hermitage to go in our different directions. The night was dark, the wind beat at us. We stood tight-lipped and hard faced.

"Alright friends!" Raghuraj cleared his throat, "Goodbye..."

For a fraction of a second we were silent, then we howled.

All of us howled....

That night we promised ourselves, "If ever one of us is happy, he will write to all the friends."

All these years I have waited for that letter from a friend. I too have yet to write to any of them.

Akhilesh, born 1960, is a major author whose short stories and essays have proved a point of departure in Hindi. He has been awarded Shrikant Verma Puraskar, Parimal Samman and Indu Sharma Katha Samman. Edits a literary quarterly, Tadbhav from Lucknow.

IN THE WILDERNESS

Sara Rai

Translated by
The Author

Those days I'd try to write but no ideas came to me. Our town offered little opportunity for getting a job. It was possible, of course, to be a teacher or a journalist, or perhaps a doctor or lawyer. But, none of these appealed to me. I tried instead, to write. It was the only thing I wanted to do, but my mind was empty, like the sky that stretched away in front of me. There were times when a bunch of broken up sentences or blurred faces, the rags of days long past would move across my brain like a caravan. But, it wasn't as if I could hold onto these images and make something of them. They'd fly far into the sky, like birds.

On some days an unclear longing took hold of me; may be this was an inspiration to write? As if a voice were stirring inside a mute. I tried hard to catch the sound, straining each sense, but it was gone before I could grasp it. I just couldn't hear it. I sat with pen and paper everyday, but the battle was lost even before I'd begun. Receding, dimly visible, something like the line of a shore appeared briefly before my mind; it was merely a shadow, though, that I strove in vain to capture. However, I was convinced that if I kept at it long enough, I would succeed. And so, I floated around in emptiness. It was a strange experience, this encounter with nothingness.

But I didn't lose heart. I had put up a swing under a tin shade on the roof; I'd sit on it for hours; thinking. Days passed by. Sometimes I'd write a few lines and cross them out again.

The swing creaked on its rusty chain. I pushed the ground with my foot and the swing moved forward; then I'd stop it again with my foot. It was all I did those days. The sky was white in summer, blue in winter and ragged strands appeared on it during the rains, making it look like a shawl made of coarse hand-woven cloth. Large chunks of time sailed by like nothing. It seemed as though days were passing not singly but in groups. Sometimes it felt as though a whole season had gone by like a single day. I had nothing to show for the passage of so much time, not even one story, nothing. It was really a bad situation.

There were several things in my range of vision, a line of dust laden bluish eucalyptus trees, standing straight and tall. They'd bend to one side in the wind, making the line go crooked. There was one tamarind, also dust-laden, and two silk cotton trees close together, with thick branches turning to the sky and huge trunks firmly embedded in the ground; evidence to the power inherent in nature. I gazed with envy at the fat silk cotton buds, their sensuousness seeming to be nothing short of a miracle to me. No flowering happened within me though, not a single bloom in all of those days. Then, it was time for the slow mystery of the silk cotton buds blossoming into flowers.

Behind the trees, the road led straight to the railway station, which wasn't far from my house. There were no right or left turns, the way was quite straight.

It was a busy road, what with people coming to our town or going away, constantly in movement. Many more people came than left, those days; it was the year of the Ardh Kumbh Mela. A sea of people washed by, bound for the new township at the edge of the water, along the river. It was a town composed mostly of tents, lights and makeshift lanes, with tall electricity poles seeming to hold the darkness on their heads like a black tarpaulin cover. Time was in motion too, and of course, it wouldn't stop for anything. I was the only one who was quite still.

A loud roar sounded from the heart of the earth, rising and becoming louder, before fading into the distance. The glass panes on the windows in my house rattled, and then it was completely silent after the train had gone. It was strange how loud the silence seemed. And then, there was the ting of the bell announcing the train's departure. This went on the whole day. What with trains coming and going all the time, I felt as if I were getting left behind, sitting there on my swing.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed that Radha had come and sat down at the other end of the roof with a bag of peas she was shelling into a bowl. She knew she mustn't disturb me, for I was 'working'. But, she didn't want to be alone in the kitchen. Sitting on the roof, even at a distance from me, she had the consolation of being with me. This was all she wanted, just this assurance. Things were hard for Radha

then. She could get to sleep at night only if the lights were on, that was how she kept her fear at bay.

Radha too, had been left behind. She'd come as a pilgrim to our town six years ago, to the Kumbh Mela. She got lost in the crowd, like thousands of other such women. The years flew past. Her husband didn't come looking for her, though it was also possible he did, but just couldn't find her. She thought it unlikely that he wouldn't have tried to search for her, but there were times when she wasn't so sure. Those were the days on which she had little hope left of being 'found'. Her upbringing being such, she couldn't say her husband's name out loud, and with her father-in-law long dead, the only person she could talk about was her mother-in-law and of course, she knew the name of the village she came from. It wasn't as if she was clever, or even literate, she was just a farmer's daughter-in-law. It was six years since she'd got lost, and disappointment had settled on her heart like a stone. She'd had to make her peace with the way things were, start a new life.

Her daughter Rashmi Kiran, then five was now eleven, a fatherless child, growing like a wild bush. She'd grown, but seemed still to be stuck in the moment when they got lost at the fair, groping around in the mist. She never had much to say. She'd fold her hands together when she saw me in the morning and say "Namaste", with a shy smile playing on her face. Radha and Rashmi Kiran

lived at my place, in the room at the back of the house. It was the milk of human kindness in me, I told myself, that I let them stay there, but I'd really done this only for myself. I felt virtuous, giving shelter to someone like this. Besides, Radha did all the housework. My selfishness lay curled under my generosity like a snake.

Across the street, there was an old yellow building with arches. There were dark patches on the yellow, left by moss from the last rains. It was a school, the Maharishi Dayanand Shiksha Sadan. The building had been demolished on one side, leaving a high mound of bricks and rubble. Something new was supposed to come up there. But nothing had happened so far, with snakes and scorpions having the run of the place. A board with 'Maharishi Dayanand Shiksha Sadan' on it, hung outside, rusty and faded. It looked like a scruffy animal and creaked tiredly in the wind. But a school still did function in these premises. Most of the children from the neighbourhood studied there. I'd had Rashmi Kiran registered there too. From my swing I'd hear them reciting their poems and tables and then school would give over, with the bell going loudly at the end. I'd see the children in their red sweaters tumbling out of the old building. They'd push open the rickety gate swinging on its hinges and swarm past the board, looking like *birbahutis*, those velvety red insects that emerged from the ground in the rains.

I turned around to look at Radha, and she read this as permission to come up to me. I watched her as she approached. What did or didn't this woman have that her husband hadn't bothered to come fetch her? I studied her face, broad-boned and flat, which somehow made her figure look squat, dark complexion, black hair. It was hard to tell her age, she could have been thirty-five or thirty-six. She wore a green cotton sari with a border; nobody could have called her unattractive. Her eyes looked anxious, with remnants of *kajal* in them from yesterday, faint, like a memory. She wanted me to write another letter to her husband. I'd already written so many, letters that never got a reply. Each time it was the same; she called him "Rashmi Kiran's Papa", as if the child were the only link between them. I don't know what came over her some days. She'd come to me and say, "My heart burns so, today. There's someone missing me." How on earth did hearts burn? I know mine never did, not for anyone.

She being illiterate, I was the one who wrote all the letters. She dictated what she wanted me to say and I wrote it down. At first the words came hesitantly, at random, as though she were picking up scattered things from here and there. She gained momentum slowly, and her words acquired an easy flow. All kinds of things, from the humdrum to the complex rolled easily off her tongue in long, wordy sentences. It was like a

steady stream of words. Where did she get so many words from, this illiterate woman? Just a handful of 'poetic' words went round and round in my own head, words like 'frost', 'anguish' 'memory' and 'petal'. They bobbed about weightless and vapid inside my head and then vanished.

She said Rashmi Kiran told her the children bullied her at school. They made fun of her speaking so little and chased her, shouting, "*Dumbo! Dumbo!*" The girl ran nervously, her steps stumbling and awkward. She was dark, said her mother, and there was nothing wrong with that surely. God had made her like that, hadn't he? But who could explain that to the children, they'd see her and cry out in a chorus :

"Matchstick!

Drumstick!

Here comes the black witch!"

She'd try to laugh it off but grew quieter still, beneath the laugh. There were days when she'd lock herself in, into the toilet at the end of school, and stay there till they all went away. She'd be in trouble if the *chowkidar* locked up for the night and went away, the teacher told Radha. She did try to scold the children, she said, but children were wicked, weren't they? She smiled a little at this. Rashmi Kiran couldn't cope with her studies either. While taking dictation, she'd go on writing the same word again and again. It was the same during poetry recitation; she'd simply

repeat the last two words of each stanza. Dear God, why did she behave like this at school? After all, it was the same girl who recited the whole poem without a mistake at home. None of this stunted her body, though, just look at her, shooting up like a palm tree. Finding a match for her was going to be tough.

Radha would go on speaking and I'd keep writing. My silent pen suddenly turned gregarious. She remembered all kinds of things, last night's dream, for instance. There was a mountain in her dream, right in front of her eyes, tall, blocking out the light. She saw the same mountain again and again, and in the dream she tried to see what lay beyond it, but to no avail. Of course, it had gone when she woke up, but she could sense its presence still, in her bones, and it made her restless. The children pinched Rashmi Kiran too, she said. And, the silly girl said nothing even then; it was the mother who saw the blue marks on her arm. Why did they pinch her, Radha seemed to demand an explanation from me. Was it to find out whether she was, in fact, real? Did her silence make them doubt her very existence? Radha carried on talking and I could feel a blind anger building up inside me, circling like a tornado. I thought about Rashmi Kiran's "Namaste" and her shy smile. It pained me to remember that smile.

I went to her school early the next day and met the principal. I told her about Rashmi Kiran's past. She was dealing

with a lost child, I said, a fatherless child. Didn't that explain why she was so quiet and couldn't work at the same level as the other children? Surely that didn't give them the right to torment her while the school authorities looked on, saying nothing? Was that why she thought I'd put her in this school? Suddenly, I had many questions to ask her. The principal looked at me calmly from behind her thick glasses. "Don't be so angry!" she finally said, and pointed to the sign "Please keep silence" that hung on the door. She went on after a pause, "You mustn't lose heart. I've seen so many children and I've been observing Rashmi Kiran, too. She's no different from the others; it's just that she's all bottled up. Believe me, she's going to be quite normal one day. Please be patient and let her make her own friends. It's the only thing that'll help her, so kindly keep out of it."

I felt a little better. I came home and told Radha about the hope the principal had held out, feeling as though I were giving her a present.

The season was changing. The silk cotton flowers had turned into pods that burst, scattering cotton wool about like a snowstorm. The soft white balls that had remained tightly packed within the pods now fluffed out in the open air and flew around, dancing madly. There was a flash of green on the dusty, dry branches of the *chilbil* too. I sensed the whirring of wings in the trees. The red-cheeked *bulbul* was pouring out its

song from on top of the electricity pole.

I sat on my swing, reading through what I'd written yesterday but found myself unable to concentrate. My eyes skimmed off the letters and settled on the glass window of the front room. There was a bird trapped in there. I must have left the window open and it flew in unawares. It was a tiny sparrow, flying in panic against the windowpane, no doubt mistaking the clear glass for open air. I could see her agitatedly flapping about, unable to get out after repeated attempts. She'd get injured like this, I thought. I went inside and opened the window and the circling bird immediately flew out, lightly brushing her wing on my ear. She was soon lost in the expanse of sky and I enjoyed seeing her free flight.

"Why did you give Rashmi Kiran this name?" I asked Radha. "After all, both the words Rashmi and Kiran mean the same, don't they, a ray of sunlight? Then, why the same name twice?"

She looked at me quietly for a bit. Then, her eyes lit up slowly and I could see the trace of a smile in them, a hint of motherly pride, something I'd never seen before.

"Haven't you noticed that Rashmi has so much shine to her?" she asked.

It was the last thing I'd expected to hear and I grew embarrassed.

I went out for a walk that evening, taking Rashmi Kiran with me. I thought I'd have a talk with her. What was the

wilderness this girl lived in? I remembered what the principal had said about her being bottled up. There was a dilapidated bus on the road, just outside the school. It had been standing here for a long time and had perhaps been used by the school at some stage, though it bore the name "Tathagat Tours and Travels" in faded letters. I'd never thought about why it was there at all, if it didn't belong to the school.

I'd often passed it and noticed that the seats and windowpanes, as also most of the other parts of the bus were missing, no doubt stolen to some purpose. Ours' was a poor town and nothing remained standing on the road for long, be it electric bulbs or the bricks from municipal tree-guards, even trees were stealthily cut at night for fuel. In fact, someone had also carried off the peepul sapling at the edge of the road, no doubt to worship it at home. Anything that was on the road belonged to no one in particular, which meant it belonged to everyone. It was all part of community living, sharing one's own and others' things.

It wasn't surprising that the bus had been emptied out. What was unexpected was the fact that the steering wheel was still there. If it hadn't been for the steering wheel, the bus was a skeleton, without wheels, going nowhere. Wild grass had sprung up inside it and peeped out from the windows without panes. It was the same grass as the one on the side of the road. There were rumours that the

bus was the night time meeting place for all kinds of anti-social elements, robbers, gamblers, alcoholics, drug peddlers and so on. It was in bad shape, this bus, and the day wasn't far when it would collapse completely and sink to the ground. That very morning Radha had told me Rashmi Kiran carried on about wanting to get into the bus; she'd stop in front of it and refuse to go further, to school. Maybe she'd seen the other kids going in. It seemed to me to be a ray of hope; at least there was something she wanted to do. But her mother wouldn't let her. She didn't approve of the goings on inside the bus.

A mad fancy took hold of me as I passed the bus. I looked round stealthily, like a thief. What if someone saw me? They'd wonder what I was up to. They'd probably think this middle-aged woman had quite lost it. I looked at Rashmi Kiran; she seemed to have guessed my intention, for her eyes were shining. Suddenly, we'd turned conspirators. Well, there was no one on the road right then. I threw caution to the wind and stepped

into the bus, with Rashmi Kiran following behind me. I got a whiff of wild grass and wet earth. There were no seats in the bus, so we stood there in the tall grass, as though in a jungle. It was pleasant in there. There were bits of broken glass on the floor and scraps of paper in the grass. The setting sun cast a reddish hue on the pieces of glass.

I moved forward excitedly, from the back door to the front, and then to the driver's cabin. I put a hand on the steering wheel and was taken aback to find it firmly in place. I tried with both hands to turn it and surprisingly, it did turn. I found myself spinning it around really fast, from the right to the left. Rashmi Kiran chuckled loudly and I found that astonishing too. My amazement grew as I felt the bus slowly rising off the ground, getting airborne. My heart leapt as we looked down, silent child and silent woman. We gazed at the street below and saw the school, our house, the entire neighbourhood, in fact. I felt this was the first time I was looking at it so clearly.

Sara Rai, born 1956, writes short stories and has published a collection of short stories under the title 'Biyaban Mein'. She is the grand-daughter of Munshi Premchand and lives in Allahabad.

ROLE MODEL

Mahua Maji

Translated by
Ravi Nandan Sinha

Suppose some eight or ten years ago, no, not even eight or ten, but say some five or seven years ago, if three young girls had knocked each door in this conservative locality looking for a room to rent, would it not have aroused suspicion? Certainly it would, wouldn't it? But not any more. That is why calling "Who's there?" Sanatan Babu opened the door and standing on his two-feet wide veranda asked the girls on the road, "Do you need a room?" This happened even before they could say anything.

"Yes, uncle, we need a room."

"How big?"

"Well, big enough for three of us."

"Only three? Can't five or seven of you manage in a room?"

"Yes, why not? If you want, we'll find a couple of girls to stay with us."

"Where will you have your meals?"

"We'll cook it ourselves."

"Will you keep a gas or an oil stove?"

"An oil stove will be better."

"You're absolutely right. Gas stoves are very risky. Are you non-vegetarian?"

"Two of us are pure vegetarians, uncle, but this one is a non-vegetarian", pointing to a girl, the other said, "But if she stays

with us, we won't allow her to eat meat or fish."

"No, no, it's not right. You should not force your taste on other people. You must have heard that saying: you should eat what you like, but wear what others like".

"All right, uncle. If you say, I won't object to whatever she wants to eat".

"At the same time, it won't be very wrong either if you do. You know, these days doctors also tell people not to eat meat or fish. That's why you get so many green vegetables—bhindis, parwals and baingans...and all very fresh".

Sanatan Babu was standing in the shade of his veranda and talking to them but the girls were feeling uncomfortable in the hot sun. When she saw him getting into bhindis and parwals she interrupted him with some impatience and said, "All right uncle, please show us our room".

"Room? But where's the room?" Sanatan Babu replied with genuine surprise, "Really there is no room to let in our house. My wife and I with my brother's family live downstairs and my elder brother lives with his family on the first floor. If we had a room to spare, would I not give it you by now? Why would I keep you waiting in the sun for so long?"

The girls were taken aback. They shook their heads and with a look of irritation on their faces walked away. Then suddenly one of them turned, and touching her throat asked, "Uncle, can

I have a glass of water, please?"

"Certainly, but it so happens that right now my wife is in the bathroom."

"But what's the problem? You can bring it yourself?"

"But where is the water? She has taken all the water in the house into the bathroom with her", Sanatan Babu answered with a touch of embarrassment. Looking at him with suspicion and disbelief and grumbling among themselves the girls walked away.

The girls might not have believed him but those who knew Sanatan Babu would also know that there was not a single untrue word in what he had said. When men get married they bring for their wives God knows how many things, but perhaps there has been no other husband like Sanatan Babu who grew into his middle age carrying bucketfuls of water for his wife. Despite having a water connection in his house, every day Sanatan Babu would carry roughly twenty to twenty five buckets of water from his neighbour's well situated in front of their house for the simple reason that the best part of his wife's day was spent in the bathroom. She had no children. They had even consulted a doctor: for a child as well as for that water ailment. But, nothing happened. With time, the water disease grew. "Oh, this is nothing. Do you know, one day she was in the bathroom for twelve hours. When leaving for office at eight in the morning I saw her going into the

bathroom. And, when I returned at eight in the evening, I found that she was still there. The door was shut exactly in the way I had left it in the morning”, with great pride Sanatan Babu would narrate this story to every passerby. People even said that actually it was Sanatan Babu who was indirectly responsible for his wife’s mania. If he had given her a little thrashing in the beginning itself, that disease would have disappeared. But no; *saheb* is busy all the time carrying buckets of water for her. And on top of it, if she got tired before she could use all the water on the same day, and eight or ten buckets were left, that old water had to be thrown away. Madam always needed fresh water. Sanatan Babu was such a gentleman that he made no complains about having a wife like that.

These days, after his retirement, he had no dearth of free time. After finishing his domestic chores he would have time to arrange for the required water and see his wife into the bathroom, and then would spend the rest of the day dealing with the door-to-door salesmen, or the postman, or chatting with girls looking for a room. When Sanatan Babu was busy with someone at the door, his elder brother would be standing on the balcony above and silently watching the scene below. He was in the habit of spitting frequently. Every five or ten minutes, he would clear his throat and spit towards the road. But, however hard he spat, instead of the road it always fell on

the veranda below. It landed on the veranda which was right in front of the bedroom of his younger brother’s insane wife who was abnormally fastidious about cleanliness and for whom everything around her was nauseating. The younger brother did not like that spitting and every time it happened, he would look helplessly towards his brother but considering his seniority would remain silent. And, after that he would begin his mental preparation about how to face the abusive language of his wife.

Perhaps, the elder brother was jealous of his younger sibling when he saw him having long chats with people. Although he was not good at conversation, he would sometimes ask a passerby, “Well Bhulua, how are you?”

“I am quite fine, uncle.”

“What’s that– *whack thoo*– mark on your face?”

“I was hurt. Two days ago, I fell down from the scooter”, giving such brief replies and with a look of annoyance on their faces people would walk away; or, sometimes out of sheer politeness would ask him,

“How’s your health now?”

“No better– *whack thoo*– this cold refuses to go”, he would say.

“There must be a cough-producing factory inside”, some mischievous fellow would remark. One or two among those who were not so mischie minded would tell another story about the origin of

that cough-producing factory, "In the beginning he did not spit like this, did he? Actually, when his handsome and only son married that ugly, much older girl, the fifth among the seven low caste sisters living in the adjacent house, the same girl who for many years had tied *rakhi* on his wrist as a sister, and also since the day when he became convinced that the widow and her seven daughters had conspired to trap his noble and obedient son, he has begun to hate the whole world. He now spits not only on that family but also on the entire world."

Disappointed with Sanatan Babu, the girls entered the apartment in front and after making enquiries from the guard went up to the flat on the third floor. The owner was the same gentleman who was notorious as a miser in the entire locality. Before allowing the builder to demolish his hundred year old tile-roofed house and building an apartment on that land, he had made quite a tidy sum out of his hundred year old septic tank. He had got the century old soil out of the tank and had it dried in the premises itself. Then getting it ground to a powder-like substance, he had got it filled in gunny bags and had sold them to seed and fertilizer shops for ten rupees per bag. During the filling of the bags, if the east wind rose, that powder of rich manure would make a direct assault on the house of Sanatan Babu. One does not know why such a harmless creature like Sanatan Babu had to face all kinds of virus, fungus, bacteria or smelly things.

It was not only the coughing of his elder brother or the powder from the septic tank that tormented him, but also the fact that his house was built on the lowest land in the entire locality and so all the drains would empty their garbage in front of his house. As a result, every fortnight or every month, he would have the responsibility of begging the sweeper of the municipality to clean it and of collecting donations from each house to pay him.

On one hand, Sanatan Babu was busy cleaning the locality and on the other, his wife was engaged in cleaning her body. She would apply soap on every part of her body, rub vigorously, wash it with water and examine it. Every examination revealed that it was not cleaned properly and so some more rubbing was required. Many times Sanatan Babu had peeped through the little window of the bathroom and observed that activity of his wife lasting hours but he could never understand it, nor could the two explain anything else to each other. So Sanatan Babu had stopped thinking about it and had shaped his life, work style and language in accordance with whatever was happening.

Escaping from such a docile and gentlemanly Sanatan Babu, the girls reached the owner of the apartment and managed to get a place to stay, but only on the condition that in one flat not three or five but twelve or thirteen girls would have to stay. The rooms were crammed with small beds. They

were more like benches than beds. Threading one's way among them was quite difficult. The rent was eight hundred rupees per bed. That too was acceptable. Reason? Where was the place to stay in this area full of famous educational institutes? Those who had four-roomed houses would accommodate themselves and their things inherited from their ancestors in two rooms and let out the other two, and those who had only two rooms would settle into one room and let out the other to students from nearby cities, towns, or mining areas. In these days of high prices, how could a middle class family trying hard to make both ends meet resist the temptation of some extra income? In the past, on Thursdays, or during Deepawali or on the Kojagari Purnima day, people in those houses worshipped goddess Lakshmi, but never before had they shown such alacrity welcoming the goddess of wealth. All around, blessings would be heard from these grateful people, "God bless the parents who did not commit the folly of asking their children to take useless B.A. or M.A. degrees and remain unemployed after that, but admitted them to these modern educational institutions giving degrees like B.B.A., B.C.A., M.B.A., Bio Tech, M. Tech and so on. They have brought prosperity to these poor localities and have given dynamism to these quiet and static neighbourhoods..."

Earlier, guardians of those families who had escorted their growing daughters to and from a college nearby now would

not mind sending them hundreds of miles away to stay in lodges, hostels or in someone's house as a paying guest. What change had taken place in the middle class mind-set in just five or six years! People wondered at it. More than wondering, they were not able to digest it. They would keep repeating, *chhee... chhee...!*

Uma aunty represented such a class of people in that locality. Since she had no room to let, she was particularly angry with these students from outside. Actually, she was unhappy with the fact that despite being the owner of a large plot of land, she and her children had to lead a life of poverty. She was growing vegetables on the land worth lakhs of rupees! Because the claimants of the property were fighting among themselves, the land had been disputed for years. She was especially angry with her father-in-law's brother who had purchased a small piece of land just in front of her garden so that no one could buy her land without buying it first. Since there were no buyers of that land, the brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law of Uma aunty living in other places were not ready to divide it. Now, till she got her share of the land, how could Uma aunty construct rooms on it? "Years ago, when your father-in-law's brother sold all his share of the land, why did he leave this small piece?" the moment some well-wisher asked her, Uma aunty would be filled with irritation and say, "*Babu moshai* wants to construct a ladder to

heaven on this land. What does it matter to him whether we are rotting in hell or starving?”

Although Uma aunty was a bit hard of hearing, there was no news, no important information about the locality that did not reach her. Uma aunty had access to the inside of every house in the neighbourhood. Very often, she would visit people's kitchens with the apparent intention of gifting jackfruits, pumpkins, gourds, guavas or papayas grown in her garden and though in hints only, would exchange 'important' information with them, "Do you know, this morning when I came out for my walk quite early, I noticed a car waiting on the road and a boy pacing up and down. I said to myself, he must be a patient in the nursing home. I walked on. But after some time when I returned, I saw that a girl, a bag hanging from her shoulder, was coming out of the flat. I thought she must be going home for her holidays. Perhaps, she had a bus or a train to catch that early in the morning. Then it occurred to me, the poor girl may find it difficult to get a rickshaw or an auto-rickshaw so early in the morning. She was a young girl, and you never know, something untoward might have happened to her and so I followed her so that I may accompany her for some distance. But *hai!* when I reached the main road again, I found that the wench was getting into that car. And in front of my eyes, that boy drove her away. Had he been a relative, he would have

come straight into the flat, wouldn't he? He wouldn't have been waiting on the road. I am sure the two of them went away to have a nice time together. Surely, they must have gone to a hotel. The girl must have told the landlord that she was going to see her parents and the parents would be thinking that their daughter is in the lodge studying. God save us from such studies! I vow that for studies I'll never send a girl of my family to some other place."

There were enough people in the locality who would not agree with Uma aunty. All those who had no rooms to let out to these boys and girls were greatly worried, "These people have spoilt everything here. They have vitiated the atmosphere of the locality. See, what bad habits our children are picking up! Just wait for a holiday and see for yourself how these girls adorn themselves and go on a picnic with boys. Haven't you noticed, when they return late at night, how dishevelled they look?"

"And you know, most boys come to meet that girl, the girl with large eyes— that tall fairish girl. When you ask her, she will always say, O, he is just a cousin... I ask you, are there only cousins in this town, and no uncles and aunts?"

"Yes, it is time to take some concrete steps. If we want to save our children we must drive out all these outsiders from our locality. We must call a meeting this week itself", this was Phalguni aunty. She was not bad at heart but even on

petty matters she would begin to shout, without bothering to whom she was speaking and that is why she had become notorious. But, her sister-in-law was completely different. She was very conscious of her self-esteem. She was not ready to make her domestic quarrels public but at the same time, she could not tolerate it that her sister-in-law got the better of her in an argument. Consequently, she had discovered a number of new ways. One of them was to pick up a broom, stand at a safe distance and with anger flashing in her eyes, show the broom to her sister-in-law in a gesture of aggression. When that happened, the short-tempered sister-in-law would get still more furious and the pitch of her voice would rise still further. The shrill voice of the younger sister-in-law would ring in the entire locality. As no one saw the broom in the elder's hand, her reputation for gentleness would be confirmed a bit more, and the younger one would acquire a little more notoriety.

The most important time for assassinating the characters of these queer people of the locality was between three and four in the afternoon. Then, the maids of all the houses would assemble near the entrance of the street. Who quarreled with whom, the boy of which family touched the girl of which house and where, who saw whom doing what—bits of information like these would clash with each other and in a few hours the entire locality would get infected.

The maids were friendly not only with other maids but also with ladies of several houses. Women, under-educated but belonging to the so called gentry, often kept in good humour, maids working in other people's houses. While standing at the corner of their roof or rising on their toes to talk across their boundary wall or collecting milk from the milkman, whenever they had a chance, they exchanged hurried whispers among themselves and managed to gather information about the goings on in a particular house. That was pure entertainment for them—more titillating than the TV serials beginning with the letter 'K'.

Every maid in the locality had a common trait that was very peculiar. All of them were very unhappy with their own landladies but would be full of sympathy for those in other houses, and on the occasions of Puja or Holi, instead of being happy with what they received as gifts from their landladies, they would admire those received by other maids.

These days in terms of wearing a dress, the women in the locality fell into two categories. In one category, there were those who despite being married would wear salwar-kamiz or sleeping gowns (called 'nighties'); while there were others who would never be seen in anything but a sari. In the locality salwar-kamiz or churidar-kamiz or the 'nightie' had become symbols of revolution. Women who showed the

guts to wear them were counted among the rebels. This courage was first shown by those women who did not live in joint families. In almost all the joint families in the locality where the writ of the mother-in-law or the elder brother-in-law or the father-in-law or the husband's sister still ran, the daughters-in-law would wear only sari and proclaim their genteelness. It is entirely a different matter that when they saw those rebel women in such revolutionary dresses, they would secretly wish to wear them and very quietly had one or two pairs of them ready, which they would carry whenever they visited their mother's place or went with their husbands on a vacation. In those few days, they would get themselves photographed many times in that dress and would feel the glow of being modern, young, independent, revolutionary and so on.

Recently, a month after her mother-in-law's death, Abha *bhabhi* was seen in salwar-kamiz for the first time. A number of older women saw her buying fish from the fishmonger in that dress. "On doctor's advice I'm practicing yoga these days. Sari comes in the way of exercising", Abha *bhabhi* would explain, noticing their surprised look. Those watching her knew that she was a recently turned rebel, and that was the reason why she was so defensive about her dress. But after a few days, she would not feel the need to be embarrassed at all.

Women between fifty and fifty-five who never acted a rebel before and who were now past the age of becoming rebellious were the ones who were most worried, pained and disturbed. They regretted the fact that they never had the courage to remove the fringes of the sari from their heads in front of their mother-in-law, father-in-law or brother-in-law; and the daughters-in-law of these days...*chhee, chhee*... But yes, the older women of the locality were strangely generous to the recently widowed Vimla *bhabhi* and Achinto's mother. They did not object to their wearing coloured dresses. After the last rites were over, Sarla aunty said to Vimla *bhabhi*, "Daughter, you can wear all the colours except red. You are so young." But, there were some whisperings in the locality about Vimla *bhabhi's* coming out of her mourning so soon. Because Achinto's mother continued to weep for a longer period, she was able to earn more sympathy from the people. An additional benefit of that was that Satyeshwari *masima* put a *bindi* on her forehead with her own hands. She said, "Do wear a *bindi*. These days everything goes. The one who had to go has gone. But you have to live, haven't you? How lacklustre your face looks without a *bindi*!"

The same people in the locality who were not ready to accept the lacklustre face of Achinto's mother, felt quite distressed to see the bright shining faces of young students from outside. They

hated it when, to the dismay of the locality, girls sat huddled against boys on bikes and drove away with a *whroom*; or when for buying a single pouch of surf or shampoo or sauce, the girls came out of their rooms and crowded before the shop, having cold drinks and chatting with boys, or despite having a cell-phone sitting for hours in the only PCO in the locality and talking on the phone.

When the telephone in the house went dead and someone had to make a call from the PCO, this two-minute job would take hours because of these students. Those people who earlier sent their girls to that shop to buy something or to make a phone call were not prepared to do so now. They firmly believed that in the company of those students, their children would certainly be spoilt. But as far as possible, they tried to eavesdrop on the conversation between those boys and girls. That day as he was having tea in Navin *da's* drawing room, Abhishek Babu reported a piece of conversation that he had overheard while waiting for his turn to make a phone call from the PCO: that girl who is a tenant in Akash Babu's house, the girl whose father is an officer in a colliery, was saying, "I don't like to get into the hassles of marriage. It's only cooking and children... There is nothing else left in your life. I don't want to be like my mother. What I like is live-in-relationship. Exactly like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. You know they lived together without getting married. They had an intellectual and

emotional relationship. They were deeply in love with each other but neither interfered in the personal matters of the other. Both had relationships with many friends. Wow, what understanding! I wish I could live such a life."

"That foolish girl does not know that it is not so easy for everyone. In most cases, after their youth is gone these women find themselves in a very sorry state. She talks about Sartre but she must read about the world famous painter Picasso", Navin *da* flared up to hear Abhishek Babu's reporting, "Once Picasso who was over sixty then was walking with a twenty year old beauty in the streets of Momatre. He told her about a beautiful girl named Germaine who had once been his beloved. He told her that a number of young men were fascinated with the beauty of Germaine. Picasso's friend Kaza Gamas also loved her greatly and one day, angry with her for something she had done, he fired at her. The bullet did not hit her but thinking her to be dead, Gamas immediately committed suicide. A number of men came and went into Germaine's life. After telling her all that Picasso took her to a dark house in a narrow street, where an old woman lived alone, waiting for her death. Picasso told the girl, this is Germaine. The same Germaine who made men mad when she was young. Today, no one bothers about her."

"Who thinks about old age? Don't you see that today's young generation

is dying to work in call centres in big cities in order to be able to lead such a free life. They want to work together, go out together on holidays, enjoy themselves and when they get bored with each other they look for another partner...then from the second they move on to the third...from the third to the fourth. Their parents don't live with them so they have no problem. They may bring anyone to their apartment, who bothers?"

"And the sad part of all this is that most of these young people come from decent middle class families. I can't understand how they become so liberated."

"Tethered cows have been set free and so naturally they will jump about a great deal. After some time when they face the dark side of this liberty, they will realize their mistake."

The conversation between Abhishek Babu and Navin *da* was interrupted by Dhakka Babu. He was out of breath, "Hurry up, come with me."

"Where? Why?" Abhishek Babu and Navin *da* said, nervously alert.

"Here. Just in front of our house. Now it has crossed all limits. Under the tamarind tree in front of our house a boy and a girl have been together for I don't know how long. When I asked them what they were doing there they said, 'We are standing on the road, have we entered your house? We are discussing an important project. Don't disturb us,

uncle.' Now you tell me, does anyone discuss a project at nine o'clock in the night standing on the road? It has become a daily affair. Today, I am going to drive these people out. I will collect the entire locality. What bad influence on our children all this has! My Buchu too has been spoilt because of these people. Of late, he has begun to keep the front buttons of his shirt open and flaunt his chest while walking."

Despite all the arguments and complaints of Dhakka Babu, Abhishek Babu and Navin *da* did not move an inch. They said, "What can we do, *dada*? It's not safe to get into a quarrel with these outsiders. If they get angry, they will bring the entire hostel to the locality. Don't you know how badly these boys had thrashed the owner of Chowdhuri Mahila Lodge last month? Now at this age who wants to be battered by these young boys and be insulted? Let them do what they like. When the girls themselves invite them, why should we bother? Let them all go to hell."

"So you would not do anything", Dhakka Babu's nostrils flared unnaturally wide.

"Why not? We'll collect a donation from each one in the locality and get a street light fixed in that dark corner", Abhishek Babu offered a practical solution. He was sure that everyone in the locality would agree to his proposal because there was hardly a person there who had not seen couples doing something in the car or on the bike

or even standing in some dark corner there.

Dhakka Babu returned home. There he shared his frustration with his wife, "That's why! Exactly that's why I am happy with myself and do not mix much with people. With what hopes I had gone to the people in the locality! Did anyone do anything? You remember when we had a legal case with our neighbour and he came out to threaten us with a gun, did anyone come out to help us?"

The anger of Dhakka Babu was justified. Some seven or eight years ago when there was a dispute with his neighbour over land, their boys had threatened to kill him and his son, and no one in the locality had come forward to help him. Then did he not become extra protective towards his son on account of those threats? Whenever his son Buchu went out, he would be given clear and strict instructions, "Don't get into a fight... close the top buttons of your shirt...don't talk to anyone in a loud voice...walk with your head bent and eyes on the ground..."

Since then his obedient son kept his eyes low on the ground. The poor boy did exactly what his father said to him. The father would sermonize, "Take this bag and bring half kilo of chara-pona fish, half a kilo baingan, half a kilo bhindi and a quarter kilo tomatoes. Get everything weighed properly. You will get about seven fishes in half kilo, and five baingans, bhindis at least ten, and tomatoes certainly five. Do not bring

less than this, do you understand?"

Now the son went to the market at eight in the morning, and after wandering from shop to shop in the heat of the sun, returned at half-past twelve with an empty bag. What could he do? He got those things weighed in several shops and every time there would be five fishes instead of seven or eight bhindis instead of ten. Then in anger Dhakka Babu pushed his stupid son so hard that he fell into the dirty drain outside. But even then, he always talked to his father in a subdued voice.

Dhakka Babu was not called Dhakka Babu (Mr. Collision) from the beginning. The people of the locality had given him that name because of a strange habit he had. He would never begin a conversation with anyone without first colliding with him. He always walked with his eyes on the ground. It meant that when he ran against another person's shoulder or his tummy, he would suddenly look up and because there was nothing else he could do, he would say, "Well Mister so and so, how are you? Everything okay?"

So when Buchu, the son of the same Dhakka Babu looked his father in his eyes for the first time and made a demand for a cell-phone and a bike, and when refused, expressed his anger by breaking cups and saucers, Dhakka Babu was alarmed. Obviously, his anger was soon turned to those students from outside in whose company his son had changed thus.

Keeping in mind such changes and because of the request and pressure of various people, ultimately a decision was taken to call a meeting of the residents of the locality. This meeting was attended chiefly by those residents who had no rooms to let. Those who had rooms to let were trying to avoid the meeting. They were afraid of losing a good source of extra income.

That extra income had changed the behaviour of many women. Let us take the example of the wife of the owner of the apartment. Of late, she had kicked her years-old habit of gossiping with the women of the locality. After all, what else could she do? All the time the women would narrate ridiculous stories about the outsiders. She had only given rooms to the girls but had become guilty in the eyes of everyone. Let these women go to hell, saying this she concentrated her attention on the TV serials. Now her days were patterned on the timings of those serials. The good thing about advertisement breaks was that they gave her some time to finish some important tasks then. Or else, God knows what would have happened to her husband or children.

So, when it was decided to have a meeting, a large number of people assembled. Mrs. So and So told everyone which girl had misled her daughter and made her join a picnic with boys. The other one added to it and informed them about the girls who had asked a girl of the locality to give up wearing those

dresses of primitive times, and so on and so forth. The discussion on dress was slightly more interesting. It so happened that when those two-bit girls commented on the dress of their daughters, the parents lambasted them, "You yourselves wear obscene clothes; revealing half your bodies and you mislead our daughter. In aping the west, you have become completely shameless. You have destroyed our Indian culture." Will you like to hear how the opposition replied to that? This is what one of them said, "Oh, you and your Indian-ness! Can you tell me what the queens and princesses of our country wore in the past? Only a bodice and a see-through piece of cloth over it. And how sexy was the navel-showing lower dress of theirs. They attended even courts in those obscene clothes and met the king and the courtiers. You learned to cover your bodies only after the Mughal kings began to rule here."

A second bombshell followed from the opposition, "You call us undisciplined? Just read *Mrichhakatikam*, the play by Shudraka. The play on which the movie 'Utsav' was based with Rekha and Shekhar Suman in the cast. Years ago, how free our society was! The Muslim kings taught us to remain in purdah and you take that to be the norm. Now we are free. Why should we live like that?"

Hearing such intellectual arguments and discussions, the parents who were chiding the girls became speechless. They

were sure that the future of their daughters was bleak. They did not know how to keep their daughters safe from the evil influence of those girls.

The speakers were the husband and wife who were quite well-known in the locality. About the husband the first story doing the rounds was that after he got married, he would develop a craving for pickles exactly on the same days when his wife's fifteen year old sister came to visit them. The girl wore a skirt and he would ask her again and again to climb up the ladder in the kitchen to bring down a jar of pickles. He would himself be standing below, looking up and pointing to a particular jar saying, no, not that one, no, no, not that either, but the other one, and so on. The poor girl would never know whether her *jeeja* was pointing to those jars of pickles or ogling at something else...

His wife too was not far behind. On the sly, she would wave to other women's husbands leaving for office; or, running into them in the morning, or in the evening would wish them good morning and good evening with great coyness, and whenever she saw a single man (it did not matter if he was much younger to her) she would innocently let her sari slide down from her breasts—all that was the subject of spicy stories about her.

So, it was natural for such couples to be worried about their daughters. It was because the parents did not want their children to learn those bad habits.

Therefore, the meeting discussed with great passion why the new generation was becoming like that. Why did they not respect the elders, or why did they want to lead a profligate life-style or wear obscene and revealing clothes.

Most of the people there blamed films and the TV for that. In one film they show a disciplinarian principal of a medical college being continually insulted by the students. Another film shows how the students of a *gurukul* force the strict headmaster to allow them and also their teachers to carry on romance on the campus. And, the bad part is that all the actors in these movies are big, highly respected film stars who are the idols of the present generation.

Hindi movies are still better than these kung-fu karate kind of foreign films and serials shown on our TVs. Our children are greatly impressed by them but what do they show? Only revenge, revenge and more revenge. To avenge the murder of his father or his teacher, a boy learns kung-fu and karate. He spends his entire life preparing for that revenge, and in the end takes his revenge by killing his enemy. The son of the enemy also repeats that process. He grows up and kills the murderer of his father and that's how the plot keeps taking twists and turns. Now, tell me, what will the new generation learn from all this? How will they learn to be cultured?

When the people of the locality were busy in the meeting, Sanatan Babu's wife was in the bathroom and Sanatan Babu

was involved with an incense-stick seller. The salesman was detailing the qualities of various kinds of incense-sticks he had. For instance, "This is manufactured by the Satyapeeth Ashram and has the exact fragrance of the bakul flower, and this one is kevra-scented, a real product of the ashram located on the Gandhmadan hill, take a look at this, and this..." Like that he would go on. Sanatan Babu first listened to the detailing carefully and then asked the salesman to light as sample one stick of each kind. The salesman was happy to do it and one by one he lighted all of them. The scent of one mingled with the other which mingled with the third one and the result was that Sanatan Babu was totally confused. So when the last incense stick was lighted, he declared in a serious tone: the incense sticks are smelling of acid; they would not do. The salesman had been talking for a long time and so there was froth at the corners of his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand, collected his incense-sticks and abusing Sanatan Babu and his ancestors under his breath, left.

Almost everyone had seen Sanatan Babu haggling with a salesman but only Pranav Babu of the house in front had the good fortune of watching him actually make a purchase. He had seen Sanatan Babu haggling for a carpet and bringing its price down from five thousand rupees to twelve hundred. Pranav Babu was fully convinced that the carpet seller from Kashmir who had sold carpets from

Kashmir to Kanya Kumari and had a long career as a salesman gave that carpet worth five thousand in only twelve hundred only to honour the occasion of getting a customer like Sanatan Babu.

Sanatan Babu was so excited on buying the carpet so cheap that even after the deal was done, he kept talking to the salesman for the next half hour.

Some of the sample questions he asked during that conversation are the following:

"You said that you have come from Kashmir. So what do you eat in Kashmir?"

"The same that I eat here, bread, vegetables and so on", the carpet seller replied.

"Do you get potatoes in your Kashmir?"

"Yes."

"What kind of potatoes? Round ones or oblong ones?"...

Here at the meeting, there was a lot of discussion and debate but there was neither a definite outcome, nor a clear decision was taken. Day by day, the locality continued to be in the process of being renewed. Some old girls left and new ones came in their place. The mothers, fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers of the locality continued to grumble. Now here is a story of one of the houses where the grumblings went on. I am telling you the story of this house only because one day, people in all the houses in the locality would

become like those living in this house.

It so happened that one day the girl who had been a source of trouble for the parents in this house visited them with a packet of sweets. That packet was like a God-sent gift to the parents who had lost weight worrying about how to keep their daughter safe from girls like her. A piece of good news also came along with that packet of sweets. It was that she had received an offer of a very good job in a multinational company in Delhi. The salary was fifty thousand rupees and a free flat to stay in. She would be sent to the USA after a year.

The family could not sleep that night. The packet of sweets remained unopened.

In the morning when the girl had packed her things and was about to leave, the parents who had spent a sleepless night went to her with their daughter

and said to her, "We want to send our daughter to Delhi for coaching. This time she had no chance here. Is it really necessary that she should stay with her parents for her studies? She will go wherever there is an opportunity. Now where will she find a place to stay in that unknown city? Will you let her stay with you in your flat? We shall be sending her the expenses. If she stays with you, perhaps one day she also will become successful like you.'

Chhe...chhee: an expression of disgust.

Babu moshai: mister.

Hai: an expression of surprise and disappointment.

Bhabhi: wife of elder brother.

Masima: mother's sister.

Da/Dada : brother.

Jeeja: husband of the elder sister.

Gurukul: a school patterned on the old Indian model.

Mahua Maji, born 1964, writes short stories and novels. Her novel *Mein Borishaila* was published by Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi. She was given the *Antarashtriya Katha Samman* by Katha U.K. in the House of Lords, London. In 2008, Rupa & Co., New Delhi published a translation of *Mein Borishaila* entitled *Me, Borishaila*.

Ravi Nandan Sinha is a writer of prose and edits a literary quarterly magazine *The Quest*. He is head of English Department in St. Xaviers College, Ranchi.

FUTURE IMPERFECT

Oma Sharma

Translated by

Seema Sharma & Devang Vyas

Brahma, the Creator has etched the destiny of all living beings on their forehead, but only an astute astrologer can read it.... (Sarvalli)

A letter from district Bhandara? Whom do I know there? Is it one of the ubiquitous chain letters in praise of Vaishno Devi or Babhuti Baba forwarded by yet another innocent victim in an attempt to escape the 'wrath' of the deity. Beating the deafening drums of greed and fear, at least one such letter invariably reaches me every month. "Mr. X printed and posted so many copies of this letter in praise of this Baba and got a foreign posting... the letter in praise of this Devi was thrown away by Mr Y, as a result, he lost his leg in an accident." How sickening! But frankly speaking, despite all my discretion, a strange, nameless fear does raise its head inside me—momentarily—each time I get one such letter. Failures and dejections have so dogged my soul...could these be due to some such carelessness...? How thankful to the Public Services Commission, who just before the cut-off age of 26, out of pure mercy, gave a lease of life to a drowning man! For, before this fortuitous appointment, for months at a stretch, the newspapers were nothing but Employment News for me and the Postman a veritable Divine Hermes!

And then, when I received the 'Appointment Letter', my whole being was thrown into an apoplexy as in the famous short story of Manto, "Open it".

My fear of unknown letters is, no wonder, not unfounded.

But, who is this to address me as 'Uncle' instead of 'Mr. Kansal'?

The fear that was oppressing me like the still darkness of the night changed into a glowing, soothing sunlight, there and then. Oh! So this was from Aditya! Aditya Narayan Satpathi, my Oriya chum of our M.A. days. But, instead of Sambhalpur, what is the rascal doing in Bhandara?

It has been over four years since I finished my masters, about the same time Satpathi left Delhi. Anyway, let me read the letter...

“What is this? No freshening up, no brushing, no breakfast and there you are, glued to this letter. Is it going to run away? First, at least have a glass of water!” mother scolded me while handing me over a glass of water.

She was right. I had not even opened my laces. After dumping my over-sized bag on the table, I had rushed towards the fridge, which has been the traditional abode for keeping letters in the house. This was, yet, another weekend escapade for me from Government training at the Nagpur academy. Surprisingly, even casual leaves could not be taken without the approval of the faculty. Soma Sekhar (from Andhra Pradesh) usually had the excuse of Naxalite troubles and Gurmeet Singh (from Punjab) had the excuse of terrorist threats for taking leave. I had the support of the perennial excuse of a bachelor: wish to take leave to ‘see a girl’ for marriage.

“Oh Mummy, if he is coming from Nagpur he must have asked his girlfriend to send a telegram.” this was Mani bhabhi, in her usual brisk way.

As soon as I realized my folly, I

recoiled and smiled at everyone and pleaded “Ma, could I get a cup of tea, please.”

By the time Ma got the hot beverage, I had already read Satpathi’s letter.

He was working in the Railways as a PWI (public works inspector) since the last 3 years. He had got married and had a two and a half year old daughter named Chandrika. He was staying in the railway quarters there. His Father-in-Law, a high ranking official in Central Railways was on deputation these days. His wife was not highly educated, just a home-maker. Satpathi wrote that he was thinking of writing to me but it got delayed for one reason or the other. Now that his wife had gone to her parents’ house for some time, he chose to write to me at my old address so that it should reach me wherever I might be. He further informed that Prashant bhai has been promoted in the Reserve Bank of India. If he spends one more year in Bhandara, he can go back to Orissa. He signed off by saying that he has spoken so much about himself, and now it was my turn to update him... about myself...my marital status... whether I ever made it to ‘D’- School...

‘D’- School means Delhi School of Economics. There is so much unforgettable about our time there. Being there was like getting passport to an elitist club. This was the alma mater of renowned economists like Jagdish Bhagwati, Amartya Sen, Raj Krishna, Sukhmoy Chakrawarti and such stalwarts whose shadows still loom large here. Founded by V.K.R.V. Rao, modeled on

The London School of Economics, this was truly an international institution.

In the beginning, I was aloof and withdrawn. The studies were enormously difficult and the milieu so very alien. Everyone rattling off in English, which was still a foreign language to me, and what was worse, there was this clique culture or groupism all around. What could one do if he was from another state and alone? The sense of superiority one had breathed while entering the gates of D-School soon evaporated into massive inferiority complex. The glamour of Hindu College, St. Stephens, Shri Ram college and Hansraj college was such that students from all other colleges were deemed as outcasts. Lady Shri Ram also was amongst them.

When I came across Aditya in a similar predicament, a natural bond flourished between us.

"I am from Ravinsha College, Cuttack," he said.

"I am from Shyamlal College, Delhi." I replied.

This was about the time when Rakesh Goswami from Hindu College had proudly told Mayank Ratudi from Stephens, "My father is a Professor of Sociology."

"Who?"

"You don't know?"

"No"

"Professor Dinesh Goswami!"

"Does that make you less of an asshole?"

Aditya and I were sitting right behind them. Aditya and Rakesh couldn't get

the slang but could understand that Rakesh has been snubbed. As soon as the punch-line was delivered, I burst into laughter. This certainly opened up possibility of friendship with Mayank which actually did happen. But this episode seemed to convince us that the pristine wall of D- School, which we thought was painted by a Master, could be brushed by a rustic!

This repartee delicately helped bolster our sagging moral in no small way. As a tribute to his earthy hilly tongue Mayank was awarded the nickname "Pahadi" (the Hillman) from that day.

In that atmosphere of groupism, 'Desis' (natives) like us had started carving out a place for themselves.

After a fortnight, I was christened "Uncle". The setting for this was the first show of the film 'Khalnayak' (the Villain), which we all had planned to see at Plaza.

At the bus stop, while watching the flow of oncoming traffic a young girl asked me, "Uncle, would this bus go to Connaught Place?" Before I could point out the blasphemic portion of her question, a childish "Yes", popped out of my mouth.

The Masters were vigilant enough to take note of it.

From then onwards, barring certificates, 'Uncle' displaced my identity of Vinay Kumar Kansal. It was a little inconvenient in the beginning and I kept contemplating dishing out titles such as 'Chilam', 'Dhakkan', etc. to my 'friends' but this never materialized. Within a

month or two, I got damn comfortable with this sobriquet. So much so that when someone would call out “Uncle, why did you not come yesterday?” or “Uncle, stop screwing around!” I would not find anything awkward about it.

In any case, the receding hairline had already begun to make major inroads on my top!

However, Satpathi stopped calling me Vinay much long afterwards. That too on my insistence because ‘Vinnie’ at home and ‘Uncle’ at D- School had so overpowered my subconscious and personal-social identity that there was no room for ‘Vinay’. Teachers were the only exception.

One day, both of us were going to Pragati Maidan to visit an exhibition and had to embark a bus from Mall Road. “Excuse me Sir, does this bus go to Pragati Maidan” Satpathi asked in his rudimentary tone.

“Yes, but don’t tell anyone,” was the tongue-in cheek answer of the conductor who was busy scribbling something on his papers. Doubling up with laughter, I handed over two rupees to the conductor while Satpathi stood there dumbstruck. When I explained the comment, upon alighting from the bus, Satpathi spat out with total irritation. “What a fucker!” Staying in our company he had been learnt the universal applicability of this word. Fool, idiot, bumpkin, all paled in comparison to this expletive. “Not a fucker, he was a Jat...and that too one from Haryana” I explained.

On our return journey, while we were waiting for the bus, Satpathi asked with

some hesitation, “Vinay, can I have a coin please...?”

I was totally taken aback! In the duration of more than a month, ever since we had been acquainted, looking at his perennial garb of a half-sleeved green shirt and his old slippers, I had some inkling of his strained resources but had not the faintest clue of the enormity of it all.

Inspite of the naked awkwardness of the scene, I slid a five rupee note into his palm. He made feeble protests of “No, no, a coin will do”. His protests had a measure of self-esteem in them but the necessity carried the day.

“Keep it”, I managed to utter before clambering hurriedly into a bus that had just arrived.

For the next couple of days, Satpathi was very awkward and conscious as if he had been stripped in front of me.

Classes at D-school would start at 9.20 a.m. in the morning and extend up to lunch at 1.10 p.m. After 3 p.m., Ratan Tata Library (popularly known as R.T.L.) had few visitors, but Satpathi was always one of them. One such day we had gone to the small roadside eatery run by Pan Singh. It was then that Satpathi opened up his life in broad details.

His family consisted of his mother and a younger sister, both of whom lived in the village. They eked out a living through manual labour, making baskets and boxes of bamboo. His father had been a landless labourer who had died when Satpathi was two. Nobody knew what had happened to him but his mother

told him that his father had suffered from Polio. Their family 'wealth' consisted of a small hut amongst the forty-fifty huts huddled on the outskirts of the village. Satpathi too had joined until he started going to the bigger village nearby where he started attending the village school.

Satpathi had a distant relative Prashant bhai who motivated him in studies. His mother had told him, "Son, I will not seek your support for food, but I will not be able to support your studies." As a result during his initial education, he had to spend more than one year in the same class. The school fees were only ten or twelve paise but even that seemed daunting.

Even after staying hungry for ten days, the month end seemed to loom ominously near. A wedding feast in the village was an occasion to eat well. There were a couple of teachers who were compassionate but when the majority of pupils were in the same boat as him, which teacher could be of any avail?

Studying till the eighth standard was the toughest period for him. Thereafter, he became physically strong enough to carry out more manual work. Also, by then, due to Prashant bhai's efforts, his fees were waived. After the ninth standard, Prashant bhai got him admitted to a school in Sambhalpur. By giving tuitions to junior students he managed to make his ends meet. He chose science in the twelfth to enable him to continue giving tuitions. Prashant bhai was older than him by three or four years and had topped not only the school but also the district. He had joined the Reserve

Bank of India the previous year after completing his M. Phil. from J.N.U. Despite being a rank holder in twelfth, it was at his suggestion that Satpathi opted for B.A. (Hons.) instead of B.Sc. When he was admitted to Ravinsha College, Cuttack, it was Prashant bhai who familiarized Satpathi with D-School's reputation as the Mecca of economics. "There is scarcely any Nobel Laureate in Economics who has not given a lecture or talk at the D-School" he had informed him.

Prashant bhai himself was not in a good situation financially but he was an extremely courageous man and would inspire others as well. Satpathi not only got a fees waiver at Ravinsha College but also got a stipend which he enabled him to come to Delhi.

In Delhi too, it was Prashant bhai who persuaded one of his Oriya friends residing in Gawyer Hall Hostel to let Satpathi stay with him as a guest.

Today the situation with Satpathi is that he has a roof over his head but every evening, he has to think of new ways of getting a square meal. This includes banking on his ever reliable profession: giving tuitions.

Satpathi had confided all this to me when he suddenly got up. "Vinay, I have told you everything. I am sure you will not tell anyone. I am waging a battle against my life and times. I don't know what the outcome will be but I am determined to succeed. These are hard times for me but every dark cloud has a silver lining."

Sensing his courage and his forthright

approach, I truly felt a deep empathy with him. I had thought that my journey from my village till D-School was one full of struggle and grit but compared to Satpathi's life, it looked so cosy and comforting.

I had taken Mani bhabhi into confidence and got a hundred rupees from her for Satpathi which she readily gave. Pahadi and Arun Nagpal had organized a stipend of two hundred and fifty rupees a month for Satpathi which was enough to meet his mess bills etc.

By the time all these issues were resolved, more than six months had already passed.

It was the end of December when Delhi's winter peaks. RTL was so large and spacious that in spite of having all its doors and windows closed, the readers still needed to wear two pullovers to save themselves to study. All that Satpathi had was a worn out maroon half sleeves sweater and the same old half-sleeved green shirt.

But Satpathi persevered.

Even on New Year's day, I saw him glued to his pet seat in RTL. That was the first time I saw Jyoti Bhatnagar, bent over his seat, talking softly to him.

In the opinion of our gang, Jyoti was a class bombshell. Her figure was the classic 36-24-36. She was a sexy dusky lass with agreeable features. On top it all, she was rich. Satpathi, what a jack- pot you have hit, bastard!

However, whenever we pestered him about Jyoti, Satpathi always replied that there was nothing between the two of

them.

"Are you the smartest in our group of five?" Pankaj questioned him once as though he was a ditenu.

"No, not at all."

"Then, tell us what is there in you that she...?"

"What can I say? But when there is nothing between us..." was Satpathi's usual defensive take.

We all knew there was nothing between them. Maybe there was no possibility of anything happening as well, but it was an opportunity to tease the sweet natured Satpathi. It was all a harmless fun. Satpathi probably was an ideal punching bag for all of us to get even with Jyoti's curves.

The entire year passed by without Satpathi having asked a single question in the class or saying anything more than a fleeting "hello" to any girl. In spite of that, he was a member of our "dude" gang which was what surprised many. But, this was true.

The results of M.A. previous were shocking! Many of the supposed heavyweights from St. Stephens had fallen flat. Most of our gang managed to scrape by. Pahadi got a first division.

Satpathi had failed, whereas Jyoti had topped.

"Let her top for now, ultimately she will have to come under!" was Arun's way of secreting his heart.

"Buddy, this is truly a dark tragedy", said Pahadi.

"Don't worry. I will fight back", was

Satpathi's brave response to our collective expressions of regret.

I had by now totally believed in Satpathi's bravery and fortitude. In one year's time he had adjusted to the D-School culture. Many final year students used to repeat certain papers of M.A. (previous) so as to better their grades. Some would repeat one, while some would repeat two or three. So what, if Satpathi repeated all four papers? Pahadi and Arun's arrangements for Satpathi could also be pulled on for another year. Swearing me to secrecy, Satpathi told me that before the results were declared he had secured a B.A. tuition in the nearby Mukherji Nagar. So, this time he would probably be able to study with greater peace of mind. True, a few things would get stalled unnecessarily. When one's fight is against time, loss of time may imply the loss of a value.

The effect of this failure on Satpathi was apparent. The same lecture hall, the tables and chairs, the teachers...all of which seemed like a sweet tonic the previous year were worse than bitter medicine now. But, he was focused. It was a *fait-accompli* that those who studied at the D-School could reach the highest echelons of the Civil Services, academics or research. For a D-Schoolite, life became a cakewalk. And all this only when the graduate did not wish to pursue further studies abroad. To achieve this, students have to undergo the grueling of D-School, much like the gold that acquires purity after passing through trial by fire.

Satpathi knew all this as much as any other person. That is why, as soon

as the term started Satpathi started his studying sessions in RTL. Through our whispered conversations I came to know that Jyoti had given her last year's notes to him. And, had given him the promise to help and support in every way.

"Support in every way?" Arun dragged the words a full mile.

"Oh, come on", Satpathi replied, blushing.

"It is precisely these graces of yours that must have won her heart", I punched.

"Excuse me!" a peeved reader near us terminated our conversation. Idiot.

The RTL had become the safest bet to meet Satpathi. During class times, he would be in his class and we in ours. No one had the guts to bunk any professor's lectures since doing so would mean spending at least an entire day submerged in text books and journals and yet not quite getting it.

But, along with all the hard work and dedication we could clearly see that we were at the right place. And, that kept our spirits high.

Satpathi, however, did appear subdued and troubled.

"This batch of students is not like ours," he declared after one month.

Even after being left behind, he continued to club himself with the rest of our gang.

"All batches are similar Aditya. The Law of Average operates everywhere. There are always minor variations, that's all."

"No, the variations are major,"

Satpathi remained firm.

“Yes, one major variation is that there is no hot cake like Jyoti in this batch”, Pahadi teased.

“You guys always go on the wrong track”, Satpathi fumed.

“No buddy, I was just kidding,” Pahadi immediately recanted.

“Yaar, what do you have to do with the whole batch. You just have to study. Isn't it? we are always there....” Arun intervened gently.

“That I know”, Satpathi answered in resignation.

Later, Arun told Pahadi not to tease Satpathi about Jyoti as this makes him a little too touchy. And anyway, come on guys, what could be common between a royalty and a commoner?

The university was having Dushehra break and I was about to enter D-School to go to RTL when I was hailed by a voice from Pan Singh's tea shop, “Uncle!” This was Satpathi. In my entire recollection this was the first time he had addressed me as ‘Uncle’. We had discussed this just two days ago.

“Would you like to have some tea?” he asked, beckoning with his thumb held near his mouth.

“Ok, Lets have”, I replied.

The tea was almost done when I noticed that Satpathi was trying to say something but was not able to.

“Anything special?” apprehending something I just managed to utter.

“It is something important, but I am

wondering whether I should ask?”

At this point, I became stern, “Come on now, out with it. What is the matter?” I asked.

His troubled visor darkened. Or, may be it got more intensified.

I too became speechless. Waiting to hear what the matter was.

“I just received a letter from my village”, he started with obvious difficulty.

“What is it about?”

“There was a fire...in the village...many houses were gutted...including ours...Mother has written that either I should return or send some money.”

“...”

“...”

“Uncle, can you help?” he ventured in a pathetic way, while pushing his toenail into the ground, and looking everywhere but at me.

“Why not dear... But buddy you know my situation also...Rs.50 or 100 is my limit”, I said sympathetically yet clearly.

“That would be sufficient”, he said taking out from his pocket a paper with a list of 20-25 donors-to-be.

“The list begins with you”, he said in a matter-of-fact voice. Pahadi, Arun and Pankaj were also there in the list. So was Jyoti, albeit way down. The list seemed to be the labour of an agonizing night.

A few days later, as soon as I got the chance, in Satpathi's absence, I raised the issue with our gang of four. Pahadi

became livid after hearing it patiently.

“Uncle, you do whatever you want. We are not going to dish out a single penny”, Pahadi said with brutal finality in his tone.

“His house in the village has been destroyed by fire”, I added, more by way of an expression of my feelings than in an effort to passify Pahadi.

“So what?”

“What do you mean ‘So what?’ Satpathi has been our friend” I was resolute.

“Its only because of our friendship that we have been helping him till now. Though you have not told me, I know that you too have been helping him. That is so good of you. But now, he is taking us for a ride. ...we also have our limitations...” Pahadi blared.

It was as if I was stuck in quicksand. My intentions were noble but Pahadi also had a point. Strangely enough, Pahadi’s statement “Who knows what is the story about fire?” did not seem far-fetched to me.

We decided not to discuss this issue further. For a few days, Satpathi was not seen in D-School. Then, once he resumed attending, aside from a few small clarifications, we did not broach this issue.

It was a February evening, in the first half of the last decade of the century. D-school had hosted a lecture of American economist John Kenneth Galbraith. We had laughed our hearts out that day. Some 8-10 of us were sitting in a corner, sipping tea and making small talks about the lecture.

“Galbraith should stop lecturing now” opined a young voice.

“Why?”

“The old geezer has nothing new to say...tell me about any of the articles, of any worth, that the oldie has penned after his ‘Affluent Society’”.

“See, he used to talk about the coming together of Socialism and Capitalism...the Great Theory of Convergence... and just see what is happening today?”

“Dear, a theory is theory. It can go wrong.”

“That’s the problem. Our economists of today have developed ‘The game Theory’, this theory, that theory and stop. They don’t bother about its applicability to real life. All the theories are based on airy hypotheses.”

“To some extent even our Mahalonobis...”

“How can you compare a theorist like Mahalonobis with Galbraith who just patches things together?”

“Yes, Mahalonobis too. His basics are not wrong. The method of putting his theories into practice which Nehru chose was wrong.”

“That is simply your belief, not a theory.”

“Think what you want. Anyway, today’s economics hardly differentiates between the two. Whatever you wish to prove, simply assume it, and then use a complex web of numbers to drape it in a model.”

This was the standard practice after a lecture by a well known economist.

We would indulge in casual chit-chat and evaluation. Satpathi, though not participating in them, would take full interest, nevertheless.

May be it was in these moments that he would draw the strength to bear the fateful thrashing that D-School had handed out to him. This was his liveliness.

But, this year's results once again threw us into a maelstrom of shock. Satpathi had not passed in any of the papers. Pahadi had obtained excellent scores. Arun had scraped through with exactly 40%, but he had already made foray into the Civil Services. My results were not too good either. I could no longer fulfill my ambition of becoming a college lecturer owing to a shortfall of one percent! But, maybe I would be able to get a foot-hold in research etc.

But, Satpathi? What would he do now? He was intelligent. He was equally hard-working. Yet, he was to have such a fate! After mulling over the issue for a long time, we consoled ourselves by saying that Satpathi was one of those two or three otherwise excellent students who were inexplicably bruised by D-School every year.

Poor fellow! What else could one say?

After those days, life took on a frantic pace. Pahadi left for further studies to Indiana University. Arun was selected for the Manipur Cadre of the Civil Services, and Pankaj, after qualifying for three banks simultaneously, had joined State Bank of India. I got a job as a research assistant in a big Institution. I used their infrastructure to the fullest in preparing for the Civil Services. And slowly, inch-

by inch succeeded in making an entry therein.

I was sent to Nagpur for preliminary training.

There was no news of Satpathi after those days.

And now, this letter from district Bhandara.

What a coincidence. This meant I would actually be able to meet Satpathi. Bhandara was very close. I started feeling a sense of elation while folding the letter back. I replied from Delhi itself. I gave him my Nagpur academy address and told him to take advantage of his being a railway-man to come and meet me as early as possible. We have so much to talk about. It would be great fun.

And, he did come. On the second day of my return, he was there before me. The same enthusiasm and the same "Satpathi" brand laughter (after interacting with a few other people from Orissa, I have come to the conclusion that the origin of this laughter is their homeland!). The same dark complexion! His face was all set to gain double chin, the stomach looked ready to protrude. A look at the shoes convinced me that these were either departmental or of a cheap local make.

After the exchange of details about the developments in our respective lives, we started reminiscing about D-School and all that was associated with our days there.

"Do you happen to meet anyone of our gang?" he inquired with an intention to catch up.

“Forget meeting, now there is not even an exchange of letters with anyone. You know I have the same old address, but when the others do not write, what can you expect... Seems every one is fully immersed in his conjugal bliss.”

“Time changes everything about us...and does not even give us an inkling of what it is doing.....take me for instance....”

“Yes buddy, tell me what have you been up to since D-School.”

Upon being asked, his gaze shot far into the horizon, as if he was mentally wrestling with an idea ...from where he should begin. I had to goad him, “Say something... say *na*”

“D-school took away as much from me as it gave me. Prashant bhai had filled me with wonderful dreams of D-School and when I got admission to it, I felt elated as Tenzing must have felt on conquering the Mt. Everest.

The Principal of Ravinshaw College, Mr Chhottaray, had congratulated me personally. I was the first pupil in the last five years to get admission in D-School. There I met wonderful friends like Pahadi, Arun, Pankaj and you... So many great, yet, humble teachers...and what an unpolluted yet competitive atmosphere...”

“Friends like Jyoti Bhatnagar,” I added a lighter twist to the memory of yore which was veering towards melancholy.

“Yes, even Jyoti Bhatnagar”, he said with equanimity.

This was news to me.

I had thought he would dismiss my attempt to poke humor at his expense. Not this time.

“So, was something actually there between the two of you?” Some vague suspicion of fear moved my subconscious. Jyoti was far too good for our sloven lot. But someone worse off could whisk her away, was not a comforting thought either.

“May be yes, may be no”, he smiled a bit but quickly drew his smile back. “But, now as I look back, I think a lot could have occurred between us.”

“What do you mean?” I was eager to get to the bottom.

“She was a really mature, caring girl...truly mature.” he was thoughtful in his nonchalance.

“Buddy, you better come to the point. And fast.” The curiosity was getting the better of me.

“When I flunked in the first year, she met me on the way and told me that the happiness she felt at standing first has been over shadowed by the sadness she felt at my failure. I was totally taken aback that a girl with whom I had hardly exchanged pleasantries could think at an emotional plan for me. She told me that she had been observing me in the group and was very impressed that despite being in the company of such uncouth friends, I had never uttered anything that was derogatory or cheap. Our other classmates also gave her a good opinion about me. You will be surprised to know that she had once called me to her house at Greater Kailash

and had given me her class notes. What a mansion! It was so grand that I thought it was better than a five star hotel. Her father had retired as a Brigadier from the Indian Army and had become a consultant to a few big corporates. Her mother was running a large textiles export company. Her only other sibling, the elder brother, had studied law in the USA and had started working for a large firm there. At her home, Jyoti was the very opposite of her gentle, soft spoken self that she was in D-school; there she was very chirpy and vibrant. I thanked my stars for her taking such an initiative. Being close to her made the entire D-School experience worthwhile. I don't know what she had thought when she had consoled me saying that D-School was not the end of the world, and that I could pursue law at the University after which I would be able to work with any big law firm."

"Strongly drawn by her affections, I was in a state of emotional dilemma, when I received the news of the fire in our village. For some reasons, you guys could not help me, but I was so desperate at that time that I had to take Jyoti's help. Without asking a single question she thrust three thousand rupees in my hand which was sufficient to deal with the crisis."

"After that, Uncle, I became less interested and more doubtful about economics. I don't know why but I started feeling that the equations and models of consumers, sellers and the economy that were being taught in econometrics at D-School were fundamentally flawed,

erroneous and false. Behind the web of equations, I could only visualize the burning huts in my village whereas Pahadi or Jyoti could visualize the membership of the Planning Commission...and maybe both of us were right in our own way. Then, what was this whole thing about?"

"I accepted that my way of thinking was fatally immature but when I placed myself and Jyoti together and compared our situations, I realized that there was something called destiny that not only determines our lives but also the prequel and sequel thereof."

"You must have observed, with how much effort and dedication I used to study. In the second year I had also grasped a great deal about the *modus-operandi* of D-School, viz. write in brief, communicate in equations. But the slippery slope I was on did not let me take a breath, nor did it let me regain my balance. The result had to be the one that was."

"What happened next?" I took a deep breath and asked as if I was listening to a fairytale.

"When Prashant bhai came to know, he was very upset. In those days he had seen advertisements of vacancies in the Central Railways. The eligibility was a minimum 50% mark in Science subjects in the twelfth standard. He made me fill in an application for the posts. At the time of the interview, he managed to get an introduction to a high-level Central Railways Officer from Orissa. For your information, he is now my father-in-law. My wife is called Mansi. He had taken up the entire marriage expenditure

on himself..."

Even after he had said so much, I still got the feeling that Satpathi was holding something back. I did not say anything, waiting expectantly.

He thought for a while and then said, "I think I should not tell you this."

He was speaking in riddles. I could not understand anything. If he did not want to tell me something, why was he setting the stage for a revelation?

"I will not press...its all up to you", I said in a matter- of- fact voice, to make him comfortable. The hostel boy had got the evening tea. I filled the solitary cup for him and got in the glass for myself. Both of us were in prayerful silence as we sipped our tea. The sound of our sipping tea was piercing the silence that hung all around us.

"Come on, I will show you around my campus", my suggestion made an amicable exit from the situation.

We had just climbed down the stairs and started towards the library when he broke his silence and asked, "Uncle, what is your birth date?"

"Why?"

"Tell me"

"11th June. And yours?"

"20th February"

Till this point the exchange was perfectly normal. No harm in such exchange of trivia between friends.

"Whom do you consider your idol?" he further asked.

"Well, there are many, but if I have

to choose one, it would have to be Mahatma Gandhi." I answered after giving it a little thought but failed to grasp what he was aiming at.

"He has to be!" he said with the conviction of some divine presentiment.

"Enough buddy, stop this", I said. I had started suspecting that his answer was nothing more than a weak attempt at some divination.

"11th June is what you had said, right? Well, 1+1 is what? 2, right? And, when was Gandhiji born? 2nd October..." He answered in response to my growing irritation.

There was plenty of opportunity for me to start an argument with him right there but I was not at all inclined to do so. "Your birthday number is also 2. Is Gandhiji not your idol as well?"

I felt proud of my ability to turn the table on him.

"Yes, it is a number 2 but because of the zero with it, everything is in a mess."

Well now, if nothing else, he comes up with this gem! Anyway, where would he escape ultimately?

Just before the library there was a dried up stream on which was a small bridge. We sat on a cleaner portion of the parapet there.

"What mess dear? Your bad days are over. You have a job, a house, a family...and if one were to think about it carefully, some problem or the other keeps cropping up all our life." I thought I had spoken something beyond my age

and experience. Instead of reacting to my answer he said, “We will talk about that later...First add up the numbers of your birth-date... 11th June 1972, right? The total is 27, which sums to 9. Right. Now take Gandhiji’s birth-date, 2nd October 1869, right? The total is what, 27 that sums to 9. Right”

I did not wish to believe him but his logic stumped me. Without any prior knowledge, he had forged a relation between Gandhiji and me, which howsoever far-fetched, did not seem totally baseless.

“So, do you believe in astrology and other such practices?” I said.

“Oh! I believe in astrology, I also **know** it. My knowledge is very basic but others rate it a bit high.”

“Yaar, how did you get into this mess? Somebody from Delhi School of Economics getting into mumbo-jumbo of astrology...what is the connection man?” I retorted teasingly.

“May be the connection was D-School itself. I had told you that in the second year I had been gripped by a deep despair and disillusionment with my own personal economics and the economic theories of the world as well. As you know I was giving tuitions in Mukherji Nagar to partly meet my expenses at D-School. Divya was the name of the girl I was teaching. Giving tuitions was exceedingly boring but I was not doing it as a hobby. Her father, Mr Dushyant Kumar had a great fascination for astrology. Every day, after I had finished teaching Divya, Dushyant Kumar and I used to have long discussions on astrology.

Today if I analyze it, whether someone would be interested in astrology or not is dictated by the horoscope of that person, but you can well say that Dushyant Kumar steered me towards astrology and it was D-School that was responsible for my coming into contact with him. He was the first person who charted my horoscope and predicted that I would get a job and get married more or less together because Venus and the Sun both were positioned in the same house in my chart. He had also indicated, mildly, that till that happened I was undergoing the period of Saturn which was not a favourable one.”

“Since then I started having faith in the pre-ordained or, what you call, destiny. In the last four years, I have learnt much more. Knowledge, experience and intuition all play a very important role in astrology but I tell you one thing- Astrology is a more perfect science than economics...”

The last sentence was delivered not as a philosophical jargon but had filtered like an elixir from the alchemy of life...His eyes, voice and the entire body language was attesting to it.

This was an issue in which the new gang, which, beside me, included Soma Shekhar Reddy, Gurmeet Singh, Piyush Jain and Ashok Dahiya, showed an abiding interest. I cannot say whether it was genuine or got generated because of the presence of an astrologer free of charge! All the members were unmarried and were on the lookout for a ‘beautiful, fair, rich and, of course, homely’ bride for their matrimony. Evidently, we were

all getting desperate for an honourable exit. That is why, so many roads were heading towards astrology.

And *defacto*, Satpathi hands down won our hearts through his mystical virtuosity. Just by knowing the place, time and date of birth, Satpathi would give detailed analysis of what had already occurred in each person's life, significant aspects of their personalities, their mental state etc. Thereafter, with the aid of their palm-lines, he would unhesitatingly give his predictions for their future. He also made it clear that his predictions of the future may not be entirely accurate because, though astrology was a complete science it was being used with incomplete knowledge and data. For instance, the latitude and longitude of a city is taken as one set of coordinates, but in reality the city may be spread over a large area covering several variations of coordinates, etc.

Evening had set in a good while ago. He had already pronounced his ultimatum to go back. If only two of us were there, he would have left a long time ago. But as he was earning the "goodwill" of so many officers, he was still there.

A hurried meal was gulped down in the mess. Till now, he had only made general statements about people whereas everyone wanted him to discuss personal fortune, based on their providing him personal and family details. But, this was possible only late at night as the entire day at the academy was infested with learning different subjects from Yoga to Computer. That too under the eagle eye of a cranky course director.

That is why, Satpathi was being cajoled with "Yaar, hang around, why don't you go later."

"I will come again some day, and very shortly", Satpathi reassured us. I sensed that the company of so many officers of a prestigious civil service was in some way soothing his ego. When he had arrived in the afternoon and embraced me in greeting, he could not resist whispering in my ears, "You have done D-School proud." I remained silent but his disappointment of being a failure at D-School resonated inside me.

I was going to see him off to the station and we were waiting for an auto.

"Yaar, you should have stayed back for the night. What difference would it have made? We would have really had fun. Do you know, at night, B.F.s (Blue films) are also available in the hostel", I quipped.

"No, Uncle, my reaching home at night is essential." a low and steady voice emerged from his side.

"So, here comes the ideal father and a faithful husband..." I attempted to mock at him.

"No, Uncle, that is not the issue", he stopped for once, just as he had stopped whilst saying something in the hostel. But, spoke again after a breath.

"Do you know anything about Epilepsy?" he said in a very measured tone.

I simply looked questioningly at him as we continued to walk.

"My wife suffers from it", he struggled

to say these words.

My feet stopped abruptly. As if they had gotten numb.

“To the Station”, I curtly pointed to the driver of an oncoming auto and got in there with him. I was totally tongue-tied. I don’t know why but I started feeling that I did not know this person at all!— a person who was my classmate at D-School and who had just spent the entire day with me.

But, I soon got into the groves. Now, I started getting furious at the delay caused to him.

Gathering morsels of courage while trying to be normal, I turned to face him as the rickshaw sped on. He was staring outside, biting the edge of his lips. This was undoubtedly the same issue he had stopped himself from mentioning this afternoon. May be this was the mess created by a redundant ‘zero’ in his horoscope, I surmised.

There was still some time for the train to Bhandara to arrive at the station but I was too disturbed to speak. After several moments of an eerie, discomfoting silence, my “Let’s have some tea ” elicited a “sure” from him.

May be he had begun to realize the huge burden that was now on my conscience. That’s why, breaking the silence he said, “She had this illness long before we got married...actually since her childhood. I came to know when she was three months pregnant. I had been at my new job for about 6 months. It was a humid evening in the end of April. I had just returned from the tracks when, along with the clanging of falling

kitchen utensils, I also heard a loud thump. I ran to see what the matter was and saw Mansi, lying face down on the floor. There was a scratch beneath one eye where she had been grazed by some sharp corner. Her whole body got stiff like a board. I held her gently and splashed water on her face. But, she remained corpse-like, still, unmoving with her eyes rolled back into her skull.”

“I thought she has suffered a heart attack, but her pulse was strong. In a short while, saliva started frothing from her mouth and her head slunk on one side. Under some involuntary force, her body was clenching and contracting in turns. I knew that in the early days of pregnancy all women experience nausea and vomiting. I lifted her gently and put her on the bed and started wiping her face and forehead with a wet cloth.”

I saw that Satpathi was re-living the incident through each minute detail as if he was faced with it again. When he said “her whole body stiffened like a board”, his right arm too had stiffened in demonstration.

“After about half an hour she became normal and when she found her head in my lap she looked at me with some suspicion. I smiled at her lovingly and asked “What happened?”

“This happens to me.”

“What happens?”

“I don’t know.”

I also dismissed the incident from my mind, but when I described the entire episode to the doctor at the Bhandara

Railway dispensary, the doctor said, "Please call her parents, then only we can say anything about it with certainty."

"But Doctor Saab, what has happened? What is the problem?"

"That can only be ascertained when we know the entire case history." He snapped.

"I thought I had unnecessarily asked the doctor and this had complicated the entire matter. Except for that incident Mansi was totally normal, but when I mentioned this to my father-in law, he said, "I shall be there tomorrow."

There was no need to re-visit the doctor since my father-in-law clearly admitted that "Mansi has been suffering these episodes every two to four months since childhood. She has Epilepsy. We have tried many cures, right from All India Institute of Medical Sciences to the naturopathy and herbal cures of the *Vaids* and *Hakims* of Haridwar. The incidence has certainly decreased but it has not disappeared. Several doctors told us that after marriage this illness sometimes abates on its own. It is not as if we kept you in the dark. We did every thing we could, but then who can fight destiny?"

When his father-in-law had told him everything clearly, Satpathi did not feel cheated or let down. He had already learnt and taught a lot about destiny in his pursuit of astrology. His whole life was a witness to this. If Mansi's father had not helped him in his interview, dejected by D-School, he would have been rendered good for nothing. Prashant bhai had guided and helped him a lot,

but after marriage, he too had become a relative stranger. Anyway, for how long he would have helped? His mother was still eking out a miserable living and raising his sister in the innocent hope that he would get a decent job.

Satpathi cannot hold Mansi's father guilty.

Satpathi was in no hurry to wind up his story even though the train had arrived at the platform. However, he assured that as there were about ten minutes left for the train to depart, I should leave. Bhandara was only an hour's journey and his house was there on the station itself. He promised to come again.

What could be closer than Bhandara and Nagpur. It was really good that two of us could meet today.

Several weeks had passed since this eventful visit of Satpathi. Ever since being introduced as products of Ravinsha College and Shyamlal College, in D-School, and despite the uncertain interval of four years, he had always felt an affinity to me. A real buddy. Maybe even if he had met after a gap of twenty years, the spirit would have been the same.

I returned to my room after dropping him to the station, experiencing the quiet after the storm. As I wrapped my blanket around me, I could not help thinking about his life...gosh, what a life he is having! The cane of misfortune is so mercilessly dogging him yet he has not given up on life.

About a month and a half had passed. My group had pleaded me many times to call Satpathi again. All four of them

had become his ardent fans. Whatever astrological findings Satpathi revealed to them, had been also confirmed by several learned astrologers. They were more enamoured of the fact that while professional astrologers made or could make true or false predictions to earn a livelihood, this was not the case with Satpathi. He was totally free from vested interests. This was so rare in astrology.

One evening, we had just put on our shoes and shorts to go to play badminton, when Satpathi arrived. He had got his three year old daughter along. Last time, I had told him that my training at Nagpur would get over in three months time. My posting was not known.

We had pledged to keep in touch.

His daughter, Chandrika, was quiet and shy, finding the house of his father's friend simply strange, as there was no 'aunty', kids, sofa, or T.V.

"Yaar, you have come so late, now you will talk about taking leave in a short while", I admonished him, recollecting his last visit.

"No, no, don't worry. I am going to stay here tonight. That is why, I have got my daughter with me. Some people from my village have come down to Bhandara. I needed to buy a few things from the City... that is why I thought..."

The group was obviously delighted. There was also no need to miss the evening round of badminton either.

The group took Chandrika with them and started heading towards the badminton court when Satpathi called her loudly, in Oriya, "Don't pester uncle."

There was a small make-shift canteen nearby which got a bit lively only towards the evenings.

"We'll join you in a short while", I told Jain.

"Oh, don't you worry partner, all of us are not going to play at the same time."

Once they had left, Satpathi removed some papers from his soiled shoulder bag and gave them to me saying, "I have made your horoscope, here it is"

"And what does your astrology say about me?" though apprehensive, I laughed out.

"The reason for you getting the things somewhat late in your life...the delay in entering the civil service, the delay in your marriage, etc., is due to the fact that the Moon is conjunct with Mars in your ascendant. The Moon fulfills your desires but these are thwarted and obstructed by Mars. Luckily, the Moon is stronger. That's why, your wishes are fulfilled eventually."

"I see."

What else could I have said! I was prepared to listen...to know what destiny had in store for me.

"Mars is a malefic masculine planet while the moon is benefic feminine. The Moon represents the mind, and that is why you will not lack imagination, emotions and thoughts. The Moon rules the sign of Cancer. There are different permutations from it, being placed in different houses of the chart. The Moon is very powerful in the 1st, 4th, 7th and 10th houses of the horoscope. In

your horoscope, have a look, three planets are placed in houses that they themselves own and in one place, in the tenth, a planet with complimentary traits is sitting. That is why, you experience the benefic influence and all good things happen to you.”

“I don’t know Yaar. I feel I have never got anything without toiling for it”, I sighed, making a token dissent with his analysis.

“That is because in your twelfth house, planet Mercury is placed along with Saturn. From here, Saturn casts its aspect on the fourth and ninth houses. The fourth house decides education and company of family and the ninth house represents wealth and one’s paternal happiness. That is why, you have left your home for this Central Service, it is unlikely that you will return to live with your family. Even if you are posted at Delhi there is a strong possibility that you will stay away, in the government quarters.”

God knows how many astrological predictions and prophecies he kept making. He would look at the paper on which he had drawn the horoscope and count something off his fingers. At times, he would look at the lines on my palm and confirm his predictions. He took out an almanac from his bag which had the astronomical details of 100 years back and forth. It also contained the exact latitude and longitude of 400-500 locations of India, both big and small, as well as the time of sunrise at each place.

“Guru (master), tell me about my marriage”, I said, being driven by the

fear of being pushed to the wrong side.

“You will get married in a year’s time”, he said after making some calculation.

I was tempted to ask, “Guruji (My master), can this be hastened by some trick?” Instead uttered, “And what else?”

“I have already told you that in your case good things happen to you but after some delay. Your wife-to-be will not only be beautiful, 99% chance is that she will be a working one. She will be a science graduate with two brothers. You will have children also after a delay but they will be bright ones for sure.”

I thought that he had thought a lot about me and my worries as well. I did not have the courage to believe any of his statements to be untrue.

“Do you remember D-School?” I could not understand how this question slipped out in front of the horoscope that lay bare before me. May be to clear the fog of astro-talks or just to talk about the good old days with Satpathi... an exercise which still had not satiated me.

“Of course! Of course!! In spite of the harsh disappointments and failures inflicted upon me there, I have no hesitation in saying that my time at the D-School was the best. It was there that I saw life in its ever expanding vastness and with the greatness inherent in it. I often get disturbed by the sweet memories of that time, and in fact I wrote to you also because....”

To change the direction of the conversation he had left his sentence

unfinished. He moved and adjusted his position and then reclined on the wall, with his right palm joining in for support. "Uncle, to be honest, D-School still resides in my dreams, it flows in my veins. Astrology has become my religion but nothing can take D-School away from me. And you will see, that one dream of mine will be fulfilled ultimately. I have full confidence that Chandrika will graduate from D-School. I have seen this in her horoscope. Like you, she has a strong Moon in her horoscope, in the first house itself, and the Mercury is residing in the fourth house. The fourth house decides the education of an individual and Mercury is a planet that assumes the nature of the planet it is associated with— becoming a benefic with a benefic planet and a malefic with a malefic planet. That is why, under the influence of the Moon it has become a benefic planet in her horoscope. Do you know she was born on a Monday as well, that is why I have named her Chandrika (of the Moon). She has been very lucky for me. I got my arrears from the Pay Commission on her birthday. Her maternal grandfather got a deputation to IRKON the same month that she was born. Do you know, that besides our own stars, the stars of our family members also affect us. This is an undisputed fact of astrology."

"Uncle, I have decided that she is all that I want. I will not have more children. My job is a modest one, so I will give her the best possible upbringing that I can. I don't want her to face the horrible difficulties that I had to face...."

It had been quite sometime since Chandrika had gone down. He felt anxious to see her. So, we too went down. Some of the lady officers of the batch were driving joy in entertaining Chandrika with their childish antics.

After dinner the group sat down with Satpathi. Their discussions continued till about two in the morning. Chandrika had long since gone to bed.

"Papa....aaaaah." The shrill cry in the darkness woke me up. I fearfully reached for the switchboard and put on the light.

A strange sight met my eyes. Chandrika was clinging to Satpathi's chest in a terribly fearful state, as if she was hounded.

"See see, there's a pigeon, there is a pigeon sitting there", she motioned fearfully towards the door.

"Beta, there is nothing there, nothing at all", Satpathi comforted her while patting her back and squeezing her further to his chest.

"No no, its there. See it's sitting there", she went berserk, without paying any attention to what he said and again huddled up near him. After staying like that for sometime, she got startled again and gaspingly muttered, "See how many ants are crawling all over you, let me be down...down let me be...please", and she started making efforts to scramble down but just when she looked down she shrieked, " Oh no, see what a large rat is coming here to bite me."

This went on for half an hour. Then, she went to sleep in his lap. We let

the light stay on in the room. When we got up in the morning she was sleeping like an angel in all her innocence.

“Has this happened before?” I asked while we had tea.

“Never!” he answered with sorrowful eyes.

“Could be because she has come to a new place?”

“Could be”

“But we will show her to a Doctor.”

“Yes, that would be the right thing to do.”

Dr. Kulkarni made us wait outside for a long time while he examined the girl alone. We had briefed him about the developments of the previous night. Satpathi kept talking about the advantages and disadvantages of staying in a place like Bhandara. He also told me how astrology had made his office life easy. The top bosses now keep calling him to their offices. He had used a major part of the Pay Commission arrears in buying a refrigerator, the balance he has invested in the purchase of shares

of the Rajlaxmi Plan of Unit Trust of India. Prashant bhai has drastically curtailed his trips to Cuttack.

Chandrika had both Raj-yog and Bhadra-yog — two very auspicious and fortunate combinations in her horoscope. The Doctor was indeed taking a long time.

When Dr. Kulkarni emerged from the room before we could ask him anything he turned towards us and asked, “Does anyone in Chandrika’s family have epilepsy?”

And then what happened? ...Let us leave at that.

But the visual stored in the memory— of a news clipping shown on television a few years back—started rolling on furiously.

A good 50-60 storey building in England, some seventy odd years old, was shown being demolished with an explosion. It was getting too expensive to maintain. The demolition technique was incredible: The entire edifice was crumbling into its very foundation ...as though it was a castle of sand!

Oma sharma, born 1963, has published three books that include a collection of short stories. Besides, he has translated the autobiography of Stefan Zweig ‘The world of yesterday’ in Hindi. Forthcoming books include a collection of short stories and a collection of essays on Raymond Carver, Saul Bellow, Isaac Singer, Ken Saro Wiwo, Stefan Zweig, Balzac, Nadine Gordimer and Promudiyia Toer (along with a piece of their art). He received Vijay Verma Katha Sammaan (2006) for his short stories. He resides in Mumbai.

Seema Sharma teaches English at Jai Hind College, Mumbai.

Devang Vyas has graduated in engineering & management and is group president of a corporate house in Mumbai.

PINTY'S SOAP

Sanjay Khati

Translated by
Deepa Agarwal

Such a thing had never occurred in our village before. Many of us had heard about 'soap', but there could hardly be two or three who had actually set eyes on it. If people were aware of the existence of soap at all, it was thanks to some army men. Also because, when Deputy Saheb's daughter visited the village once, some women observed this object with her. It was said that wherever Pinty might be standing, a scent of flowers surrounded her up to a distance of at least two miles. If ten or fifteen years later people still had memories of that Pinty, it was because of soap. People would place it in the category of fragrance, behind attar and other such perfumes.

Well, Pinty was a being who had arrived from another world. Soap had never been glimpsed with any other person in the village. In truth, I was the one who acquired the first cake of soap in our village. That too, in a sudden, unexpected manner.

It was the fifteenth of August or some such special day, because school was closed. Kaka and I had walked several miles to sell potatoes in a small town. My uncle must have been five or six years older than me. We were almost like friends. Sometimes though, in view of his age he did display an eagerness to throw his weight around. However, he never succeeded in his attempts to assert authority over me.

We were roaming around sucking lemon drops, enthralled by the razzle-dazzle of the town, when we arrived at a crowded field. The place was as packed as a fair ground. Extremely noisy as

well. Whistles were being blown. A man's authoritative voice was booming over a loudspeaker, as if scolding everyone.

Confused, totally unmindful, we were burrowing deeper into the crowd when I suddenly found myself standing in a row of boys, similar to me in age. Someone had caught hold of my arm and hurriedly made me stand there. A man was marshalling everyone, making them take up position near a white line. On either side of me boys were yelling, flexing one leg as if getting ready to pounce on something, over and over again.

It appeared that a race was about to begin.

At first I got scared. I looked around for Kaka but could not trace him. The men who stood there brandishing sticks must have shoved him away with the rest of the crowd. The loudspeaker was intoning numbers.

One...two

And three! They all dashed off like starving beasts. I along with them. At first I couldn't figure out what to do, but when I noticed the boy next to me racing ahead pumping his matchstick legs, I pelted after him like a fury. With such force that in no time at all I got entangled in the rope stretched across the other end of the field and fell down. It was another matter that I hurt my knee too, slightly. When I dusted myself off and rose, the sound of clapping resounded in my ears. And a shiny box was thrust into my hands.

A giggling Kaka emerged from somewhere in the crowd. The two of

us laughed and laughed. I was itching to run some more. Run and run. I bounded ahead and Kaka followed me, panting away. We left the town behind. I was racing pell-mell towards the village when Kaka began to call out to me. Eventually, when I came to a halt near the river, he caught hold of me.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Then I remembered that I was still clutching the shiny red box. Immediately, Kaka grabbed it and began to examine it, turning it over in his hands. He was the one who guessed that it was a cake of soap. His face was beginning to gleam with excitement. He sniffed it again and again. When I asked him for it, he wouldn't give it back.

"I'm not eating it up!" he snapped. His intentions did not seem honest.

I flared up. After all, it belonged to me. I tried to snatch it back. Struggled to knock him over. But it was impossible to get the better of that ruffian—tall and strapping as he was. By now he had opened up the gleaming wrapper and taken out the delicate pink cake that lay within.

I resorted to my ultimate weapon. I dropped down on the rocks near the river with a resounding thud. And began to bawl, shedding real tears. "I'll tell Ija...!"

The trick worked, as it always did. Kaka glared at me with reddened eyes, then flung the cake of soap at me, saying, "Go, die." I leapt at it. "Give me the wrapper too!" Kaka threw the wrapper at me. I wrapped the fragile cake carefully

in the wrapper and made my way home, laughing, sniffing at it.

Thus was launched a serious antagonism between us, the first ever. At that time I was so absorbed in the delicate scent of the soap that I had no time to take notice of Kaka. Later, this animosity became permanent.

Well, that evening, Kaka walked behind me kicking stones. The moment we reached home, he cocked his head and announced, 'Gopiya's head is so high in the air today that he can't even glance down. Just because he got a cake of soap.'

Ija was gathering the cow dung into a heap. She stood up and said, 'Saban! Where did you get it? What is it like? Show it to me!'

'It's mine!' I snapped.

Ija went and washed her hands clean. 'Show it. Let me see too, what kind of soap it is.'

But I had no faith left in anyone. After much fussing, when I opened my fingers, Ija picked it up with great delight. She went close to the lamp and examined it carefully. Then sniffed it two or three times. 'I'll bathe with it,' she said.

I swooped on it like a bird of prey. Grabbed it and stuffed it into an inside pocket. Ran and stood at a distance of least twenty footsteps. Ija could only gape. 'Go die,' she said furiously. 'May your soap burn up!' She walked off, glaring at me.

So, that's how my mother became enemy number two. The truth was—I was unable to grasp the consequence of this cake of soap. I was too young,

perhaps. But soon I began to get the feeling that I was surrounded by foes. I knew it—that Kaka turned all my belongings inside out. That he inspected each and every canister and tin that existed in our house.

To the extent that he sifted the hay and straw in the cowshed. But no one was able to ascertain where the soap was kept—except me.

Beaten, Kaka tried flattery. But I was no longer so gullible.

Bapu wasn't lucky enough to see the soap. Ija and Kaka had provoked him so much by harping on it constantly that he resorted to violence. However, by now I was well aware that temptation would strike anyone who happened to even glance at it. So I wouldn't budge from my stand. Defeated, Bapu gave me a couple of kicks, saying, 'So...he's acquired a taste for perfume and scent! Saala, make him take the cows out to graze!'

I did not shed a single tear and swallowed the insult. But from that very moment I began to doubt that he was my real father.

Kunti did get the opportunity to touch and smell the soap, under my strict supervision. Since then, she follows me around, wide eyed. There's no way to get rid of her, apart from giving her a couple of tight slaps.

With so many people around me, it was becoming hard for me to look at the soap again and again, the way I wanted to. My restlessness grew. Each day felt like a mountain that had to

be climbed. Finally, on Sunday I made a tough decision and took out the soap, got some hot water and sat down to bathe.

This would be my first bath with the soap. I removed the cover lovingly. Placed it carefully in the sun. Held the soap tenderly in my right hand and touched it lightly to my wet hair.

The pink cake had some letters engraved on it. I did not know how to read English but whatever was written added greatly to the beauty of the soap. I had to take care that the letters didn't get rubbed out.

Kaka ostensibly sat inside studying but his head would keep popping up at the window. In between I could hear him read loudly from his book. On her way to cut grass, Ija halted in the middle of the courtyard. She watched me for a while then pulled a face and went away. Kunti stood two steps away and gazed entranced at the soap sliding on my head, the white foam emerging from it and the multi coloured bubbles glistening in the sun. 'Scram! Get lost!'

Kunti began to plead, 'Dada, give me a little too!'

I knew Kunti too well. She was as sly as a cat. It was best to chase her away. First I threw water at her. When she didn't budge, I slapped her with my wet hands. The moment she fled, screaming, Kaka came clattering down the stairs. 'You raised your hand on her? You're going to get it today!' But he did not move beyond the fence. Just stood there and glared. I was too far off. I continued to enjoy myself, whipping

up foam, laughing. Kaka kept hurling abuses but did not go away.

I rubbed myself with the soap for a long time then poured water on my body. Dried out the soap. It had not worn out noticeably. I placed it back in its cover. Then I swaggered past Kaka. He sniffed the air.

How fresh my body felt. What a delightful scent! And how soft my hair felt! I quickly got dressed, worried that the fragrance might escape.

I used to leap off the parapet that surrounded our courtyard and often I'd begin to fly. I'd float like the pigeons above the high, high mountains, forests, far, far away. How many lands, how many villages would slip away beneath me. My body would tingle all over. When I looked down, our house appeared tiny, like a toy. And Ija, Bapu, Kaka, Kunti, all the people, how different they looked—like ants. I would soar high above the whole world. Everything would be below me. Nobody could reach me.

They say that during their growing days, children dream of flying. But dreams are not reality, someone also said.

After bathing with soap that day, I felt I could take off any moment.

I had school that day. Early in the morning, I worked up a fine lather and scrubbed myself till I shone. I dressed my perfumed body in my best clothes. Parted my hair with great care. All the way, I kept lifting up my elbow, sniffing at it to make sure the fragrance had not evaporated. No, fragrance doesn't evaporate. It lasts for hours. If there

were no sunshine, no sweat, if dust didn't fly and the wind didn't blow, perhaps your body would always exude fragrance.

It took the class by storm. Soon all the boys had their noses pointing up, sniffing the air crazily. For a while I enjoyed the scene, smiling faintly. Then I placed my arm straight on the face of the boy sitting next to me.

'Oh, baba ho! What have you put on?' The boy actually jumped. The class was thrown into such a welter of confusion that God forbid should ever happen again. Pushing, shoving, the boys sprang at me and dug their noses wherever they could to get a whiff. Those who were done pushed their eyeballs right up to their hairline and began to cry, 'Tell us! Tell us!'

And when, enjoying myself thoroughly, I told them the whole story, the room was filled with clamour. 'Is it true? There's a cover along with it? But it will finish one day, then? Then what, he'll take part in the race again and win another. It'll last a year at least. Show it, yaar, come on.'

When Massa'ab arrived the noise was stilled. But none of them could concentrate on their lessons. They were all watching me, from the corners of their eyes. I was soaring really high in the sky. That moment if I had proclaimed that I was the monitor from now on, they would all have said, 'Yes, you are!' They had heard about Pinty from their elders, about her soap. Finding that dream like story coming true, they were going wild.

The bell rang for half time. The boys

got up to dash out as usual. Then suddenly all of them froze. I was still seated in my place. 'Come on, come!' Today all of them wanted to stick close to me. Even those who used to beat me up, taking advantage of my skinniness.

I rose, but an unfamiliar reluctance besieged me. This had never happened before. Earlier, I was invariably the first among those in a hurry to rush out. But then the boys had never surrounded me and said, 'Come, come on,' either.

'You're on our side'. 'No, on ours.' A furious battle flared up to determine which side I'd be on to play kabaddi.

I was overcome with constraint. The thought of being chased around in kabaddi, rolling in the mud was terrifying. 'No, I don't want to play,' I said.

'Why? Why?' The shouts came at me from all sides. Then all of a sudden it seemed as if the boys had understood. 'All right, you'll be the referee. You can sit and watch.' They all moved away, frustrated.

Each and everyone was dying to take a look at the soap. The word had spread through the village like wildfire. People would stop me on the way. Find some excuse for visiting us. They wanted me to show them the soap. When I refused they would get annoyed. Even scold me. All the same, they would definitely sniff at me. My family must have faced some embarrassment on my account. Later on, *they* would make me the target of their abuses. Kaka would always make threatening gestures. A couple of times, finding me alone, he squeezed my throat. Kunti was forever sulking. If I ever

happened to quarrel with her, Babu would lose no time in letting me experience the weight of his two and a half kilo hand. Ija always spoke to me in an irritated tone.

The whole world seemed as rapacious as vultures trying to snatch away this tiny modicum of joy from my life. I noticed that in the beginning people would be very deferential, but when I didn't show them the soap they would immediately turn hostile. Almost everyone had become my enemy now.

People even nicknamed me Pinty. This was not a joke. It was a way of showing their loathing. The boys would call out, 'Pinty, Pinty!' And the most astonishing thing was that despite feeling troubled by this I began to wonder where Pinty was and what she was like. I had even sketched her outline in my mind, which I would fill up with colour in my spare time. I believed that she must look like the Lakshmi on our calendar. She was as fair skinned and her clothes were so shiny that a glow surrounded her even in the darkness of the night. Not a single speck of dust could settle on her. She was as light as if she were created out of a blank, white sheet of paper.

And I had simply abandoned all play. Some boys did want to keep me company but the allure of living it up with the group would draw them away. When the boys were enjoying their noisy games, I would sit on the low wall, shaking my legs. They would chase each other in kabaddi, rush into the clammy fields to search for cucumbers, steal lemons,

bathe in the river with their clothes off, slide on the dry pine needles. They would shriek and yell, wrestle, tear their clothes or scrape their bodies the way they always did. I would watch them from my seat and crack my knuckles.

The truth is I often longed to jump into the midst of the group. But whenever I was about to do this, God knows what made my body freeze. At such moments I wished that some boy would just drag me from my seat and push me on the field where they were playing kabaddi. But perhaps this was not possible. Now they didn't even ask me to join them. They had accepted that Pinty's role was to sit and watch. They had begun to forget my true identity.

Now Kaka was setting off to market. He was gathering bags to carry stuff back in. I couldn't control myself. 'I'm coming too,' I said.

Kaka flared up. 'You will not come with me.'

'I will.'

'Bhabhi!' Kaka proclaimed, 'Ask him to get your things. I'm not going.'

Ija charged at me like a tigress. She caught hold of my ear and hurled me to the ground. 'I'm going to settle you today. The bigger he's growing, the more rotten he's getting.' She gave me a couple of kicks on my back and dragged me out. Kaka yelled out enthusiastically from behind, 'Fix Pinty well and proper.'

Ija dragged me like a dead rat to the parapet and pushed me into a bed of nettles—'Oh I-ija...Ve...'

One last fragile thread of attachment

had lingered. That too snapped, that moment. At half time as I sat on the low wall, my eyes filled up again and again. The leaping, prancing boys began to tremble in my gaze. My body still throbbed with the agony of its encounter with the stinging nettles. My elbows were grazed, my hair full of dust. I had bathed that morning too. But not a whiff of scent remained on my body.

I felt like a wholehearted good cry. I'd leave; I'd depart this place! Go away forever to the land where Pinty lived. People were not like this there. There was no hatred. None of this undeserved persecution.

And I made up my mind that one day, as soon as I got a chance I'd run off to the market. They say that buses leave for distant places from there. I'll get on to any one of those. Then I'll never come back. Never.

After that moment, my resolve began to gather strength. I selected the clothes I'd take with me. I hid away a bag too, to carry them in. Collected some walnuts and spied out the place from where it was possible to help myself to some money. Now, I just waited for the right opportunity.

And once everything was in place, disaster struck. I was bathing. No matter how cold it might be, I wouldn't miss my bath. Little did I know that Kaka was lying in wait. The moment I put down the soap he pounced on it like a cat. I was stunned. Kaka's hand was on the soap. He was picking it up when it slipped out and fell far away. By that time I had screwed up my eyes and

flung a heavy brass lota at him.

Kaka said, 'Hai!' He swayed and sat down heavily, holding his head.

By that time I had picked up the soap and gotten ready to strike again, lota in hand. But Kaka didn't rise. Now my legs turned shaky. I shook him and said, 'Kaka, Kaka!'

He groaned, lifted his head and I saw red blood flowing from his forehead. 'You hit me, saale!' Kaka began to mumble God knows what. Then he staggered out, still pressing his head with his hands. At the threshold, he paused. Tearful face. Blood streaked cheeks with tears gushing down. 'Saale, one day your soap will wear out,' he sobbed.

Kaka left and I stood there dazed. I opened my hand and gazed at the beautiful pink cake. But how slender it looked now. Its fragrance had vanished too, now.

My heart plummeted.

There was no time to cry. I quickly put on my clothes and ran upstairs. Pulled out the bag. Stuffed some clothes inside it. No time to keep walnuts. My school bag? Why would I need it? Money?

Then I overheard Kaka tell an anxious Ija how he slipped on some cow dung and his head struck the threshold of the cowshed.

I couldn't stand straight after that. Just fell face down on the bed. After a long time I was able to get up and hide the soap in its usual place. When I returned I went off to sleep in a dark corner. Didn't even get up in the evening. Said I had a stomach ache.

When I woke the next morning I found a strange light filling the place. It had snowed during the night. I hadn't even noticed it. My heart plunged with anxiety.

I rushed out barefoot on the freshly fallen snow. Who was bothered about the cold? The pile of straw was covered with four inches of snow. Here it lay—my secret. When I dug out the snow with my hands I found nothing but slush beneath. My fingers got coated with it. Where was it? Not here, nor here? Not even here?

My hands encountered something slimy. A lump of pink sludge. Scented. I sank down on the snow with a thud, the lump enclosed in my hand.

'Haria!' It was Ija. She had come to milk the cow. I looked up. Her lips puckering up as always, for a joke. The lump slipped out of my hand. A kind

of sob emerged from Ija's mouth—'Haria...'

A shudder shook my whole frame, tearing me apart. Letting myself fall apart completely, I clutched my mother with my muddy hands and bawled.

Ma sat down beside me too. She gathered me close to her heart. And hiding my face in her womb warmth, I wept, after a long time. The way I used to before.

And suddenly I felt as if a huge mound of ice was melting. My heart turned as light as cotton wool, turned lighter and lighter. If at that moment, a gust of wind had touched me, I would surely have taken flight.

Sanjay Khatri, born 1962, is a creative author as well as a journalist. He has two collections of short stories— Pinti ka Sabun and Bahar Kuchh Nahi Tha. He also writes a regular column in a newspaper.

Sanjay Khatri, born 1962 is a short story writer and a journalist. Has two collections of short stories— 'Pinti ka Sabun' and 'Bahar Kuchh Nahin Tha'. Lives in Delhi.

Deepa Agarwal, born 1947 is a freelance writer in Hindi and English. She writes poems and short stories. She also writes books for children. She lives in Delhi.

CAREER, GIRLFRIEND AND VIDROH

Anuj

Translated by
Sanjay Dev

The near-placid surroundings of *Ganga Dhaba* make me nostalgic. When the pale, lamp-post light rebounding from the surrounding lifeless rocks, diffuses in the fog, it appears, as if the rocks have come to life. These amorphous, inanimate rocks double as seats for students of the campus, and have witnessed the rise and fall of many a political doctrine the campus has given rise to.

Clad in long *kurtis* and *jeans* and casually puffing at cigarettes, this bubbly bunch of boys and girls would be so rapt in discussing ideologies over a fifty-paisa cup of tea, not even faintly realizing how the night surged past small hours and into morning. Those were the days when ideologies abounded in the campus. Now, even the rightists have come to assert gradually their hold over the campus. Otherwise there was a time when JNU campus had rightists just for the name's sake. The left itself had so many factions and was so much riven by mutual conflicts that it left little space for any other ideology to take root.

In such a scenario, a self-proclaimed apolitical bunch dissociated itself from the factional strife and started calling themselves 'free-thinkers'. With passage of time these free-thinkers coalesced into a group and with that a new ideology came into existence. Soon this group firmed up into a strong organization and earned itself an independent political identity. Maybe, not to support an ideology too is an ideology.

Whether it was a clique of boys and girls sitting on the rocks in circle, or a lost lovebird, this *Dhaba* in the vicinity would soon witness intricacies of world politics wrapped up with intellectual precision and simplicity. Here marxism and its affiliated-isms would determine the dos and don'ts of romance and politics would soon take over love. These were the peculiarities which told JNU from the faceless run of its cousins.

The campus offered scarce opportunities of romancing to those identifying with the Right and this was perhaps why they were always aggressive. The graph of their envy and anger would continue to rise like the interest graph of usurer. This sulky image of theirs did not go down well with leftists who called them lumpen in their criticism.

Just about those days the campus saw the advent of a new faction of leftists which surpassed all previous leftist ideologies in aggression and assiduity. It was called AISA. There is little doubt in success of an assertive and struggling ideology going ahead with missionary zeal. Maybe this was the reason why AISA climbed several rungs of success.

The character of student politics in JNU during those days was different from that of the one at national level. Here caste and religion did not constitute election plank of student union, rather doctrines did. There were some more equations at work which would play major role in election. From election point of view a boy amounted to a single

vote, whereas a girl was considered worth four. Besides her own vote, a girl had one vote of her boyfriend and at least two more of her suitors. Sometimes, the vote of a boyfriend would be unpredictable because of the ideological differences, but the vote bank of suitors would be difficult breaking into. Student unions like AISA, SFI and AISF vied with one another to convert girls into their cadre whereas organisations like NSUI, Free-Thinkers and DRISO lagged behind in this race every time. This straightaway told on the outcome of the results. Despite hard attempts, NSUI and DRISO would fail in bringing freshers to their fold. The girls associating with these unions would either be Ph.D. aspirants, or running on *Nine-B* extension. Obviously their market value was not such as could be expected of assuring four or more votes. They would be considered a single vote only, and therefore were not courted either. It was this single-vote girls who had confided to the campus folk the secret instances of molestation of girls in the campus. As otherwise, in a liberated atmosphere as prevailing here, who else could imagine that unlike small towns, instances of molestation of girls would occur here too!

In JNU campus, membership to ABVP had no common recognition. Therefore going for it would be tantamount to asking for trouble.

Discussions at the *Dhaba* would be hot, but did not turn acrimonious. The

place would resonate with occasional peals of laughter. But to trace its source and subject would be difficult. In the vicinity was an airport. This meant a crescendo of whirring sound left in passing of a plane every five-ten minutes and the silence would envelop everything in a few seconds as before. A far away, full-throated singing sporadically pierced the serene surroundings.

Nobody had any idea of what Vidrohiji sang. But since the voice came from the core of the heart, it wouldn't sound inharmonious or harsh as both words and tune were by him.

"Vidrohi ji, what do you sing?", one day I asked. I didn't get the drift of his singing, I admitted. He had his own set of arguments to explain his acts.

"Did you get what that *alien woman* was screaming about yesterday in the programme at *Jhelum lawn*?", he retorted. I nodded in the negative.

"When you can raptly listen to her. Why can't you listen to me?" he enquired bluntly.

I was nonplussed. He was right, I realized. It was in programmes like these that those who had nothing to do with music, would feign absorption with interest, fearing lest someone should think they were not intellectuals.

"Comrade, if you don't get my song, I can't help. You need to evolve yourself", Vidrohiji was telling me.

"You must have read *Raaso*", he

inquiringly asserted.

"There is a set of *Raaso* works which would even bashfully baffle those who claim to have command over Hindi Literature".

Of all that *Vidrohiji* was saying, I got this much drift only— whatever he sang wasn't a meaningless prattle of some cranky person, rather something serious which must be heard. The whole Ganga Dhaba used to be the audience of *Vidrohiji* but hardly anyone would listen him.

"Vidrohiji, when nobody is listening why do you sing so loudly", I quipped.

Vidrohiji would never have to think before reply. He was ever ready with wit and used measured words as if speaking from a rostrum.

"Look, comrade! Without ever listening to me you've asked me everything today. A day will come when time will demand of you to explain why you didn't ask Vidrohi".

His talks appeared to be inconsistent to me. Still I continued the discussion.

"Vidrohiji, you've not trained in music, still you sing in tune", to be apprehensive of his displeasure, I asked in subdued tongue.

"Comrade, nobody can turn an artist through mere learning. Art is an intrinsic thing which finds expression in poetry, stories, songs and music and incoherent talks of Vidrohi."

He was looking at the sky abstractly, and I was looking at him. Vidrohiji's

talk would be beyond me, yet I listened patiently.

“Vidrohiji, what you had been singing a while ago really meant”, I asked perplexedly.

Without uttering anything, Vidrohiji only smiled.

After a while, he asked of me, “Well, Comrade, tell me whether you would listen to me if I read you out two-three pages of prosaic prose”.

Pausing awhile he continued smilingly.

“If I start declaiming from this Dhaba, calling upon people to listen to me, I would be dismissed as a gone case this very night. But song and music have it in them to carry any message anywhere. Prose is not a thing to listen, rather to read. Only songs, music and poems can be lyrical and worth listening”.

I found Vidrohiji’s talks more intellectual than mere prattle. Perhaps, intellectuality and insanity get blurred somewhere along the way. I had heard that the dividing line between sanity and insanity is very thin. I was getting to realize this today. I lit up a fag.

“Comrade, give me a fag”, bade Vidrohiji.

I offered him a cig and asked whether he would like to have tea.

“Why not, sure, I would have one, if you offered”.

After keeping quiet for a while, drawing a deep drag of fag, Vidrohiji continued,

“I have a lot to say. But whom to say? Who would listen to me? Who has leisure? Whether this crowd would do, that can’t seem to think beyond Career, Girl-Friend and Boy-Friend? I can’t afford to hector, standing at this Dhaba. Therefore I choose to sing, so that nobody should say, Ah, you crazy man, why all that nuts, therefore I choose to sing”.

Vidrohiji had turned sentimental saying all this, staying calm for a while he flared up again,

“A variety of saintly figures, godmen, this, that... keep holding forth on bunkum and cant on television. Don’t people listen to them in captivity? I do, but only sing. And not minting money exploiting on the susceptibilities of simple folks as these supposedly saintly figures do! I’m only singing, if you love, listen to it, if you don’t, for aught I care?”

Vidrohiji was not himself. I thought it better to slip away from there.

Shyama Kant Singh Vidrohi came from Azamgarh. Azamgarh is a small town in U.P. It has seen the birth of many *familiar faces* that have brought glory to its soil. The youth force of Azamgarh takes their names with pride. Among them figure many from the underworld, who have earned Azamgarh a dubious reputation across the world and who are held as role model by the unemployed youth here. There was a time when common men would keep their links with

goons a secret, but now social parameters have changed. It is said Umrao Jaan Ada also hailed from hereabouts. But people have forgotten her now. Having passed B.A. from this very Azamgarh, Vidrohi came to JNU.

Vidrohi's 'making' of life had become the talk of the town. Now he would return here as an officer only. But after coming to JNU Vidrohi busied himself with justifying his name. A son of a poor farmer, and rebellious as he was, he got agitated on seeing the economic disparities of Delhi. The highly political milieu of JNU nurtured his agitated mind. The entire student politics of JNU would always be on the look out for such agitated minds with open arms. In no time, Vidrohi became the hardcore cadre of SFI.

Vidrohi was a bright spark of Hindi Department of JNU. He first did his MA, then M.Phil. but could not complete his Ph.D. since a matching, kindred soul entered his life. Both were in the same centre, and hence got along nicely. Gradually, it started appearing as if Tulikaji had become the subject matter of his research. The whole of morning, noon and evening was devoted to Tulikaji. She was not only beautiful but also understood pretty well what beauty meant and amounted to. Besides she also nurtured political ambitions which left little time for studies. Who but Vidrohi could square these conflicting priorities? After all he was the person who could not see Tulikaji in trouble. And this

readily prompted him to write dissertation on Tulika's behalf towards her M.Phil. His work was appreciated a great deal in the department. Soon after this, the department was abuzz with talks of Tulika's intelligence.

This was about the time when the command of AISA was in the hands of Vinayji. Vinay's political insight guided him that if he anyhow got Tulika round to joining AISA this time round, his control over the union would be complete. For Tulika's association with this outfit meant winning allegiance of a large suitors' following.

Finally, Vinayji had his motive fulfilled thanks to Vidrohi. The magic spell of Vinayji swayed Vidrohi so completely that he quit SFI to become a member of AISA. But not for long Vidrohi and Vinay could stay yoked together. Under the brilliance of erudition of Vidrohiji, Vinay's aura started losing sheen. His hyped stature had been effectively dwarfed. On the other hand, Tulika also started seeing the fruition of her political ambition after joining AISA. Vinayji also saw 'ample' political promise in Tulikaji. Besides intending to benefit from Tulika politically, Vinay also wanted to exact from her the price of nurturing political ambition despite being a woman. But at the same time it was amply clear to him that he could hardly get his designs, given Tulika's proximity with Vidrohi. Which is why he started detesting Vidrohi's presence. May be Vinay was not so deft as Vidrohi to 'hypnotize'

a woman. But in political maneuvering, he outsmarted him. By now Vinayji had started every thing to demolish Vidrohi.

Following betrayal by Vidrohi, the much-antagonized SFI was already looking for an opportunity to settle scores. What can be more availing in such a situation than making friends with foe's enemy. Vinayji was a dab hand at exploiting opportunities that came his way. He entered into a secret pact with SFI. This new forging of fresh alliance destabilized Vidrohi like never before.

Despite being faced with such an unnerving and contrary situation, Vidrohi put up a brave front. He already had the support of a faction within the party. This was the source of his strength. But how long can one betray oneself? The most likely did happen. The new alliance trumped up its ace. Vidrohi was branded an agent of communal organization and expelled from AISA.

In JNU joining communal organisations straightaway means— to be in the doghouse with womenfolk. Vinayji had his equation worked out with other student organisations. Thus Vidrohi was politically isolated from the campus without much opposition. More than three-fourth of Ph.D. work was still to be completed. Most of his time was already taken up by M.Phil. dissertation of Tulikaji. And even Tulikaji had distanced herself from him. Vinayji spared no stones unturned in exercising his political clout against Vidrohi. Therefore Vidrohi could

not secure extension under rule Nine-B despite his hard efforts. Ph.D. Was left incomplete and Vidrohi was expelled from JNU.

For some time Vidrohi disappeared from the campus. Nobody knew of his whereabouts. But after a few months, he resurfaced in the campus. Now he had no enemy here. His appearance had changed. Clad in an old pair of jeans and an unkempt, shabby *Kurta* with worn-out slippers on feet, he sported a straggly beard.

“Vidrohiji, what's going on these days”, I asked.

Looking vacantly at the sky, Vidrohi started murmuring

“a son of a farmer, I'm growing crop in the sky. They unbelievably say. Ah, Oh, you loony man, whether crop ever grows in the sky! In retort, I set them the poser. You nuts! when the earth can raise God, why ever can't the sky have the crops grown? And, look! Now either of the two will happen. Either the sky will have crops, or the earth shall see God uprooted.”

Babbling this Vidrohi wandered off with unhurried steps and got lost in the fog somewhere. With each passing day Vidrohiji's crankiness was getting weirder. Coming to rest on rocks, talking to himself, and singing aloud constituted his everyday rituals.

Whenever I came to the JNU, my eyes would search for Vidrohiji. He often

met me at the Dhaba. I would meet him without fail, and offer him a cup of tea and a fag. I had seen Vidrohi's life as a student and hence had sympathy with him.

For quite a while I had been staring at the rocks where Vidrohi would sit singing. I was lost in some vague thoughts when someone interrupted,

"What are you looking for in these rocks, bro?" as if I had been jolted out of my reverie.

A man used to sit here and sing loudly. He is not seen today.

"Perhaps, you are talking about the loony Vidrohi", he looked at me

questioningly.

"Yes, yes, the same chap", I nodded in affirmation.

"Oh, umm... it's years since he met his maker", coolly he said.

"When? How? Numerous questions cropped up in my mind at the same time.

"God knows, what happened to him. Some say, he died from shivering, stiffening cold. Perhaps committed suicide, others claim! Nobody knows for sure, his fate. His Stiff was found collapsed on these very rocks!

With a heavy heart, I wound my way out of the campus. But my ears keep resonating with Vidrohi's songs.

Anuj, born, 1968 comes from Motihari, Bihar. Completed his higher studies from JNU, New Delhi. Holds a Ph.D on presentation techniques in Television. Presently working as Editor for Parliament of India. The first short story collection titled "Career. Girlfriend aur Vidroh" published by Bharatiya Gyanpith in year 2009. At present lives in Delhi.

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.

Poetry

SEVEN POEMS

Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari

Humanity's Sorrow

Buddha was not the first
to see and experience it,
timeless is the history of pain.

Nobody could describe,
Nobody could write,
Neither religion, nor books of holy origin
could decipher in totality,
the sorrow of humanity.

Multilayered in its myriad forms
stabbing as much inside
as outside,
brimming to the top.

Do you want to have a look at sorrow?
For this you do not need to go to a soothsayer.
or a hospital
or a town
or a village

or a forest,
you can see it
where you stand,
all around,
like water it finds its way
flowing below,
down and down.
lolling like the fiery flames
hissing like the serpentine sea,
no sect, no community
no weapon, no king
no parliament, no advertisement
can mitigate
human pain.

Only you,
yes, you and you alone,
can alleviate
humanity's sorrow
may be just a fistful,
if you let it trickle,
drop by drop
off your palm.

Books

No, not in this room,
there, take them there,
under the staircase
in the garage
take away these books

where the fridge
or the full-size mirror
won't fit.
Tie them in a sack,
hide them away,
in some corner
dump them under the plank
or over the broken pot.

Take them,
wherever you wish,
Takshila or Vikramshila,
who wants these books?
we aren't heirs to them.
some would covet the pass-book
some the locker key,
some eyes would brighten up
at the thought of ownership,
of lands or hidden treasures of coins therein!
alas, oh alas!
time has come to such a pass,
nobody wants them-books
like the sad, old grand mother,
unwanted.

Hey books,
have patience,
wherever they dump you,
wait,
wait for that wandering child,

lost on his way,
who groping in darkness
would come upto you,
his desired destination found.
recognise him by his touch
open up your heart to him,
gradual and slow,
wherein is hidden,
the time eternal,
and the tired truth,
anger suppressed,
and love mute,
whom the enemy's spies
could not catch.

Mother's Hearth

This is a story of the times,
when match box was not invented.
mother would save a few cinders
from the night's fire
in the earthen stove,
for the morning rotis to cook.

When everybody went off to sleep
mother would shelter cinders,
with loving care in a corner,
the embers bright,
as if they were invaluable precious stones
or a tender child,
or a blushing bride.

When clouds would thunder at night,
lightening would strike
jackals would howl in fields
we would cling to mother
seeking in her lap
solace from fear
in this battle of darkness
the ashen cinders were,
like the protective 'kundal'
and the safety armour.

Mother's hearth was
like the beating of her heart
like her flaming fantasies
like her smouldering desires.

Mother would console us
"No evil spirit can enter this house,
As long as this fire kindles",

Slowly would she get up in the dark,
she would hide the cinders
more protectively in the ashes grey,

as she would
her children shield,
under the hem of her saree,
to suckle with loving care.

A Tall Man on the Road

Today,
all of a sudden
a tall man was seen on the
people peeped out of their shops,
to have a glimpse of him,
children danced and clapped
tiptoeing to look at him.

The Hawaldar whispered,
“Sir, this man is taller
than the height of the prison door.”

The clowns twittered
“Lord this man is bigger
than your chair.”
at the crossing,
the traffic policeman’s eyes
widened with wonder,
“oh, my god, such a tall man on the road.”
he muttered.

The man walked modest and carefree.
straight and firm, on the rajpath (kingsway)
the news spread like wildfire in the city,
people, all dwarfs
came out of their homes.
newspapers were watchful,
army was put on alert,
and the cabinet deliberated

on the presence of a man
so tall.

An old woman herded together
all her grandchildren
and showed them the grand tall man
pointing that in satyug
people used to be that tall.

Satyug – aens ago when truth and virtue prevailed in society.

Connaught Place

People are running
helter – skelter,
looks as if
connaught place
would be vacated
within hours.

Everybody hopes
that they will get onto the train
Everybody fears
that they might miss the train.
Everybody has pieces of luggage
but nobody has time.
whom should I ask
to come along with me.

Everybody knows
that the atom bomb is about to drop here,

Everybody knows
either it is now or never.

I am in no hurry,
hope to get the last bus,
the one that I usually take,
though slow I might be.
And in the bus would I meet people
who are in no hurry either.
I know the way out to safety
in this calamity,
I want to tell the people
who are running
helter-skelter,
about the safe places
they can hide in,
but what can I do
if people want to escape
just by themselves,
by themselves alone.

A Woman's Pilgrimage

Early morning,
she cleaned
a whole lot of dirty dishes,
swept the house,
got her daughters ready,
spruced up for the school,
made tea for everyone
and when the infant child started howling

in his wet diapers
she wiped him clean
interrupting her prayers in the middle.

At lunch time,
when she was about to wind up,

A guest arrived,
welcoming him
she fed him with the remaining 'dal'
diluting it with some water,
and for herself
she had the left-overs
a little chutney for taste
she quietly ate.

She wished to take a short nap,
when the girls came back,
tired from school,
she got involved,
they demanded
and she performed,
Already time to cook
yet another meal,
yoked was she
to the next chore.

At night,
when everybody was fed and contented
she sat,

this time round
to a dinner of 'rotis'
fortunately with vegetables
that her husband bought
of course which he chose.

Before falling off to sleep
she cried
for a little while
to herself alone,
remembering her father
who was dead and gone.

Then in the arms of her husband
thinking of her daughters' marriage
she lost herself in a world of dreams,
and in her sleep
did she complete
her pilgrimage
of all the holy places.

After all something remains

Something remains
mark my words
though the pyre burns
and the cremation ground is ablaze.

How much and what remains you guess
Why would anything remain?
it is a meaningless question,

the answer to which,
i do not know.
i simply know
that something would remain.

Are you sure?
do you believe
the desire to live
would die a natural death?
that convictions would fail,
that dreams would dissipate
that words would degenerate.

Do you believe
does the fire burn all?
does the air dry everything
does the water swamp all around?
And does the divine weapon
of the invincible gods
annihilate one and all?
no, i do not think so,
but i know for sure
that something definitely would remain.

How, where and why
the one who remains
alone can say.

Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari, born 1940, is a Hindi scholar, editor and poet. He was professor of Hindi in Gorakhpur University until his retirement in year 2000. He has written books of literary criticism, travelogue, memoirs and seven collections of poems. He also edits a literary magazine 'dastavez'. He lives in Gorakhpur.

Shobha Narain, born 1955, teaches English at a College in Delhi University. She writes short stories in Hindi and translates from Hindi to English.

Poetry

FOUR POEMS

Kuber Dutt

Translated by
Kamalini Dutt

Living Manuscript

That which flows from infinity to
Arid heart cells
That which caresses the angry stubborn rocks with
Loving arguments...
Lights lamps at the dawn of centuries
That which kisses the feet moving forward..
That which germinates
New life on the famished faces,
Brings joy,
Which disciplines the eyes to see.
Gives the hands, work and arms, the perennial spring of energy
Which binds,
One positive thought to the other
Detachment to attachment,
Desolation to festivity,
Which turns the natural humming of a human mind into scripture,
The living manuscript which springs out of the voice
Of the human being

That which becomes the bridge
Between the creative spaces of the mind
That
Which the mind nourishes with health unceasingly...
Nurtures the human life,
You are that,
Very much part of me
I learn
Delving in you
Again and again.

O my dear

O my dear
O my special one
Whatever has happened to youHappens
A betrayed one
Rests on your threshold
Rise!!!! Look at the garden
Look at the Leading Priest next to the garden
Look at the comfort
Given by one poor to the other

O my dear
O my special one
Why do you cry?
This chaos happens everyday
In the city of gardens
Get up!!! Look at your country
Look at the kafan which
Is flying in the sky

Without a reason
Watch the country to see
Those who
Have been banished
In their own country
O my dear!!!!

The 13 armed one

Chaos is openly eating up
The rainbow rhymes of progress
Who are those artistes, the connoisseurs of chaos....?
Planning commissions
Which are in the cells of progress
In their core is sitting, the king of monetary securities.
Who has rosary in one hand
Spear in the second
Vermilion, sandalwood paste and
Holy water of Ganga in the third
Pistol and bomb in the fourth
Poison and explosive fuse in the fifth
Lakshman, Ram, Seeta in the sixth,
Riots in the seventh,
Constitution in the eighth
Money-lender in the ninth
National silence in the tenth.
Balance in the eleventh
Three monkeys in the twelfth
And in his thirteenth arm he has
The inverted couch of time.
In the couch lies the connoisseur of chaos

Who is openly eating up
The rainbow rhymes of progress
Who is making money out of trash
Who mutters sometimes Jai Sri Ram
Sometimes Jai Hind.

Incurable disease

Translated by
Purva Dhanashree

Whenever you want
You'll find that poem
Which decorates the forehead of the first day of the sun
That which travels through
Fragrance and stench of the
Other hemisphere every night
And is present in your
Dirty dreams every night
But you are not there.
Watch intently
The same poem
Caresses your soiled feet everyday
The same poem
Rests amidst the small coins
In your pocket giving protection.
The poem also
Meanders, jumps and treads going through
The painful gums and the creases in the bodies of your children
Often it pats you lovingly

Between the languorous moments
When you travel in the bus.
Moreover it spreads a pious light
Between your crumpled handkerchief
And the weave of your soiled inner wear
But you are unaware.
I want you to tell, a sad child
That
His smile is more beautiful
Than gold
You will find the same poem
Imprinted
In the eyes of that child
You can see him very often
In the waste paper basket
Nurturing meaningless words.
The same poem leaks from
The dry reservoirs of language
Which you
Or your contemporaries might have written
A poet wrote it.
And you lost it.
You were trapped
In the
Bloody tornado of the new world order
Now in the spider web
Of the market forces
Not only your poem
Is imprisoned
But your luminous soul too.

My friend forget not
That you had a language
Which stung the nose-tip of the autocracy
Search that language which
Was in the opposition front
But
Changed its loyalty
And decorated as rings
In the fingers of the country whites
But why would you do so
You have been inflicted by the incurable disease
Of immortality.

Kuber Dutt, born 1949, poet, painter and telemedia personality. He has five collections of poems, exhibitions of his paintings held in Delhi. He produced a 70 episode series on Pablo Picasso. He lives in Delhi.

Kamalini Dutt, born 1950, is an exponent of bharatnatyam and works as director of Delhi Doordarshan archives.

Purva Dhanashree, born 1979, student of English Literature and an accomplished classical dancer and vilasini natyam that has fetched her Sangit Natak Akademi yuva puraskar. She lives in Hyderabad.

FOUR POETS

Doors

Kumar Ambuj

Translated by
Shobha Narain

These are not just doors
when they move
Mother moves alertly
with watchful eye
She asks– “what happened?”

The thick metal chain,
with four links
bound with memories of a life-span
rattles against the door.
when it rings clink-clonk
abuzz goes the house in response.

These doors have
the moon and the sun
And the snake-god
tattooed on them.
They symbolize security and faith
bringing back memories
of our Father

They are old
but not weak

They swing to a weighty motion
when they open
An entire new world
opens to us.

When these doors crumble
and are no more
Home would not be
Home.

Kumar Ambuj, born 1957, a student of science and law, is a poet and a short story writer. Has three collections of poems and a selection of short stories. He works in a nationalised bank in Bhopal.

Conversation with a Woman in my Dream

Vimal Kumar

Translated by
Shobha Narayan

The woman,
first knocked at the door
in dream of course.
She asked as she entered the room
'how are my children?
They must be quite grown up by now
eligible for marriage.
Do they go to school or college?'
What do I tell that woman
how to tell her
that her middle daughter had eloped with a driver.
How to tell her that the names of her children
had been struck off their school
And their father had lost her jewels in gambling and drinking.
In dream of course
I asked that woman
to sit down.
The children are fine I told her
But do tell me something about yourself
how *are* you?
The woman answered
Ah, no time to sit,
I came just for a while
I should go, I must leave now.

But you are very quiet, she says in dream of course.
you don't even tell anything,
why are all these papers strewn on your table
what have you kept in your box?
your room is filled with a strange odour.
well, what about work, your job?
what are you doing these days?
what do I tell that woman
who has walked ten years
to reach here
into my dreams?
In fact she used to live in my neighbourhood
doing odd jobs.
suddenly one day
her children started howling
her husband was dumbfounded
what do I tell that woman
I thought of course in my dream.
And I told her in dream as you know
rather desultorily- 'something or the other jest goes on.'
Please wait for some more time
while I make tea for you
And the woman asked
in dream of course
well, tell me what is happening in our city?
as in old times do you still potter around with this or that?
The woman kept on sitting
in my dream of course
talking about varied things
telling about her experiences

As she departed
of course from my dream
her children came running to me.
How is our mother?
the middle daughter asked.
And the youngest daughter started sobbing uncontrollably
'Ma does not appear for some days now
in my dreams' said the eldest.
Looking at her serious face
this young girl
growing like a palm tree,
I became thoughtful
Next time when this woman
trespasses my dreams
asking so many questions
what would I tell her
what lies do I keep in stock
to convey?

Vimal Kumar, born 1960, is a poet who also occasionally writes prose. This poem won him the prestigious Bharat Bhushan Agrawal Puraskar. His published works are Chor Puran, Yeh Mukhota Kiska Hai and Sapne Mein Ek Aurat Se Batchheet. He works as a correspondent in U.N.I. and lives in Delhi.

Pagaldas

Bodhisattva

Translated by
Shobha Narayan

(Dedicated to the pakhavaj-player Swami Pagaldas who passed away on 20th January, 1997 in Ayodhya)

The boatman
who consigned Pagaldas to the river,
told me
that Pagaldas lived a sad life
inspite of living in Ayodhya.
I asked 'why should he be sad, though living in Ayodhya'
He said,
'only those who knew Pagaldas well
can give the reasons for his sadness.
I have only heard in passing his crying, the wailing sound
that he tried to muffle
by beating on his Pakhavaj'

I requested him to take me to his place, and let me meet those who knew
him. I asked the wise men, his disciples
'did Pagaldas truly remain sad, inspite of living in Ayodhya?'
The disciples did not respond.
They continued to fiddle with their drums,
beating them with their palm.

when I insisted
they showed me his room.
It was all so still,
no one went there,

no movement, no voice,
Even Pagaldas's drums had
lost their sound.

I continued to look for
Pagaldas's acquaintances in Ayodhya
As soon as people heard his name,
they quietly walked on;
Many days had just passed
when I chanced upon a
friend of Pagaldas,
who played in concerts with him;
he asked me
why do you want to know
why was Pagaldas sad
although he lived in Ayodhya?
He questioned- 'why are you sad in Benaras? Buddha in Kapilvastu?
Kalidas in Ujjain? crops in farms?
leaves on trees? people in Delhi, or Patna?
or for that matter in this World
or this Universe?'
Why are they sad?
why must you ask about Pagaldas
being sad
inspite of the fact
that he lived in Ayodhya?'
I said his sadness does not concern me,
I am also unconcerned with Buddha's Kalidas', or other's sadness. It is none
of my business!
I was just curious to know
why was Pagaldas sad
though he was living in Ayodhya?

He told me in confidence

Pagaldas 'himself' was
the root cause of his sadness.
I asked him
who is this 'other' Pagaldas?
what does he do?

He told me
'In this Ayodhya lives another Ayodhya,
in this Sarju flows another Sarju
in the same way,
another Pagaldas lives in this Pagaldas,
though separate from each other
but both are sad.'

The other Pagaldas
wanted justice.
He wanted truth to be protected
and Ayodhya's honour to be saved;
he just could not tolerate crookedness,
he was an angry man!
like the first Pagaldas
he was not indifferent,
or bothered only about 'self'
he did not like the first Pagaldas
who sat at home
sad and aloof
just watching.

I said-
injustice must be opposed
truth must be defended
it must prevail.
but you have not as yet

told me the reason of his sadness.
He said- 'the Pagaldas, that is the one who wanted truth to be saved,
who wanted justice
who wanted Ayodhya's honour protected,'
he was killed,
cornered in his own compound,
surrounded by his own people
no, not alone,
was he murdered.
And the first Pagaldas
was left alive, untouched
to play on his musical instruments for the glory of arts.
because of the murder
of this other Pagaldas
because of the helplessness
of not being able to save him,
because of not being able to speak the truth,
Pagaldas became sad.
Because this other Pagaldas was gone
there was none to accompany Pagaldas
in his concerts
as properly as he wanted.
He became forgetful,
because he missed the 'other'
his music lost its vibrant colours,
because we forgot how colours are painted,
he forgot the measure and method of his music,

he gave up music
he gave up playing in concerts
he avoided people
If ever did he sit down to play, at people's request
it was not music that rose from his Pakhawaj,

but the sound of beating of his chest.

Having told me all this
he was quiet.
Ferrying me across the river Sarju thus.

he said
'whatever I gathered,
and understood
as the reason
of Pagaldas's sadness,
I have narrated,

Now, it is for Sarju to decide
why Pagaldas was sad,
although he lived.
south of Sarju in Ayodhya.

Bodhisattva born 1968, a young Hindi poet, recipient of Bharat Bhushan puraskar for above poem. He lives in Mumbai and presently writes for films and television. Author of three books.

To See That Beauty Was A New Experience For The Mirror

Nilesh Raghuvanshi

Translated by
Shobha Narayan

In the town,
that has forests all around
big trenches, deep moats and caverns wide,
she lived
in fearful darkness,
like a flickering candle.
worn out, bone-weary,
did she work
day and night.

Years ago,
did I see her
outside the forest
roaming with a man
she was youthful then
on her face was an unfathomable richness,
inside her was a storm brewing,
that propelled her.
She took wings,
but vanished was her laughter
amid all this.

In the same forest
did I meet her again
drop-dead tired was she
as if war-wounded
smeared in blood.

But very noteworthily,
more than ever before
she appeared to be free,
like the vast skies above,
like the she-swan
soaring over the swinging seas below.
Momentarily was she like a flower,
in full-bloom
separated from its branch.

Now,
her courage was her ornament;
her confidence
adorned her forehead
stuck like a vermilion mark.
she had radiance on her face
that nature lent her,
as she fought with its elements.
Today,
she has her own discourse,
in its brilliance
glittered words
as if they were
diamonds.

Nilesh Raghuvanshi, born 1969 is a postgraduate in Hindi and linguistics. She works at Doordarshan, Bhopal. Recipient of Bharat Bhushan Agrawal puraskar, she has three collections of poems. She also writes for children.

SAAKET

Nandkishore Nawal

Translated by
Ravi Nandan Sinha

It is a well-known fact that Maithilisharan Gupta's poem *Saaket* was inspired by two essays. One of them was Rabindranath's 'Kavya Ki Upekshitayen', ('The Neglected Women of Poetry'), which came out in 1899; and the other was Mahavir Prasad's Dwivedi's 'Kaviyon ki Urmila Vishayak Udasinata' ('Poets' indifference to Urmila'), which was published in 1908. In his essay, Rabindranath has mentioned four women who have been neglected in Sanskrit poetry—Urmila of the *Ramayana*, Priyamvada and Anusuya of *Shaakuntalam* and Patralekha of *Kadambari*, but Urmila is a character who has been mentioned first and has been discussed in the greatest detail. He says, "Urmila is foremost among those neglected women who have stood mutely on one side of the *Kavya-yajjnashala* (poetry seen as place to worship and to celebrate) of Sanskrit literature." In his view, the sacrifice of Urmila is greater than that of Lakshman because "Lakshman had sacrificed only himself for the divine couple, but Urmila sacrificed her husband more than herself." By calling Urmila's sorrow as 'universal lament' Rabindranath has given it a slightly mystical colour, but the main point of his views on Urmila is expressed in these words, "When it was time for her sweetest introduction to her husband, Lakshman went to the forest with his eyes fixed on Sita's pink feet walking in front of him. When he returned, could there have been the same freshness in the heart of that bride, who had remained devoid of the light of love for such a long time?" Further, we shall see that Gupta ji has described Urmila's sacrifice and privation with the same

humanistic point of view. The essay by Dwivedijee was written under the profound influence of Rabindranath's essay. In a sense, this essay can be called a translation of that part of Rabindranath's essay that deals with Urmila. This is suggested by the fact that he published this essay under the pseudonym 'Bhujangabhusan Bhattacharyya', but what clearly clinches the issue is the following statement which is only an elaboration of Rabindranath's meaning, "The happiness that she would have experienced after her marriage cannot be compared with that which she received when she met her husband after a separation of 14 years."

But is *Saaket* only this? Despite the fact that it is inspired by the renaissance, the democratic movement and the consciousness developed by the women's liberation movement, is it correct to consider it only as a poetic expression of the views expressed by the two great men mentioned above? I think that the critics of Hindi, including Gupta ji himself, have contributed to the creation of this myth about *Saaket*. It is a fact that Gupta ji first started writing a poem called *Urmila-Uttap*, but it is not certain that *Saaket* is a revised and improved version of it. It is possible that some parts of that earlier poem may have been included in *Saaket*, but the truth is that *Saaket* is a different poem and its structure is entirely distinct from that of *Urmila-Uttap*. In the list of Gupta ji's unpublished works, one can find even

today the name of a poem called *Urmila*, written in 1908-09. One sometimes wonders: is *Urmila* the same as *Urmila-Uttap*? But it was circulated in the Hindi world that the original name of *Saaket* was *Urmila-Uttap*! Again, the importance given to Urmila and Lakshman in *Saaket* has led to the perception that they are the hero and heroine here and that this is a heroine-centred poem! Now, let us see how the critics have contributed to the creation of this myth about the poem. Acharya Shukla says in his *History*, "*Saaket* has been written primarily with the objective that Urmila should not remain 'the neglected woman in literature.'" Similarly, in his popular book on *Saaket*, Dr. Nagendra considers Urmila and Lakshman to be the hero and heroine of this poem and says, "Its objective is the union of Urmila and Lakshman," which according to him is in accordance with the requirements of literary theory. The statement of Pt. Nanddulare Vajpeyi is somewhat more original in the sense that in his essay entitled *Saaket*, he proves that in this poem 'the saintly Bharat has been made the hero and Urmila who has been separated from her husband is the heroine.'" Since Gupta ji could not resist the temptation of including the entire Rama-story in *Saaket*, that misconception was created and popularized that it is only a retelling of the story of the *Ramayana*. In his essay entitled 'Punurutthan ke kavi Shree Maithilisharan Gupta' ('Shree Maithilisharan Gupta: The

Renaissance Poet') Dinkarjee has written, "The change taking place in our perception of the Rama-story in the course of renaissance has been expressed fully in *Saaket* of Maithilisharanjee." At the core of this opinion is the same misconception.

The structure of *Saaket* was seen to be faulty because it was considered to be Urmila-centric, and also because it was considered to be a retelling of the Ram's story. Acharya Shukla found an absence of epic features in this poem because he did not see in it any possibility of the epic action in Urmila's life as it was without incidents. He saw it only as a subject fit for *muktakas*. This is confirmed by canto nine of the poem. Secondly, he thought that because Ayodhya was made the setting where the story takes place, the structure of the poem has become asymmetrical. In the first ten cantos, events related to Ayodhya are described but the rest of the story is somehow packed in the last two cantos. In his book on *Saaket*, Nagendra also says, "The pace of the story is much more irregular than it should be, it is extremely slow in the beginning, completely still in the middle and very rapid at the end as if everyone was in a hurry to get over with the story." He suggests that the reason for this is Gupta ji's inability to create the grand image-work necessary for an epic and also because of the primacy given to the element of subjectivity in it. It is interesting to note that many years later when he took up the re-evaluation

of Dadda's poetry in the year of his birth-centenary he discovered a new version of Kuntaka's *vakrokti* in the narrative structure of *Saaket*. Not only this, he also found in the narrative structure of the epic that the poet has successfully employed the concept of the unity of place discussed by Greek literary theorists in the limited context of drama. Vajpeyeejee also considers the narrative structure of *Saaket* faulty, incoherent and lacking in balance for which he gives the reason that the poet had conceived it 'in the early part of his poetic career'. These are some examples that prove how critics in Hindi—from the major to the ordinary—have made irrelevant and sometimes contradictory statements suggesting a lack of a deep study of a work of art.

Saaket was published in 1931, and as Gupta ji has himself said, it was written two years before that and also that it took fifteen or sixteen years to write. The question is—what was the reason behind leaving *Urmila-Uttap* or *Urmila* incomplete and not publishing it? Or then, what does this statement in the introduction to *Saaket* mean?: "Meanwhile many changes were made in it and it was natural too." Certainly, it is natural that in the course of writing an epic, a number of changes will be made in it, and if the period of composition is long, it becomes necessary too, but here I want to suggest something else. These changes certainly happened in the course of writing of the poem,

but the real change in the plan of the work was made at a point that lies between the completion of *Urmila-Uttap* or *Urmila* and the beginning of the writing of *Saaket*. Because of this fundamental change Gupta ji cancelled the first plan and began to implement the second plan. What exactly was that change? When he went deep into the character of Urmila, he found that the basis of that change, which was her commitment to the ideal of the joint-family system. It was because of this that after marriage when she came to her husband's family her husband left her for fourteen years because of his devotion to this brother and she did not say anything. It was because of this sacrifice of hers that makes her stature taller than that of Sita. The sacrifice of Lakshman too was big, but he was at least close to his brother and sister-in-law whom he worshipped. Urmila was entirely alone and she had to drink that poison silently. In the fourth canto of *Saaket* Gupta ji has described her and Lakshman's condition not only very accurately but also very beautifully. This can be seen in some pieces of dialogue. Urmila to herself: "*Kaha Urmila ne—'Hey man/ Tu priya-path ke vighna na ban'*". (Urmila said to herself: My heart, do not become an obstacle in the path of your beloved). Sita to Urmila: "*Aaj bhagya jo hai mera,/ Who bhi hua na ha! Tera!*" (What my destiny is today/ Even that, alas, could not be yours!) And Ram to Lakshman: "*Lakshman, tum ho tapaspradi,/ Main van mein bhi raha*

grahi./ Vanvasi hai nirmohi,/ Hue vastutah tum do hi." (Lakshman, you are the ascetic, / I remained a householder even in the forest. / The ascetic is without attachment, / This really only the two of you are). This shows the importance of Urmila and Lakshman, it will be wrong to draw a conclusion from this that Gupta ji has made these two the hero and heroine of *Saaket*. He has considered their faith in the joint family to be the basis of their sacrifice, and has made a creative effort to establish this ideal in his poetry. Since the sacrifice of these two characters for the joint family was the maximum, they received the greatest importance.

It is true that the character of Urmila took Gupta ji to the joint family and the joint family forced him to make Ayodhya—Saaket—the centre of his story. This was because Dhashrath's family lived there, and that was not a nuclear family of a husband and wife but a joint family made up of many wives and many married sons. Gupta ji always kept this fact in mind or else when the setting of the story moved to the forest he would not have written, '*Yah jangam-Saaket-dev-mandir chala*' (Here goes the moveable Saaket as the deity's temple). Or, he would not have made Ram say this about Ayodhya, '*Sookshma roop mein sabhi kahin tu saath hai!*' (You are everywhere with me in a subtle form). Similarly, the poet writes about Chitrakoot, '*Samprati Saaket-samaj vahin hai sara.*' (Now the entire society of Saaket is only

there). After all, what is this joint family for which we see a fondness not only in Gupta ji but also in Premchand, another great writer of the modern age? It goes without saying that among other things, this too is the agony of Hori in *Godan* that his joint family is breaking up. Naturally, he tries to protect its honour in every way. Shree M.N. Srinivas, the eminent sociologist has written in his famous book entitled *Social Change in Modern India* that in the modern age "important changes have taken place in the family system of the Hindus, and these processes are most clearly evident in the new aristocracy." By 'important changes' he means the disintegration of the agriculture-based joint family system under the pressure of the industrial civilization and the coming into existence of the nuclear family in its place. Muktibodh, a writer of the later phase of the modern age has also considered the disintegration of the joint family system as the most important happening of the twentieth century. By the word 'kutumb' the Indian mind has always understood the joint family system, and it has always desired to see the whole world as a family. Its ideal has been '*vasudhaiv kutumbakam*' (the world as one family). In this situation if such great writers like Gupta ji and Premchand felt disturbed by the threat to the joint family system, it was completely natural. They have tried their best not to give up that ideal and to protect it to the best of their ability. The great effort

of Gupta ji in this direction has found expression in his epic called *Saaket*. In that Dashrath is truly a person ready to take the responsibility of the family and the actions of the other characters also is guided by their faith in the family and its discipline. Not only this, behind Kaikeyi's repentance also there lies the same feeling for the family. For instance she says, "*Yug yug tak chalti rahe kathor kahani—/Raghukul mein bhi thi ek abhagin rani*'. */Nij janm janm mein sune jeev yeh mera—/Dhikkar! use tha mahaswarth ne ghera*'." (Let this heartbreaking story be repeated for ages—/Even in Raghukul was there an unfortunate queen./ In each of his births let a person hear about me—/Shame on her! She was supremely selfish'. Here I would like to underline the words 'supremely selfish'.

The centrality of Ayodhya has determined the structure of *Saaket*, which the scholars have failed to understand correctly. They thought, and also wrote that in the poem the central position given to Ayodhya is because of the character of Urmila, while the truth is that the real reason for this is the family of Dashrath. It has been pointed out earlier that wherever the family goes, Ayodhya goes with it. Had Urmila been the central character of this poem, she would not have been absent in a number of cantos. In the second canto itself, Urmila is absent from the centre, the protagonist of the seventh canto is Bharat, the heroine of the second part of the

eighth canto is Kaikeyi, and if the story in the tenth canto is presented through the memory of Urmila, that of the eleventh canto is first presented through the words of a merchant who has returned from the south and then in the words of Hanuman. According to Gutptaji, if we take even Chitrakoot to be Ayodhya considering the latter's description of being mobile, then we find that all events actually take place in Ayodhya itself—through the description of what Urmila remembers and then from what we learn from the merchant and Hanuman. In the twelfth canto Vashishta, by his Yogic powers, shows the scenes of the battle to the people of Ayodhya in that city itself. In that canto there are Urmila, Lakshman and Vashishta and also other characters such as Mandavi and Shatrughan. It is true that this poem ends with the union of Urmila and Lakshman, but that happens because of their sacrifice for a higher ideal of the joint family, and not because they are the hero and heroine of the poem. In this canto the ideal of the joint family has been established. When Shatrughan is about to go into the battle, stopping him Kaushalya says: "*Hai! Gaye so gaye, rah gaye so rah jayen,/ Jaane doongi tumhe na, ve aaven jab aaven.*" (Alas! Those who have left, have left, but those who remain here must stay,/ I'll not let you go, let him come whenever he does.) Here she is not ready to allow Shatrughan to leave even to help her son and daughter-in-law, rather she gives him more importance than those two.

In the end saying "*Dekhun kaun chheenane mujhse aata*" (Let me see who comes to snatch him away) and "*Pakad putra ko lipat gayee Kaushalya mata*" (Mother Kaushalya held her son tightly in her arms.) On the other hand, Sumitra is ready to sacrifice her other son for the sake of Ram and Sita: "*Jiji, jiji, use chhor do, jaane do tum,/ Sahodar ki gati amar-samar mein pane do tum.*" (Sister, sister, leave him and let him go, /Let him act in the battle like a brother from the same womb.) Bharat has already asked Shatrughan: "*Maataon se maang vida meri bhi lena,/ Mein Lakshman path-pathi, Urmila se kah dena*". (Say goodbye to our mothers on my behalf too,/ And tell Urmila, I follow Lakshman.) Kaikeyi's response too is like Sumitra's: "*Bharat jaayega pratham aur yeh main jaaungi,/ Aisa avsar bhala doosra kab paaungi?*" (Bharat will go first, then I will go/When else shall I get such an opportunity?)

As far as the ninth canto is concerned, it has been seen as the one responsible for damaging the structure the most. It has been said that this canto is an obstruction in the flow of the narrative; one of the reasons for this is also the fact that it has been written in *muktaks* (independent stanzas of four lines). Here the point that needs to be considered is this: is the long period of separation accepted voluntarily by Urmila to keep the ideal of the joint family alive not something that would have led the poet to pause a little and describe it in some

detail? From this point of view, the ninth canto is not an obstruction in the flow of the narrative; rather, it has created a vortex in it, which of course is a deep vortex. I think the fact that this canto was written in *muktakas* is due more to the nature of the subject, rather than to the influence and keeping to the trends in *chhayavad*. Critics have noted that the salient feature of the description of Urmila's separation from her husband is the result of the use of a combination of the old and new styles, whereas I think that the real quality in it is its focus on family values, a fact that takes it beyond the question of the use of traditional or new style. The charge that the poet has hurriedly completed the three cantos after the ninth, in which the story dealing with the time before and after the leaving for the forest has been told is not very valid. The reason is that the matter narrated in those cantos is 'relevant' but not very 'authentic'. The primary and authoritative story is of course that about the going to the forest, but still, if Gupta ji has tried to narrate the events before and after it in brief, it only helps the reader to understand Urmila's strength of character, who had been brought up in Janakpur, and the story about the abduction of Sita and the battle in Lanka are related to going to the forest only in terms of cause and effect. The last two cantos throw light on the characters of Lakshman and Urmila, and also describe the other characters.

Further, as a skilled poet Gupta ji knew that sheer idealism is meaningless, unless it emerges out of stark realism. Secondly, no one can be the national poet of Hindi unless he offers a profound and detailed description of family life. Naturally, when he looked at the story of Ram from this angle, he found that it is the finest story from the point of view of the reality of family life, which means it has both familial quarrels and an ideal of sacrifice in it. Idealism shines only in the darkness of realism, so he wrote *Saaket*. The reality of family life in it is expressed by the going away of Ram to the forest, while its ideals are the sacrifices of Urmila, Lakshman and Sumitra, the guilt of Bharat and his journey to Chitrakoot and the repentance of Kaikeyi, and simultaneously, the getting ready of Urmila, Bharat, Shatrughan, Kaikeyi and others to go to Lanka with an army to help Ram. Decidedly, the supreme act of sacrifice is that Ram agrees to obey the wishes of his stepmother and his father and goes to the forest. Similarly, the newly-married Sita's following her husband into the forest is the ideal of the highest kind.

The narrative structure of *Saaket* is not very flawless; yet its organization is a proof of the poet's capacity and skill. This poem is not an imitation of *Ramcharitmanas*, because in it Gupta ji has reorganized the story of Ram according to his own requirements. Only one example will suffice. In the eleventh

canto, when Hanumanjee was flying to bring the *sanjeevani*, he had to come down to Ayodhya as he was hurt by an arrow shot at him by Bharat, from there itself he took from Bharat the *sanjeevani* given to him by a yogi, and returned. Clearly, this incident is described differently in the *Manas*. But the real achievement of *Saaket* is not due to the changes made in the story, but because of the way the narrative has been developed. Those incidents which received a detailed treatment in the *Manas*, such as the story about the meeting of Ram and Bharat, have been described briefly by Gupta ji, those incidents, such as the agony of separation of Urmila and the repentance of Kaikeyi, that Tulsidas has dealt with only in a line or two have been described in detail by the poet of *Saaket*. Those incidents that have been described in detail in *Manas* have also been narrated in some detail by the poet here, which shows his inventiveness, without which no one can be an epic poet, nor even a poet. Here it is necessary to refer to some incidents. In the dialogue between Manthara and Kaikeyi in *Manas*, Manthara persuades Kaikeyi by creating in her a sense of fear of another wife of Dashrath, while in *Saaket* she has taken out this never-missing arrow from her quiver: “*Bharat se sut par bhi sandeh, / Bulaaya tak na unhe jo geh*” (He doubts even a son like Bharat, / Because he did not even ask him to come home.) Similarly, in the *Manas*, the dialogue between Ram

and Kevat is presented as a blend of devotion and levity, in *Saaket*, the Guhraj himself washes the feet of Ram, which makes it a serious scene. The immortal lines go like this:

*Barhi padon ki or tarangit sursari,
Mod-bhari madmatt jhoomati thi tari.
Dho lee Guha ne dhooli Ahalya-tarini,
Kavi ke manas-kosh-vibhuti viharini.*

(The rippling Ganga moved towards the feet,

The boat swayed as if in joy and intoxication.

Guha then washed away the dust that had saved Ahilya,

That is the wealth in the treasure of the poet's mind.)

In the *Manas*, when Ram is leaving for the forest, Lakshman does not express anger against Kaikeyi and Dashrath, he only requests Ram to take him along with him, but in the present poem he gets furious. When Ram tries to console him, he breaks down, “*Mita Saumitri ka yeh kop sara, / Umar aayee acahnak ashroo dhara.*” (That anger of the son of Sumitra disappeared, / And suddenly his eyes brimmed with tears.) The fact of the matter is that while in the *Manas*, the hot-headedness of Lakshman, which is born out of his deep love for Ram, can be understood and forgiven; in *Saaket* he comes through as an open and emotional character. In the story it is remarkable to see how Gupta ji has created his own points of crisis, which attest to his originality as a poet.

Guptaji's focus on the ideal of the joint family system should not lead us to the mistaken belief that he was a revivalist poet. To advance this argument that when the joint family system was being shaken by the push of history, he tried to save it, is nothing but taking a very superficial view. History is destroying many other things that are precious, and in its wake many things are appearing anti-human. In this situation progressiveness means making an effort to protect that which is precious, and rejecting that which is anti-humanity. This indeed requires a great deal of level-headedness, or the entire exercise may go waste. The Indian joint family was like a 'commune' in which the members earned according to their ability and received according to their needs. What else can be a better ideal for mankind? It has already been pointed out that India put forward the ideal of considering the entire world as one family. In communism, the internationalism of the proletariat is one of its major principles, and not long ago Ram Manohar Lohia, the socialist thinker of India, said that one of his many wishes is to travel in different countries without a passport. *Saaket* is a modern poem in a very important sense. In its beginning itself Gupta ji has written:

Ram, tum manav ho? Ishwar nahin ho kya?

Vishwa mein rame hue nahin ho kya?

Tab mein nirishwar hoon, Ishwar kshma kare;

Tum na ramo to man tum me rama kare.

(Ram, are you man? Are you not God? Are you not there in every speck of this world?

Then I am an atheist, God forgive me. If you are not in me, let my heart be in you.)

Scholars have tried to interpret these lines in the light of their belief that Gupta ji is a believer in God, and he is disturbed if Ram is not God! The truth is that Gupta ji is saying here with all seriousness that Ram is not God, but man, and so he cannot but be devoted to Ram. He is not in every speck of this world; rather the poet's own heart is devoted to him! Supporting this contention are these lines spoken by Ram in the eighth canto:

Bhav mein nav vaibhav vyapt karaane aaya,

Nar ko ishwarta praapt karaane aaya!

Sandesh yehan main nahin swarg ka laaya,

Is bhootal ko hi swarg banaane aaya.

(I have come into this world to make it newly rich,

I have come to make man divine!

I am not Heaven's messenger,

I have come to make this world itself a Heaven.)

Acharya Shukla has written that in *Saaket* "instead of distorting the time-honoured characters in the *Ramayana*, the ideas of the modern

movements...have been expressed through them skillfully.” This is a significant statement because it is a quality of Gupta ji that he rebels against the tradition while remaining within it. That is why when we see his mythical-historical characters as being presented in a new or modern form, we cannot accuse him of distorting them. Perhaps this is the reason for his universal acceptance. A little before the above quoted lines spoken by Ram he addresses Sita in words that apply both to her and to himself, “*Hamko lekar hi akhil shrishti ki krida,/ Anandmayi nit nai prasav ki peeda.*” (The game of entire creation is because of us./ Everyday there is the pleasant pain of a new birth.) In the poetry of Gupta ji, there is no contradiction in these two statements.

Certainly in *Saaket*, not only Ram but all the other characters are human. For example, let us take the characters of Lakshman and Urmila. In the tenth canto while remembering her childhood Urmila says that when her mother told her stories of gods and goddesses, she would laugh at them, and would enjoy the stories of human beings more, at which her mother would call her an ‘atheist’: “*Chunti nar vrit mod se,/ Suniti dev katha vinod se.../Amaron par dekh tippani,/ kahti ‘nastik’ kheejh ma mani.*” (I would happily choose the stories of men/ And laughingly listen to the stories of gods.../ When she heard my comments on the immortals/ Annoyed, my mother would call me an ‘atheist’.) This is not

merely the mischievousness of childhood, but is indicative of how Urmila’s character would develop on the basis of humanism. Therefore, it is not surprising that when after an absence of fourteen years Lakshman returns and Urmila’s friend begins to help her in getting ready, she tells her that she can put on these clothes and ornaments but from where will she get the youth she has lost during his long absence? :”*Par youvan unmaad kahan se laongi main?/ Woh khoya dhan aaj kahan sakhi, paoongi main?*” (But from where will I bring that zest of youth?/ Friend, where will I find that lost wealth of mine?). She gives a similar reply to Lakshman when he says that the man standing before her is not that ‘man greedy for your body’, but is now fully fit to be her ‘husband’!:

Swami, swami, janm janm ke swami mere!

Kintu kahan ve ahoratra ve sanjh savere!

Khoyi apni hai! Kahan woh khil khil khela?

Priya, jeevan ki kahan aaj woh chadhti vela?

(Master, master, O my master in my every birth!

Where are those days and nights, and where those eves and morn?

Where alas! have I lost those lustrous games?

Where is now, my dearest, that rising tide of my life?)

Further Gupta ji writes:

*Kanp rahee thi deh-lata uski rah rah
kar,*

*Tapak rahe the ashroo kapolon par
bah bah kar.*

(From moment to moment her body
trembled like a creeper,
And tears trickled down her cheeks.)

Similarly, in the incident showing Ram
going after the golden deer, when Sita
blames Lakshman that he is inactive
despite being a *kshatriya*, he replies:

*Main kaisa kshatriya hun isko
Tum kya samjhogi Devi,
Raha das hi aur rahoonga
Sada tumhara pad-sevi.*

*Utha pita ke bhi viruddh main
Kintu-arya bharya ho tum,
Isase tumhe kshama karta hun,
Abla ho, aya ho tum!*

*Nahin andh hi kintu badhir bhi
Abla vadhuon ka anurag,
Jo ho, jata hun main, par tum
Karna nahin kuti ka tyag.*

(What kind of *kshatriya* I am
How can you understand it, Devi?
I have always been your servant and
will remain
Always the one who serves you.

I rose even against my father,
But you are my brother's wife,
So I forgive you,
As you are a woman, and an *arya*.

Not only blind, but also deaf

Is the *arya* bride's love,
Whatever it is, I am going, but you
Do not leave this cottage.)

The reader will agree that this is
not the voice of a servant but of a man
whose ego has been hurt and so he reacts
in anger. While describing this incident,
Tulsidas did not pull away the cover
of devotion that Lakshman had for Ram
and Sita, and show him a naked man,
but Gupta ji does not hesitate to do
this. Why? It is because his first
commitment was to that humanistic
realism, which is a characteristic of the
modern age.

Saaket is a modern poem not only
because humanism characterises the
personalities of its characters but also
because their responses can always be
seen in terms of the poem's underlying
realism. We have come to believe that
realism and idealism are contradictory,
but Gupta ji negates this conception at
several touching moments in the poem.
Let us consider the reactions of the
characters. In the third canto, when
Lakshman comes to know of the intrigue
of Kaikeyi, he gets furious and says to
her, "*Bharat ko maar daloon aur tujhko,
/Narak mein bhi na rakkhoon thaur
tujhko!*" (I will kill Bharat and you,
I will not let you find a place even
in hell!) Not only this, hinting at Dashrath
he says, "*Bane is dasyuja ke das hain
jo, / Isi se de rahe vanvas hain jo,
/ Pita hain ve hamare ya—kahun kya?*"
(He who has become a slave of this
robber-born woman, / That is why he

is sending him to the forest, /Is he our father or—what shall I say?) So it was natural that this scorching heat of realism became too much for critics like Pandit Nanddulare Vajpeyee who believed in romantic supremacy and who thought it necessary to comment on it, “Perhaps in no sense can these situations in poetry be taken to be of a high order.” He did not recall a similar scene in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, so it was too much to expect from him that he would have noted the modern tone that had crept into the reaction of Lakshman. It is true that Lakshman says, “*Mukut hai jayestha hi pata hamara*” (Among us only the eldest becomes the king,) but more than this, is not this statement of his much more significant? : “*Bhala ve kaun hain jo rajya leven,/ Pita bhi kaun hain jo rajya deven? Praja ke arth hai samrajya sara...*” (After all who is he to receive the kingdom, /And who is father to give it away? / The whole empire is for the people ...) This is an example of his rebellion against the tradition. Kaikeyi’s reaction to Lakshman too is equally realistic: “*Khari hun main, bano tum matrighati,/ Bharat hota yehan to main batati.*” (I stand before you, go ahead and kill your mother, / If Bharat was here, I would have taught you a lesson.)

The realism and idealism of the joint family has been expressed fully in the fourth canto of *Saaket*. Since Gupta ji’s primary objective is fundamentally idealistic, it is very naturally present in this poem. But at the same time here

we have the very realistic responses of the remaining characters of the family of Dashrath which have changed the entire atmosphere of Ram’s story and which have brought it closer to our life and experience. The reaction of Sumitra shows that only she was fit to be the mother of Lakshman: “*Sinhi-sadarsh kshatrani/ Garji phir kah yeh vani—/...Raghav, shant rahoge tum?/ Kya Anyaaya sahog tum?/ Main na sahoongi, Lakshman! Tu?/ Neerav kyon hai is kshan tu?*” (Like a lioness did that *kshatrani/ Roar and said—/ Raghav, will you keep quiet? / Will you accept injustice/ I won’t accept it, Lakshman! And you? / Why are you speechless now?) Kaushalya also says, “Samajh gayi, main samajh gayi,/ Kaikeyi ki niti gayi.” (I understand now, yes I understand it, / The plan of kaikeyee has failed.) In the end when full of the love for her son Kaushalya says, “Bharat rajya ki jar na hile,/ Mujhe Ram ki bheekh mile” (Let the kingdom of Bharat last for ever,/Only give me my Ram), Sumitra roars again,*

*Swatvon ki bhiksha kaisi?
Door rahe ichha aisi.
... ..
Prapya yaachna varjit hai,
Aap bhujon se arjit hai.
Hum par-bhag nahin lengi,
Apna tyag nahin dengi.
Veer na apna dete hain,
Na ve aur ka lete hain.
Veeron ki janani hum hain,
Bhiksha-mrityu hame sam hain.*

(How can our right be gifted to us?)

Let us not ever desire it.

... ..

It is wrong to beg for something that is due to us,

This we have earned with the power of our arms.

We will not take what is due to the others,

But we will not give up what is ours. The brave do not give up what is theirs, Nor do they take what belongs to others.

I have mothered the brave,
For me begging and death are the same.)

In this canto the reaction of Ram and Sita themselves is the most important, which is linked directly with the reality of the modern age: it is the reality of politics in which sacrifice and service have been replaced by lust for power, and the reality of society, in which for the last two thousand years or so, woman has been walled inside the house. Ram's response is rooted in idealism, but it also uncovers reality. Naturally, when he speaks, it seems as if a man of principles is speaking in this corrupt political atmosphere in the country! Responding to the words of Sumitra and Lakshman, he says without getting excited, very much like the Ram of *Ram ki Shaktipuja*, who is not influenced by the urgings of Vibhishan:

*Yadi na aaj van jaaun main,
Kis par haath uthaon main?—
Pujya pita ya mata par?
Ya ki Bharat se bhrata par?
Aur kisliye? Rajya mile?
Hai jo trin sa tyajya, mile,*

*Ma ki spriha, pita ka pran,
Nashta karoon, karke savran?
Prapta param gaurav chhoroon?
Dharma bech kar dhan joroon?*

(If today I do not go to the forest,
Then whom should I kill?—

Respected father or mother?

Or a brother like Bharat?

And why? That I get the kingdom?
That which is worthless as a blade
of grass?

The wish of mother, the promise of
father,

Should I wound them and destroy them?

Should I give up the supreme honour?

Should I sell my *dharma* for money?)

Impressed by this element in Ram's character, Gupta ji has declared in the last lines of the canto: "*Prasthan,—van ki or,/ Ya lok man ki or,/Hain Ram jan ki or.*" (He leaves—towards the forest,/ Or towards the hearts of the people,/ Ram walks to the people.) Here I would like to underscore the words 'lok' and 'jan'. Both these words have been used in their modern sense and point to the chemical compounding of the ideal and real in *Saaket*. Sita's reaction too is similar. When Ram tells her about the discomforts of living in a forest and tries to stop her from going with him, she offers her own argument, along with conventional arguments like 'a wife has to be with her husband', which express very effectively and touchingly the modern woman's aspiration for freedom:

*Yadi apna atmik bal hai,
Jangal mein bhi mangal hai.*

*Kantak jahan, kusum bhi hain,
Chhayawale drum bhi hain.
Nirjhar hain, durvadal hain,
Meethe kand, mool, phal hain.*

... ..

*Mukta gagan hai, mukta pawan,
Van hai prabhu ka khula bhavan.*

(If one is strong,
Life even in the forest is pleasant.
If there are thorns, there are flowers too,
And trees that give shade,
And the streams, and the grass,
And sweet roots and fruit.

... ..

There is the open sky, the bracing
breeze,
The forest is the Lord's open palace.)

It goes without saying that the kind of newness and the consciousness of freedom that is there in these words of Sita is not there in the Sita of the *Manas*. And it was not possible in the middle age either.

In the sixth canto instead of a Riti-age heroine pining for the hero, we have Urmila behaving like a woman of the warrior class, who only regrets, “*Yadi swami-sangini rah na saki, / To kyon itna bhi kah na saki— / Hey nath, sath do bhrata ka, / Bal rahe, mujhe us trata ka...*” (If I could not be with my master/ Why couldn't I say even this— / O master, be with your brother/ So that I have the strength of that saviour...). She considers Lakshman's love for his brother as his duty, and wants to live rather than die pining for him, so that

she can see him again in Ayodhya. To him she has this to say, “*Yeh bhratra-sneha na una ho, / Logon ke liye namoona ho.*” (Let this love for his brother not weaken, / Let this be an example for the people.) Despite all this, which is extraordinary but not unnatural, her words about him impress us, the words that come straight out of a wife's heart: “*Aaradhyayugma ke sone par, / Nistabdh nisha ke hone par, / Tum yad karoge mujhe kabhi, / To bas phir main pa chuki sabhi.*” (When the worshipped couple is asleep/ When the night is silent,/ Haply when you remember me, / I shall get it all.) Kaushalya, instead of lamenting along with her husband, tries to console him which brings to us the realistic image a wise and pragmatic wife:

*Tumne nij satya dharma pala,
Sut ne swapatya-dharma pala,
Patni pati-sang bani devi,
Priya anuj hua agraj sevi.
Jo hua sabhi avichitra hua,
Par dhanya manushya charitra hua.
Gaurav bal se yeh shok saho,
Dekho hum sabki or aho.*

(You followed your dharma truly,
The son followed his,
The wife with her husband became a goddess,
The dear younger brother served his elder brother.
Whatever happened was normal,
But man's character won the glory.
Bear this sorrow with strength born of honour,
And, O, look at us all.)

In this piece of dialogue the word 'avichitra' (normal) is definitely important because whatever took place in the family of Dashrath is common and normal for Kaushalya. At the same time, 'man's character' too is important because human realism can be presented only thorough human character. If gods become the medium of conveying human realism, they too will have to descend from their world and act like human beings. In this canto the speech of Dashrath is so realistic that it hurts the reader, "*Main hi anarth ka hetu hua, / Ravikul mein sachmuch 'ketu' hua*" (I am the cause of all this misfortune, / I am like 'ketu' for this sunny family). He blames himself in these words and remembers Kaikeyi and in his profound grief says to Kaushalya, "*Mango tum bhi kuchh patrani, / Doon lekar aankhon ka pani.*" (You too ask me for something, my queen / I shall give you the tears in my eyes.) When Sumantra returns to Ayodhya after seeing off Ram and others, Dashrath's sorrow is expressed in the following words: "*Mujhko bhi vahin chhor aao, / Woh Ramchandra-mukh dikhlaao.*" (Take me also to that place / But show me the face of Ram.) His last words are heartrending, "*Hey jeev, chalo ab din beete, / Ha Ram, Ram, Laksman, Sitey!*" (O soul, now leave as your days are over, / Oh! Ram, Ram, Lakshman, Sita!)

In the end let us note the reaction of Bharat also. We have seen the anger of Kaikeyi when Ram was going to the

forest; we shall also see in what words she expresses her repentance in Chitrakoot. First, let us take the reaction of Bharat. When he returns from his maternal grandfather's house and learns from Kaikeyi herself that she had asked for the crown for Bharat as a result of which Ram had to go away to the forest and Dashrath had to die, he faints exclaiming "*Ha hatoasm!*" (Oh! I'm killed). When he returns to consciousness again, he explodes in anger. The words he uses are worth noting because this reaction is based on realism as much as it is on idealism:

*Jee, dwirasane! Hum sabhi ko maar,
Kathin tera uchit nyay vichar.*

... ..

*Dhanya tera kshudhit putra sneha,
Kha gaya jo bhoon kar pati-deh!
Gras karke ab mujhe ho tripta
Aur naache nij durashay dripta.*

... ..

*Khar mangaa, vahan vahi anuroop,
Dekh leyn sab—yehi hai woh bhoop!*

(Live, you snake-woamn, and kill all of us,

Your sense of proper justice is harsh.

... ..

Blessed be your hungry love for your son,

That you roasted and ate the body of your husband!

Now eat me too and feel content,

And dance in evil arrogance.

... ..

Get me a donkey, that is an animal fit for me to ride,

Let everyone see—here goes the new king!)

In the above lines the description of Kaikeyi as a demon is something that only Gupta ji could achieve. In equally powerful words he has shown the commitment of Bharat to the people, which means that when compared to Ram he is quite incompetent to become king, and that is why he would never become the king, as it would mean deceiving the people. In the *Manas* we have a description of Bharat's guilt, that Acharya Shukla has considered very important. Gupta ji has described Bharat's guilt briefly but very accurately, which expresses fully the difficult situation in which he finds himself:

*Kaun samjhega Bharat ka bhav—
Jab Karen ma aap yon prastav!
Ree, hua na tujhko kuchh sankoch?
Tu bani janani ki hanani, soch!
Ishta tujhko dript-shashan-niti,
Aur mujhko lok-seva-preeti.*

(Who will understand the feelings of Bharat—

When, mother, you propose this!
O! Did you not waver even for a moment?
Think, are you a mother or a murderer?
You desire the arrogance of political power,
And I love to serve the people.)

The words of Bharat spoken in the cremation-ground express his noble pro-people character:

*Van chalo sab panch mere saath,
Hain wahin sabke prakrit narnath.*

*Rajya pa len Ram Janakpriya,
Ram ka pratinidhi Bharat ban jaye.
Nij praja-parivar-palan bhar,
Yadi aarya na karen sweekar,
To chuno tum anya nij narpal,
Jo kisi ma ka jana ho lal.
Vyarth ho yadi Bharat ka udyog,
To itni kripa Karen sab log—
Is pita hi ki chita ke pas,
Mujh agati ko bhi mile chirwas!*

(Come, O people, to the forest with me,

There is the real king of all of us!
Let Ram rule over us like Janak,
Let Bharat only represent Ram.

If to protect the family and the kingdom,
Our lord does not accept,

Then elect some other king for yourselves,

Who may be any mother's son.

And if all efforts of Bharat go in vain,
Please be benign to me and do only this,

Near the pyre of this father of mine,
Let this unfortunate man also attain eternal rest.)

Clearly, Gupta ji's modern consciousness is reflected in these lines. If Ram refuses to accept the kingship, let another man be elected king, who may be the son of any mother. There is nothing contradictory about this wish as in India monarchy and republicanism existed side by side. Trying to console Shatrughan, Bharat says, "*Taat, rajya nahin hai kisi ka vitta,/ Yeh unhi ke saukhys-shanti nimitta—/ Swabali dete hain use jo patra,/ Niyat shashak lok-*

sevak matra!" (Brother, the kingship is not anyone's personal property, / It is only for their prosperity and peace— / Who are ready to sacrifice their petty self/ The anointed ruler is merely a public servant!)

It has been said before that in *Saaket*, Gupta ji has described in detail the repentance of Kaikeyi. In the *Manas*, Tulsidas says only this much: "*Kutil rani pachhatani aghai*" (The cunning queen repented much). Here in the second half of the eighth canto Gupta ji has given her more importance than Bharat. Why? Today it need not be stressed that women's liberation is at the centre of Gupta ji's poetry. Because a woman symbolises exploitation, neglect and incrimination, it is not possible for a representative poet of the modern times to skirt this issue. In *Saaket*, there is Urmila but there is also Sita and Kaikeyi, who have a central role to play in the poem. If Urmila is the protagonist of the ninth canto, Sita is the central character in the first half of the eighth canto and Kaikeyi that in the second half, a fact which has been mentioned before. In the second half of the eighth canto, when Kaikeyi speaks about herself at the gathering at Chitrakoot, she expresses in it her basic humanism and certainly her concern for protecting the joint family. Here let us cite just three examples in her speech which touch the readers' heart by their veracity and poignancy:

1. Yadi main uksai gayi Bharat se

houn,

*To pati saman hi swayam putra
bhi khoun.*

(If I have been instigated by Bharat,

Let me lose my son the way I have lost my husband.)

2. Kya kar sakti thi mari manthra
dasi

*Mera man hi rah na saka nij
vishwasi.*

(What could that damned Manthara have done,

If I had not lost faith in myself.)

3. '*Raghukul mein bhi thi ek abhagin
rani*'

(Even in Raghukul was there an unfortunate queen'.)

Where the first quotation proves Baharat to be innocent, the second one allows Kaikeyi to be forgiven fully, because she considers herself responsible for whatever had happened. Here there is no supernatural context related to Saraswati nor is there the tendency to blame Manthara. There is only Kaikeyi, a woman, and one who is completely without guard, who can be blamed entirely for what happened. The last illustration, which has been quoted before also, creates such compassion and sympathy for her that the entire gathering cries out, "*Bharat jaise adwitiya putra ko janane wali yeh ma dhanya hai.*" (May this mother who has given birth

to an extraordinary son like Bharat, be praised.) Such is the power of the truth of self-expression. It goes without saying that the ability to write such meaningful dialogue is not possible only on the strength of mere poetic skill.

Gupta ji has been severely criticised for his description of physical beauty and love in *Saaket*. The criticism of such critics has been that it is improper to express such sentiments in a story dealing with Ram, especially when the poet himself is a *vaishnavite*. These critics should be asked: did *vaishnavism* discipline Gupta ji or did he himself decide to remain within bounds? Secondly, was only Tulsi a *vaishnava*, and not Sur who, going beyond the set 'limits' has described openly the love between Krishna and Radha, and other gopis? There is no doubt that Gupta ji was a *Ramanandi vaishnava*, but did he not have the right that as a creative writer he could transcend the boundary of propriety? How far is even Tulsi limited by the discipline of *vishishtadvaitism*? Certainly, the statement by D.H. Lawrence about believing the work and not the author can always and everywhere be cited as a principle. This statement is implicitly related to the creative freedom of a writer who ultimately is not bound by any religion, or philosophy or ideology. One of the many accidents that Gupta ji had was that because he chose the subject of Ram for *Saaket*, he was placed not in the tradition of literature on Ram but in that of Tulsi. Naturally

when he described love in its voluptuous form in *Saaket*, people found fault with him saying that such lines were a sign of a complete degeneration in a poet who was a devotee of Ram and was bound by the limits of propriety! The critics could never free themselves from their prejudices and did not try to discover that Gupta ji is not a poet in the tradition of Tulsi, but in that of Valmiki, Kalidas and Bhavbhuti, who were not guided by a false sense of morality and who accepted everything that life has to offer. It is not surprising that Gupta ji was taken to be not only a poet of Gandhian morality but also a representative poet of the Gandhian age, without really realising how much he disagreed with the fundamentals of Gandhian philosophy. In the beginning of many cantos in *Saaket*, Gupta ji has referred to a number of the poets of the previous ages. Tulsi is only one among those six poets; the others are the Sanskrit poets Valmiki, Bhasa, Bhavabhuti, Kalidas and Vyas. Among these the first four poets used the story of Ram, whether fully or partly, as a subject for their poetry and drama. In the eleventh canto Vyas has been mentioned because he is '*kapidhwaj ke kripalu kavi*' (the generous poet of kapidhwaj), and the story of Hanuman's coming to Ayodhya has been narrated in it. Through all this does Gupta ji not give any indication about the real tradition to which he belongs? It is well known that he made Valmiki's *Ramayan* and Vyasa's *Mahabharata* the primary sources for

his poetry, wrote his poem *Shakuntala* making Kalidasa's *Sahkuntalam* as its basis, and translated four Sanskrit plays of Bhasa into Hindi. In his *Uttarramcharitam* Bhavbhuti has created the poignant character of Sita and under his influence Gupta ji has done the same with Urmila in the ninth canto of *Saaket*. It is also well known that Gupta ji did not know English, but he knew Sanskrit well and always had *Amarkosh* and Sanskrit grammar as his reference materials. Therefore, how unfortunate it is that critics have taken a blinkered view of his poetry and have remembered only Tulsi when discussing the influences on Gupta ji! In fact the poet Sumitranandan Pant has understood Gupta ji's poetry much better than these critics, and has said that it contrasts with that of Sur and Tulsi, and that too when Pant wrote an entirely different kind of poetry, which went against that written in Gupta ji's age. He says:

*Sur sur, Tulsi shashi—lagta
mitthyaropan,
Swarganga tarapath mein kar aapke
bhraman.*

(After roaming about the galaxy of your poetry, the assertion that Sur is the sun and Tulsi the moon among poets appears to be false.)

In the concluding part of the first canto of *Saaket* Gupta ji has given a beautiful description of the love between the newly married Lakshman and Urmila:

Haath Lakshman ne turat barha diye,

*Aur bole—“Ek parirambhan priye!”
Simat si sahasa gayi priya ki priyaa,
Ek teekshna apanga hi usne diya.
Kintu ghate mein use priya ne kiya,
Aap hi phir prapya apna le liya!*

(Quickly Lakshman extended his arms
And said—“My dearest, come to me!”
The beloved of that lover suddenly
withdrew into herself,
Giving him a sharp look.
But cunningly her lover
Took what was due to him.)

On this Vajpeyeeji comments, “These kinds of descriptions of love are acceptable neither in the old tradition of Ram story, nor in modern poetry, which prefers subtle and psychological description of things, accept it.” Here one should ask him what he means by “the old tradition of Ram story”. As far as the question of “subtle and psychological description of things” is concerned, it is natural that a *chhayavadi* critic would insist on it. Surely a *chhayavadi* critic is not any less a lover of abstraction than a *chhayavadi* poet, or else Vajpeyeeji would have showered lavish praise on Gupta ji for this life-like description. Similarly, he found the description of Urmila's beauty in the first canto to be inferior to that of Shradha in *Kamayani* and said, “Despite the presence of idealism in *Saaket*, these kind of voluptuous passages in it are difficult to accept.” The practice of calling a poem inferior by comparing it to one's favourite poem is much older than the time of Muktibodh, when after comparing

with his own poetry he proved that *Kamayani* was an inferior poem. Perhaps the lines that Vajpeyeeji disliked the most were these; “*Mandirstha kaun yeh devi bhala?/ Kis kritee ke arth hai iski kala?*” and which was natural too.

In this context it needs to be said that in the eighth canto Gupta ji has described Sita in the same manner as he has done Urmila. Instead of showing disgust with it, one needs to understand the poet’s point of view, which is not bound by any imaginary sense of propriety that a critic may have.

Ankur hitkar the kalash payodhar pavan,

Jan-matri-garvmay kushal vadan bhav bhavan.

... ..
Paakar vishal kach-bhar eriyen dhansati,

Tab nakhjyotimish, mridul ungaliyan hansati.

... ..
Rukne-jhukane mein lalit lank lach jaati

Par apni chhavi mein chhipi aap bach jaati.

When seen carefully he has tried his best not to let the description become too crude and concrete, though there is no doubt about its being voluptuous. Gupta ji must certainly be considered guilty of having committed a sin for writing this! When in the ninth canto he describes the separation of Urmila from her husband, he seems to have crossed the limit. Urmila says,

*Mere chapal yauvan-bal!
Achal Anchal mein para so,
machalkar mat sal.*

Beetne de raat, hoga suprabhat vishal.

Khelna phir khel man ke pahanke mani-mal.

Pak rahe hain bhagya-phal tere suramya rasal.

Dar na, avsar aa raha hai, ja raha hai kal.

Man pujari aur tan is dukhini ka thal,

Bhent priya ke hetu usme ek tu hi lal!

Vajpeyeeji says about this that in this description the expression of emotion has descended to a level that can only be called mundane. This is not expected from the heroine of *Saaket*. Quoting the first two lines of this song, he said that ‘The implication of these lines brings them so close to the expression of Urmila’s passion that her conduct at other places as a brave woman fails to achieve the desired effect.’ He speaks as if these two images of Urmila are contradictory and that *shringar rasa* cannot go with *veer rasa*. Vajpeyeeji has not been able to notice the fact that Urmila’s feeling of love has created a human warmth not only in the description of her separation from her husband. And naturally, he has not been able to notice how in *Saaket* Gupta ji has broken the previous myth of Ram’s story. Undoubtedly, in this poem the story of Ram goes beyond the mould

created by the Manas that is based on devotion. This, however, does not mean that it also goes beyond idealism.

Primarily and ultimately, *Saaket* is a humanistic poem and all its underlying values are modern. Here we tend to agree fully with Dr. Nagendra's statement that "The greatest credit for establishing the values of the age must go to him (Gupta ji)" and "his fundamental values are really values of humanism." These human values are revolutionary and not conventional, a fact borne by the criticism of *Saaket* which wants to see the poem as conforming to the tradition. But see the criticism of Nagendra himself. First he praises the humanistic values and then tries to subsume modernity into tradition! He says, "It should have been easy for him to keep it within the norms of the Shree sampradaya." I request the readers to keep the ideology of Shree sampradaya aside and read this as work of art, then they will also rid themselves of Nagendra's concept—typical of the age of Dwivedi— that poetry is "*shwetvasana sanyasini*" (a white-robed nun).

Concerning the structure and modernity of *Saaket* there is a state of misconception in Hindi and there is doubt about its poetic quality. A critic like Acharya Shukla, who was also a good judge of poetry, saw in it 'the full development of poetic quality in it' but the new generation did not take his view too seriously though it gave importance to the view that it lacks qualities of

an epic. That generation recognizes Gupta ji's historical contribution only, which means that he turned the prose of the age of Dwivedi into poetry, which made later poetry possible. They have no time to realize that in literature the historical and literary importance are not discordant. In literature historical importance really means literary importance. The point is that without being creative no poet can create the medium of poetry for his age nor can be a model for the later poetry. Poetry can only receive the creativity of the poet and then becomes creative or raises the work to a higher level. The creativity of Gupta ji is still to be understood. As far as *Saaket* is concerned, it is certainly the pinnacle of his creativity. The kind of attention he has given to this poem was not given to any other work of his. In it his poetic art is evident in its full power and spontaneity and reaches the greatest heights. This poetic art is not merely poetic skill. And that is why it pervades both the structure of the poem and its inner sense; or rather in the entire poetry, where there is no difference between the structure and inner meaning.

In this poem Gupta ji has occasionally expressed his views on poetry, but his self-discovered truth about it is expressed in the words of Ram when, pleased with the description of the sangam by Lakshman and Sita he says, "*Abhivyakti ki kushal shakti hi to kala,/ Kintu aap anubhuti hai yahan nishchala.*" (Art is

only the skill in expression,/ But here there is the spontaneity of experience.) It means that their description lacks the skill in expression but it has the element of experience in it. It appears as if Acharya Shukla who believes that 'the arrangement of words is poetry' were saying that the experience of *rasa* is poetry! In Saaket poetry is seen in its natural form and there is also skill in expression. The reactions of various characters cited above, though somewhat generously, show that they have poetic quality in both senses. However, in this context something more needs to be said here.

Dr. Nagendra has written that Gupta ji was an architect but not a lapidist, a teller of stories but not a wordsmith. This is entirely wrong, because not only was Gupta ji's vocabulary vast, he also had an exceptional ability to coin new words and change them according to his need. Some scholars have propagated the view that in his writings, there are some very uncommon Sanskrit words that sound like barriers, and also that he does not pay attention to any other aspect of poetry except rhyming, to which he gives special attention, and so his poetry ends up becoming mere rhymed verse. There is a grain of truth in this but when we focus only on this aspect of his poetry we overlook some of the more positive sides of his poetry. It is true that to rhyme with 'rajya' he brings 'ajya' but what needs to be seen is whether or not that word has

been fixed as a precious stone in the line, or whether, because of that word, there is an obstruction in the flow of the verse, and if there is such an obstruction, whether it has aesthetic value or not. It has to be remembered that in Guptaji there was a tendency not only of considering a word for its sweetness and tenderness but also to draw it from a very wide range. Thus he extended the poetic vocabulary of Hindi. In this sense, after Tulsidas he is the second poet who did not consider any word untouchable for poetry; in other words, he did not select words only on the basis of whether or not it was poetic. His limitation was that his words end up giving their dictionary meaning only and do not create ripples of meaning. But that was not his own limitation but that of his age, and also that of the genre of epic that did not allow him much leeway. When Bharat calls Kaikeyee *dvirasane* he not only calls her a double tongued snake but also hints at the fact that she had asked for two boons. The reader enjoys such a use. This is the special quality of *Saaket*. The epic form does not permit him to explore layers of meanings in the word. There is a variety in Gupta ji's use of vocabulary. I give an example from the twelfth canto in which he describes the army in Ayodhya getting ready for Lanka. Here we notice how courageous, skillful and creative the use of words is:

Aise aganit bhav uthe Raghu sagar-nagar mein,

Bagar uthe barh agar-tagar se dagar-dagar mein.

... ..

Khachit tarni, mani rachit ketu jhakjhaka rahe the,

Vastra dhakdhaka rahe, shastra bhakbhaka rahe the.

The reader will admit that words like 'sagar, 'nagar bagar and so on, not only create consonance but also bring a remarkable freshness to the description. "Those feelings that rose in Ayodhya spread through each of its street like the fragrance of the incense of agar and tagar." In this quotation if *Khachit tarni* and *mani rachit* show one kind of vocabulary use, *jhakjhakana*, *dhakdhakana*, *bhakbhakana* show another. *Khachit tarni* and *mani rachit* are not merely words with same consonants but there is also a deeper meaning in them, such as, at Ayodhya in the night 'the colours of the army that are fluttering have the image of the sun, the symbol of the suryakul, and have rubies in them that make them shine.' Similarly words like *dhakdhakana*, and *bhakbhakana* are not merely similar in sound to *jhakjhakana* but suggest an explosion of light. Thus, the range of Gupta ji's vocabulary stretches from the literary to the folk.

A common conception about the language of Gupta ji's poetry is that it is the poetic transformation of the prose of the age of Dwivedi. There is truth in this conception but it does not apply to his entire oeuvre. This is true of

the language of poems like *Jaidrath – vadh*, *Bharat-Bharati* or *Panchvati*, in which a kind of metre has been used which can take easily the sentences of prose. However, this is not true of those poems that have been written in a shorter or lyrical meter. In every way, *Saaket* is the most mature work of Gupta ji. Not only does its ninth canto show a variety of meters, the other cantos are also written in shorter meter and sometimes some stanzas are in the difficult *varnik* meter, in which the first part is of ten letters and the second of eleven letters. It goes without saying that like the other kinds of stanza-forms, this stanza form has also been very beautifully used. However, it is true that whether the stanza is long or short, Gupta ji always pays attention to syntax, and the syntax is always right no matter how concentrated the expression is. But it is not necessary that syntax is always of the age of Dwivedi. Those cantos in *Saaket*, which have longer stanzas, are only three- the eighth, the eleventh and the twelfth, and this has helped him to present the story effectively. Thus, when discussing the language of this poem, it must be remembered that Gupta ji has used simple as well as multi-layered language in which you can go on from meaning to meaning. Obviously, the pleasure that one gets from it is of a very order. The writer of this poem is a person skilled in the use of words as well as in the use of sentences. Because of the paucity of space only a few examples of simple language are being given here,

and that too only from the second canto:

1. Prakrit Hindi:

*Mod ka aah na or chhor,
Amra-van sa phoola sab or.*

2. Hindi enriched with Sanskrit words:

*Hansi rani sunkar voh baat,
Uthi anupam abha avdaat.*

3. Hindi with tadbhav words:

*Saje vidhu ki bendi se bhaal
Yamini aa pahunchi tatkal.*

4. Hindi with idioms:

*Vajra sh para achanak toot,
Gaya uska sharir sa chhoot.*

5. Rhymed Hindi

*Bina khole phir bhi voh netra,
Chalane lagi vachanmay vetra.*

6. Hindi with meaningful word-play

*Satya hai to hai satyanash,
Hasya hai to hai hatya-pash.*

7. Sanskrit based Hindi:

*Grihagat chandralok vidhan
Jancha nij bhavi shav paridhan.*

We have spoken above of the question of language concentration. This is seen in Gupta ji and sometimes it seems that his language progressively became more concentrated. And the greatest that has happened is that it has acquired a remarkable verbal economy. We can leave the others, but even what has been said by Nirala in his *Ram Ki Shaktipuja* has been expressed by Gupta ji in fewer words. Nirala writes, “*Jaise ojaswi shabdon ka jo tha prabhav/ usase na inhe kuchh chaav, na ho koi duraav,*” and Gupta ji says the same thing in

the fourth canto of Saaket in fewer words, “*Laksman ne prabhu ko dekha,/ Na thi udhar koi rekha.*” Now I speak of another kind of expansion seen in poets like Kalidasa when because of the requirement of the meter he expands a word like ‘koplohit’ to ‘kopvilohit’, which increase, and not decreases its beauty. If a poet has only the ability to contract and not to expand, he will not be able to write the meters properly. When Gupta ji expands a word, he makes it more beautiful as Kalidasa does. An example:

*Hue gadgad yahin raghunandanauj,
Shishit kan poorna mano pratrambuj.*

Clearly a word like *raghunandanauj* which became necessary for the meter adds much to the music of the line. In a simple language there is a natural tendency to expand, but it goes without saying that in Gupta ji it is very effective. For instance, when Sumantra says, “*Kahan se kumati ki yeh vayu aayee/ Kinare naav jisase dagmagai,*” the line acquires a remarkable effectiveness. Similarly, in these words spoken by Urmila, there is a very beautiful use of idiomatic Hindi: “*De saki na saath naath ka bhi,/ Le saki na hai! haath ka bhi.*”

To be able to write an epic successfully, a poet must have the ability to tell a story. Because Chhayavadi poetry was the poetry of subjective expression, therefore it gave primacy to lyrics. Naturally we see a lack of story-telling ability in the poets of this school. This applies both to Prasad, the writer of

Kamayani and Nirala who wrote *Tulsidas*. From this point of view among the poets of the Kari Boli, Gupta ji was decidedly the most competent. Later we find this quality in Dinkar, the writer of *Kurukshetra* and *Rashmirathi*. Gupta ji tells the story with a kind of completeness that is seen in prose. At the same time he is able to convey the most complex situations very successfully in his poetry. He is able to give a full description of things as well as emotions. It will be difficult for anyone to resist the temptation of quoting a few such pieces of description from *Saaket*. In the fifth canto when Ram enters the forest with Laksman and Sita, he has described the forest in detail. Some parts of that description are the following:

*Aage aage bhag raha hai mor yeh,
Pakshon se path jhar chapel chitchor
yeh.*

*Machak-machak yeh keesh mandali
khelti,*

*Lachal lachak bach dal mar hai jhelti!
Kahin sahaj tarutale kusum shayyam
bani,*

*Ung h rahi hai pari jahan chhaya
ghani!*

*Ghus dheere se kiran lol dalpunj mein,
Jaga rahi hai use hila kar kunj mein.*

*... ..
Phailaye yeh ek paksha leela kiye,
Chhati par bhar diye, anga dheela
kiys,*

*Dekho, greeva bhang sang kis dhang
se,*

Dekh raha hai hamein vihang umang

se.

... ..

*Mustakgandha khudi mritika hai
idhar,*

*Bane aardra padchinha, gaye shookar
jidhar.*

It must be noted that this entire description is extremely pictorial and is mostly dynamic. It is obvious that it is easy to paint things that are still but to delineate things that are moving is slightly more difficult. In the seventh canto when Bharat and Shatrughan are returning from their maternal grandfather's house and when they enter Ayodhya, the poet has described the scene in some detail. Like lines quoted above, parts of that description are worth noting:

*Anuj, dekho aa gaya Saaket,
Deekhte hain uchcha raj-niket.*

*Kamya, karbur, ketu bhushit atta,
Gagan mein jyon sandhya ghan-
sanghatta.*

... ..

*Ubhay aur suhamrya pulinakar,
Beech mein path ka pravah prasar.*

*Barh chala nishabd sa rath-pot,
Tha tarangit mansik bhi srot.*

*Uchcha thi griharaji dono or,
Nikat tha jiska na or na chhor.*

*Rajmarg-vitan-sa tha vyom,
Chhatra sa upar udit tha som.*

Similarly one or two descriptions of nature are also worth noting. In the eight canto in Chitrakoot the meeting continued throughout the night. When it ended, dawn was breaking. Gupta ji

describes it in these words:

*Moonde anant ne nayan dhaar woh
jhanki,*

*Shashi khisak gaya nishchint hans
hans banki.*

*Dwija chahak uthe, ho gaya naya
ujiyala,*

Hatak-pat pahne deekh pari girimala.

In this the word 'hatak' (gold) is worth noting. This at least tells us that we are reading a poem of the age of Dwivedi; and the remarkable thing is that it gives us a new flavour that is different from that of modern poetry. Gupta ji had the ability to describe nature accurately even in very few words, for instance this description of the night in the beginning of the tenth canto: *Tam mein khsiti-lok lupta yon,/ ali neelopal mein prasupt jyon.*" In the Manas Tulsidas has described the magic deer in this manner:

*Kabhun nikat puni doori parai.
Kabhunk pragte kabhunk chhapai.*

*Pragatat durat karat chhal bhoori.
Yehi vidhi prabhuhi gayee le doori.*

Undoubtedly this description is very vivid, but Gupta ji has presented this in a new way, which throws light on many of its qualities. In that context he has described the beauty of the deer, which we quote taking it to be a part of the description of nature:

*Arun roop us tarun hiran ki
Dekh kiran gati, greevabahng,
Sakarun narhari Ram rang se
Gaye door tak uske sang.*

As has been mentioned above, Gupta ji has the skill of depicting emotion. Here two or three examples only will suffice. In the second canto of *Saaket* the description of the mental turmoil of Dashrath is very powerful:

*Vachan palte ki bheje Ram ko van
mein,*

*Ubhaya vidh mrityu nishchit jaankar
man mein,*

*Hue jeevan maran ke beech dhrita
se ve,*

Rahe bas ardh jeevit, ardh mrit se ve.

This description of Dashrath and of Kaushlya and Sumitra on his left and right after Ram goes away to the forest in the sixth canto is extremely noble, which is beyond the powers of an ordinary poet:

*Gajraj pank mein dhansa hua,
Chhatpat karta tha phansa hua.
Hathnian paas chillati theen,
Ve vivash, vikal bilalati these.*

The muktaka style in the ninth canto like the poetic style of *Yashodhara* got invented on its own. In this Gupta ji has tried to capture and describe each feeling of Urmila who is suffering because of her separation from her husband. He has done a number of experimentation in the area of epic. This is one of those experiments, about which it must be remembered that the period of her separation from her husband was very long. Only one illustration is being given here which describes her mental state:

Ab bhi samaksha woh nath khare,

*Barh kintu rikta yeh hath pare.
Na viyog hai na yeh yog sakhi
Kah, kaun bhagyamaya bhog sakhi.*

The teacher of Hindi (and why not the critic?) will say that it is an example of delusion and think that he work is done, one who enters the mind of Urmila through these lines can only understand how he has given a new energy to an old form. Does the mental state of Kaikeyee not remind us of the Ram of

Uttarramcharitam, who experiences the touch of Sita in her absence and when he becomes conscious again and does not find her there, asks in great perturbation, is this a dream? Then he says: how can this be a dream when I was not asleep?

Saaket is definitely a classic of modern Hindi poetry.

Courtesy: Kasauti

Dr. Nand Kishore Naval, born 1937, is an important literary critic. He has been Professor of Hindi in Patna University. He has penned books on Nirala's poetry and edited Nirala Rachnavali in eight volumes. He has also written on Dinkar and Muktibodh. 'Hindi alochana ka vikas' is another important book by Naval. He has edited six literary magazines, the last of which was kasauti. Naval has received U.P. Hindi Sansthan's Subramanya Bharti Samman, Dinkar Puraskar and Ram Chandra Shukla Samman for his critical contribution. He lives in Patna.

WAS AMBEDKAR ONLY A DALIT LEADER?

Lal Bahadur Varma

Certainly not, Ambedkar was not just a dalit Leader. Such a perception belittles him and betrays lack of sense of history and deprives us of an understanding that might facilitate our task of changing this world for the better. When one calls Gandhi a great Indian leader or father of Nation – ‘Rashtrapita’ to be precise, on the one hand one tries to give Gandhi an honour *non pareil*, but on the other limits him to the Indian context, whereas his role in human history provides an ‘alternative’ of world-wide significance.

We, however, are concerned with an estimate of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s role in history. He is usually considered as the greatest Dalit Leader and he is almost worshipped by his followers. Apotheosis of such a father figure is there to be seen in innumerable statues of a person holding a book in his hand which happens to be replica of the Indian constitution. It is made to be great honour to be called author of the Indian constitution - constitution of world’s biggest democracy, a constitution which is perhaps the most voluminous.

This proposition is neither correct nor suitable. Ambedkar was only the chairman of the drafting committee. Debates in the Constituent Assembly clearly show that dozens of leaders were very vocal and assertive and a kind of ‘national’ leadership emerged which made the constitution what it is. Dr. Ambedkar was perhaps one of the unhappiest members of the Assembly. He did not mince words in expressing his dissatisfaction and let it be known that if the constitution were not changed soon enough it might prove

disastrous for the country, more so for the poor and the deprived of India.

My submission is that this constitution does not fully satisfy even the bourgeoisie which was its real authors and main beneficiary. How else to understand the hundred odd amendments in about six decades of its existence. As far as dalits are concerned less said the better. Most of the provisions which could somehow benefit the poor were are not justifiable. Therefore calling Ambedkar the author of such a constitution in no way elevates him. On the contrary, it should be considered demeaning.

He should be remembered and honoured as a great emancipator of not only the dalits but of the whole Indian society, in a way whole mankind. Dalits in India were prey to the most callous patriarchal and *Brahmanical* society. They were forced to live a dehumanized and perpetually humiliating existence. Shambook and Eklavya are only a mythological representation of a continuing social reality. One need not turn the pages of history to find out evidences of criminal and unpardonable exploitation, oppression and suppression of the dalits. In spite of so-called constitutional and legal support and guarantees, a woman, more so a dalit woman can be paraded naked and can be gang-raped in front of 'amused' people—even by the defenders of law and the country. It wives of kings like Sita and Draupadi could be humiliated in public one can imagine the plight of ordinary

women and dalits. What Ambedkar did was to smash the shackles of fatality fettering the people - जाही विधि राखें राम ताही विधि रहिये - what is lotted can not be blotted.

Ambedkar was preceded by a leader, through less knowledgeable but more concerned and courageous than Raja Rammohan Roy. Jyotiba Phule played no less, if not greater, role in awakening the people of India. He exposed the 'Ghulamgiri' in Indian society and insisted on abolishing it. He did not stop at theorizing. He considered education to be the most effective instrument of change and lighted the first lamp in his own home. He educated his own wife and inspite of insults literally hurled on her, she became the first woman teacher.

Ambedkar inherited that foresight and deep concern. Wading through thicks and thins of life he accomplished the highest of education in India and abroad and equipped himself with the ancient as well as modern knowledge of the East as well as of the West. He was now prepared to take a plunge in public life.

At the age of 26 he submitted before the government a memorandum that greatest divide in Indian society was between the 'untouchables' and the others and the former are turned into such slavery that they dare not even complain.

His first enterprise in social movement was Mahad Satyagraha. It can be easily called the first movement for the emancipation of the untouchables.

It started as demand for the right of the untouchable to fetch water from a public tank. The movement ultimately failed but Ambedkar succeeded in awakening the people. Manusmriti is deemed to be the social canon which has fragmented Indian society, and degraded the 'shudras' and women to the rungs even lower than animals. It continues to be the moral basis of hegemonic Brahmanism even today. Dalits had mustered courage by then to burn copies of Manusmriti.

Growing awareness among the depressed classes forced the Congress to accept the abolition of untouchability but it did not agree to accept granting any privilege to these communities. In the Round Table Conferences held in London Ambedkar insisted that the depressed classes are accepted as Hindus only due to political consideration. Therefore, they must be given a separate status. When the British Government accepted this proposal, Gandhi went on hunger strike to prevent the fragmentation of Hindu Society. The aura and moral authority built around the Mahatma was such that Ambedkar had to back out but he felt suffocated.

Since then he started thinking in terms of conversion to some more rational religion. It ultimately resulted in his accepting Buddhism with lakhs of his supporters.

He organized his followers even politically. His party finally became the Republican Party of India.

Rural India is as much glorified as ancient India. Ambedkar punctured both these formulations. He exposed ancient India as monument of exploitation of the working people. Similarly he said that the dalits were more helpless in the villages. He, therefore, wanted his supporters to shift to urban areas where they could get atleast the crumbs of modern development and civilization.

His book 'Who Were Shudras' exposed the hypocrisy of caste-system and his advocacy to end casteism convinced many. However, his all convincing arguments in favour of emphasis on social justice did not convince the communists and they continued to see Ambedkar as a distractor, a deviationist. Most of them continue to follow the beaten track.

He was and continues to be scandalised as pro-British. But who was not? Raja Rammohan Roy, Ranade, Gokhale, even Gandhi, the Congress Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha. And what about the Party that wronged him most? Was Communist Party of India not pro-British during the second World War when the Soviet Union joined hands with the Allies after Hitler attacked Soviet Union? And at what cost? Almost betrayal of the national cause. Befriending an enemy in face of a greater enemy can be called a tactical move. Fascism had become 'greater enemy' for Capitalism as well as Socialism. In that case what is sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander too. For Ambedkar Brahminism - the social slavery and

humiliation was greater enemy than political slavery, which was to end someday, anyway.

Ambedkar's place in history can be better understood with even a cursory comparison with Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Martin Luther King was a great American leader who fought for the rights-civil and human rights, of the blacks in the United States of America. He launched a Gandhian struggle against racial discrimination in the U.S.A. in general and particularly in the southern states. His famous and inspiring speech 'I have dream', immortalized in a film, reverberates throughout the world even today. When Barak Hussain Obama was sworn in as President of the United States of America, it was said that King's dream was fulfilled. Yes, in a way. But the racial prejudice? It is a long protracted war, a world war of its kind, for which King had no clear perspective.

Nelson Mandela was involved in a greater battle against the Apartheid in South Africa. There the sufferings – Mandela's and his followers', were much more trying. There the struggle was political, economic and cultural too. But the emphasis was on political struggle which definitely had primacy. But Mandela had no clear perspective of the problem either. It was proved during the period he himself held the reins of power in his country. Blacks have been empowered but their sufferings have hardly lessened.

King and Mandela are projected as greater world figures, more so because King was murdered and Mandela had to undergo long period of hard punishment. As compared to them Ambedkar did not suffer much for his struggles. But should martyrdom determine the role one plays in history? Sometimes martyrdom plays the determining role in glamourising the person as in the case of Bhagat Singh who is called Shaheed-e-Azam the greatest martyr. First of all there should not be any categorization in martyrdom and secondly, Bhagat Singh had much more advanced ideas about emancipation of Indian people than most of his revolutionary co-travellers. His place should be determined by the quality of his leadership - martyrdom or no martyrdom.

Ambedkar faced a much more complicated and complex problem in India than the one faced by King or Mandela, both in space and time, in quality as well as quantity. He succeeded in cultivating a kind of Gramscian hegemony of his idea of social emancipation which has almost universally created self respect and self confidence in the dalits of India. This desire of equality and empowerment has churned the social stagnation of Indian society and has great significance in the history of mankind. It may not be fully appreciated to day but the sooner it is done, the better for the betterment of the 'wretched of the world'.

One need not evaluate a leader in terms of quality and quantity of his followers. Most of the followers have betrayed the cause of the one whom they profess to so vehemently follow. Look at what followers of Marx, Gandhi and Ambedkar have done to the vision of those great leaders of mankind.

Marx is made a pioneer of the economic man. Yes, he did emphasise the role of economic production and consequent relations but for him it was essential and primary struggle but only the primary. He had an integral perspective of body, mind and spirit of economic, political, social and cultural man in society. He thought of a 'new man' in a 'new society'. But his followers have given an opportunity to the opponents to criticize that 'one does not live by bread alone'. It is scandalous Marx would abhor such a crude simplification.

What about Gandhi? In today's ratrace for material fulfillment, when Gandhi's dictum that 'there is enough for the need but not for the greed', is literally proved, one may not agree with all that Gandhi stood and struggled for but his alternative

world view, his incessant struggle, even on the personal plane, to serve the truth, as he saw it, atleast underlines the insufficiency of the other view. His followers, if there remain some, have marginalized him by idolizing and crimsoning him.

Coming, finally, to Ambedkar, one has only to leaf through his complete works to be marvelled by the range of his learning and commitment. He had studied the Indian as well as western classics more than perhaps any other contemporary leader. His knowledge had led him to this wisdom that Indian society must throw away the killing and chilling burden of social inequality to be able to march ahead. His diagnosis was that casteism must be banished lock, stock and barrel. And what have his followers done? They have taken to his ugly idolization and are trying to perpetuate casteism. Like followers of Marx and Gandhi, they too are nose-deep in political opportunism and have completely forsaken their cultural vision of a new society.

Does history permit permanent forgetfulness?

Lal Bahadur Verma, born 1938, is a famous historian and creative writer. He edits journals 'Itihasbodh' and 'Muhim' in Hindi. Dr. Verma did his post doctoral research in Paris from 1968 to 1971. He was professor of History at Allahabad University until retirement in 1998. His novel Uttar Purva has been acclaimed by critics as an indepth study of life in Manipur. He is actively involved in social work of human rights bodies. He has translated Victor Hugo's classic work 'Les Miserables' from French into Hindi. He now lives in Allahabad.

JAPANESE SOURCES OF AJNEYA'S POETRY: AN ASIAN DISCOURSE

Rita Rani Paliwal

We Indians have been historically destined to see the world through colonial doors and windows. So our contact with the rest of Asia has been influenced by western biases. For a long time our view of Japan also had been West-centric. Post independence Indian literature has in many ways tried to cross those mental barriers. Ajneya is the first among Hindi poets to introduce the Japanese cultural ethos and literature to Hindi readers. He is a writer known for his innovative and experimental temperament. His short story 'Naga Parvat Ki Ek Ghatna' (written in 1950) may be marked as the beginning of the Hindi-Japanese Asian discourse. Dealing with the question of dehumanization and brutalization of human-self in the process of military training and disciplining, this story exposes the western hypocrisy of human values of freedom and equality. Written during the period of Japanese occupation of Allied Forces the story tries to deconstruct the Euro-centrism rather West-centrism of the issue of Japanese militaristic fascism during the World War. The oriental positioning of the story gives a new perspective of the approach and questions the manner in which the ruling or controlling powers dealt with the people whom they ruled and those whom they called barbarous and militaristic.

During Summer and Autumn of 1957 Ajneya travelled to Japan. The exposure to Japanese culture and life enriched his mind and heart. Whatever he visited, saw, listened, experienced or read during his visits to Japan influenced his thought, sensibility and poetic expression in a number of ways. His collection of poems

'Ari O Karuna Prabhamay' was published in 1959. In this he has himself acknowledged the Japanese influence and the reader also can feel it. How much he liked the nature of Japan can be seen from the following lines of his notes in 'Bhawanti' (1970):

Izu Pradesh he aisa dekha jo mere divaswapnon ki prayah sab sharten poori kar deta hei. Agar vah desh mein hota—ya us per rahane wale Hindi bhashi hote, to sachamuch vahan ja basata! —kyonki pahar aur sagar ki tarah Hindi bhi mere divaswapnon ka ang rahati: pahar ke pas rahoonga, sagar ke pas rahoonga, aur Hindi mein rahoonga.....

'Bhawanti' (1970)

Here I shall focus my discussion mainly on three points:

1. Poems written during Ajney's journey to Japan
2. His translations of Haiku
3. His later poems that have their inspiration from Japan

I

During his trips to Japan Ajneya visited centres of Japanese Culture and places of natural beauty. While travelling Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, Kamakura, Atami, Nikko, Osaka, Hiroshima, he wrote poems like – 'He Amitabh', 'Dhara Vyom', 'Dip Patthar Ka', 'Samrajni Ka Naivedya dan', 'Son Machhali', 'Roop Katki', 'Poono Ki Sanjh', 'Sagar Par Bhor', 'Audyogika Basti' etc. In addition to writing these poems during his stay in Japan he also read

a lot of Japanese literary and other works. Prior to his journey he had already made himself well acquainted with Japan through books. While being in Japan he saw Japanese paintings and other forms of art and also got exposed to Zen-Buddhism, which proved to be an enriching experience for him. Japanese people's closeness to nature also drew his attention.

Reading his poems written in Japan one notices that Ajney has avoided immediate reaction or response to the places he has visited. Even the poems written in Hiroshima and Osaka i.e. 'Laute Yatri Ka Vaktavya' (18 December, 1957) and 'Audyogika Basti' (17 December, 1957) are the poems of quest of human touch in the process of mechanization of life. He has taken serious notice of the marginalization of individual self in the rat race of modern civilization and industrialization. His poem entitled 'Hiroshima' (about atomic Bomb destruction and human tragedy) was written two years after his visit to the place. This clearly indicates that Ajneya could not immediately respond to his exposure to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial because the feelings were too deep for quick reaction.

The immediate response is only seen in a poem written during visits to Kyoto and Nara. There is an invocation to Lord Buddha:

He Amitabh!

Nabh poorit alok

*Sukh se, suruchi se, roop se, bhare oak
He Avalokit
Hiranyabh!*

'He Amitabh' (written in Kyoto on
6th September, 1957)

The next poem entitled 'Dhara-Vyom' written on the same day after reaching Nara is not an invocation, but seems to be the extension of the previous poem. Here the forgiveness and compassion have emerged from the earth and sky and spread in the life and nature— river, sea, stream or cascade.

Another poem 'Dip Patthar Ka' also has the similar tone. The stone lamp-stand constructed like a small pillar is typical symbol of Japanese temple architecture. Such lamp-stands are usually seen at the temple or shrine compounds and gates. They are so beautiful in their style that they cannot be passed unnoticed by a visitor. Now-a-days with ample electricity lights they are more objects of beauty than utility, but in the past ages lamps or candles were kept in them. To Ajney this lamp-stand with a lamp inside, spreading dim light in silence, seems to become a source of compassion with radiance:

*Dip patthar ka
Lajili kiran ki
Padachap nirav
Ari O karuna prabhamay,
Kab? kab*

'Dip Patthar Ka' (written on
9th September in Kyoto)

The poem 'Ek Chitra' written on the same day in Nara and Kyoto depicts the nature under cloudy sky. The voice of a bird awakes the benedictory splendour of compassion in the poet's heart, to which he bows with delight.

What is worth noticing here is that when Ajney visits Buddhist temples in Japan the first thing that flashes ahead of all in his Indian mind is the great infinite compassion (Karuna) of Lord Buddha. Ajney knows very well that Buddhism of China and Japan is not the same as that of India. There it got intermingled with many indigenous influences. In Japan it became the warrior's 'dharma' and leaving aside the path of ahimsa it took the arms. Zen-Buddhism has prospered with 'samurai' culture. Yet in spite of knowing all this the eternal 'karuna' associated with Gautam Buddha again and again surges up in his mind and heart. There is another poem, 'Samrajni Ka Naivedya Dan', written in Tokyo on 25th September, 1957 based upon a past event of Japan i.e. while visiting the temple of ancient Japanese Kingdom of Nara, Japanese Empress Komiyo got in a dilemma as to what she should take as an offer to the deity and ultimately she decided to go without any offerings.

In this poem the state of mind of Empress has been depicted on the basis of 'karuna' and 'ahimsa'. The heart of the empress is overwhelmed by the infinite 'karuna', which expands itself to the vast world of nature. It restricts

her from plucking the flowers or buds because she feels that they are happy on the branches of the plants or trees:

*Jo mujhe sunati
Jivan ke vihval sukh-kshan ka git
Kholati roop-jagat ke dwar jahan
Teri karuna bunati rahati hai
Bhav ke sapane, kshan ke anandon ke
ahoratra aviram
Us bholi mugdha ko
Kanmpati
Dali se vilaga na saki*

The flowers collected by others are not considered by the empress an appropriate offering and she herself does not want to pluck the flowers because doing so would spoil the rhythm and harmony of nature. The flowers are beautiful on their respective branches. So the empress offers all the flowers and buds on earth to Lord Buddha from wherever they are blooming – all offered ‘unimpaired’, ‘unsmelt’, ‘untouched’, ‘unpolluted’:

*Jo kali khilegi, jahan khili
Jo phool jahan hai,
Jo bhi sukh
Jis bhi dali per hua pallavit, pulakit
Mein use vahin per
Akshat, anaghrat, asprisht, anavil
He mahabuddha!
Arpit karati hun tujhe*

Here the Asian view that regards that there is life in nature presents the nature in its ‘moments of happiness’ to the deity. Here, we can see the twofold attitude towards nature. Firstly, the traditional view that all natural and cosmic

phenomenon are offerings to the Supreme Being and secondly, that preserving nature is also a service to the almighty.

Among his poems written in Japan there are some short Haiku like poems also. Two of them are worth mentioning here. ‘Poono Ki Sanjh’ is a beautiful poem describing natural phenomenon of evening twilight and rising of moon through amorous imagery:

*Pati sevarat sanjh
Uchakata dekh paraya chand
Laja kar ot ho gai*

‘Son Machhali’, the most representative of Nayi Kavita (leading movement in Hindi poetry of the sixth decade of the past century) poems, is quite an abstract poem from semantic point of view. This has been one of the oft-discussed and much explicated poems of Ajney:

*Hum niharate roop,
Kanch ke pichhe
Hanf rahi hai machhali
Roop trisha bhi (aur kanch ke pichhe)
Hai jivivisha!*

—‘Son Machhali’ (written on 10.9.1957)

The imagery and symbols seem to be familiar but the meaning is quite obscure. The poem is quite complex and vague from the point of view of meaning. Interestingly it has been the object of academic debate of Hindi critics of two generations. While Dr. Nagendra has tried to interpret and explain it within the framework of traditional theory of Rasa (‘Rasa Sidhanta’, p.356-357), Dr. Namvar

Singh says that it is an example of how a little poem of 'Nayi Kavita' movement has proved to be a pin to puncture the balloon of the age old theory of Rasa. (Kavita Ke Naye Pratiman, p.23-24). In his book 'Nayi Kavita aur Astitwavad', Dr. Ram Vilas Sharma also tries to prove Ajneya a formalist on the basis of this poem. But both – Dr. Namvar Singh and Dr. Ram Vilas Sharma– have escaped the effort of interpreting it. Ajneya himself has tried to explain the symbol in his note entitled 'Pratika aur Satyanveshana' in 'Atmanepada':

Jivan swapnon aur akaron ka ek rangin aur vismay bhara punj.
Ham chahen to us roop mein he ulajhe rah sakate hain, kintu roop ka yah akarshan bhi vastav mein jivan ke prati hamare akarshan ka hi pratibimb hai. Jivan ko sidhe na dekh kar ham kanch main se dekhate hain, to ham un roopon main he atak jate hain jinake dwara jivan abhivyakti pata hai. Kanch ki tanki main pali hui son machhali par kavita main yahi kaha gaya hai.

—'Atmanepada', p.45

Virtually the traditional mind and modern experimental mind have been so much mingled with each other in this poem that finding an accurate meaning becomes a challenge. The reader tries to find some meaning with the help of some symbolic words used here:

'Fish' is a traditionally used symbol and 'Roop' or 'Form' has a traditional

connotation of 'Nana Roopatmaka Jagat' i.e. this world full of many forms and shapes. The fish symbolises the nature which is independent and has its own system. But this independent fish is closed in glass tank meaning that the free nature is bound in the complexities of modern civilization and development. Looking at the fish through the glass one sees the beauty of the form in which it has been kept as well as the beautiful form of the fish. At the same time the fish is breathing heavily, as it is imprisoned. Its freedom is lost but it is struggling to survive with a desire for freedom.

II

Next I shall talk about the translation of Haiku by Ajneya. These Haiku poems are compiled in 'Ari O Karuna Prabhamay' under the title 'Ek Chid Ka Khaka'. Total 27 Haikus have been kept under two categories – those in which the name of the original author has been mentioned and those which do not mention the author's name but the translator has accepted that they are based upon some Japanese Haiku poems. These are the poems No. 53, 55, 64 and 75. The author has clarified in the preface that where he feels that the translation has deviated from the original Haiku because of translator's unfamiliarity with the Japanese language he has accepted his limitations. That is why he has not called them translations. This modesty of the poet translator is worth appreciating.

His translations are unique examples of his poetic genius– because he has

recreated them in the environment and idiom of Hindi language appealing to the sensibility of Indian reader. At the same time they are so close to the original poems that I would like to quote renowned Professor of Hindi in Japan— Prof. Toshiya Tanaka. In his article published in ‘Dharmayug’ under the title ‘Haiku aur Ajney’ Prof. Tanaka writes:

‘Ajneya main kavitra itana tha ki Japani sahitya ke manas jagat main pravesch hone mein samarth hua.....Ajneya ne haiku ke manas main apana hriday patal dekha hoga. Isiliye Ajneya ko haiku ke anuvad karya main jitani saphalata mili, utani kisi Japani bhashavid, videshi lekhak ko nahin mili thi, udaharanarth:

*Shira uo ya
Sanagara, ugo
Mizu no tamashoi*

—(Raizan, 1653-1716)

*Uchhali machhali
Mano pani ka antrang hi
Kanp gaya ho*

—Ajneya

*The White bet
As though the spirit of the water
Were moving*

—Blith

Yah vasant ki kavita hai. Hawa tez nahin, dhoop kadi nahin, vatavaran shant. Shayad gaon ka drishya hoga. Chhoti nadi bahati hai. Vahan kavi ne kshan bhar dekha hai. Isaka anuvad Blith ne yatha shabd kiya.....Anjeyna ke

anuvad ko padhane se pata chalata hai ki ‘ujala’, ‘kanpana’ shabd ka prajog unaka apna hai. Yahi Ajneya ki vishistata hai.

—Haiku aur Ajneya (‘Dharmayug’,
16 October 1966, p.17)

In fact Ajneya has translated Haiku form of poetry with such a lucid and suggestive elegance that it gives the pleasure of reading an original poem. For example I quote the famous Haiku of Basho in Ajney’s translation:

*Tal purana
Kooda dadur
Guddup*

With a suggestivity of various meanings the poem sounds as if written originally in Hindi. One can explain it in a number of ways – in the old pond of thoughts there occurred a flash of a new idea; or in the old track of convention a clinking sound of the innovation and so on. Similarly one can see the translation of another Haiku of Basho:

*Maun purana nagar: sanjh
Ghanta dhvani ki laharon par tirati
Suman gandh.*

or the following Haiku of Buson:

*Varsha ke basant main maine dekha:
Chhata ek, ek barasati
Sath-sath jate, batiyate*

These translations have contributed to Ajneya’s poetic talent. He has been able to develop a unique precision, subtlety of meaning and elegance of expression in the imagery of trivial objects

or events. This unprecedented poetic grace, the gravity of words and sobriety of expression was a result of his deep study of Japanese literature and Zen. By thorough study he could understand how the pre-world war life of Japan was so much influenced by Zen. The Zen way of thought and its practices deeply influenced Ajneya. He has himself acknowledged it in 'Atmanepad'. Here I translate an excerpt from 'Atmanepad':

One of the Zen practices of devotion is 'Koan' or riddle, which aims at liberating the practitioner of all sorts of biases and prejudices. Though a Guru is needed to liberate from the prejudices, yet the Guru himself is a prejudice and the practitioner has to liberate himself from the expectation of getting something from the Guru.....In due course one day the practitioner gets 'Satori'— the light of knowledge in his heart. In the sharp radiant light of awakening he finds the answer to the riddle— an unprecedented, unique, the only answer which is so unattached that not to talk of Guru or tradition, it hardly has any relation to the riddle itself.....I do not claim to have achieved any 'Satori' or so. The only thing I want to say is the advantage I got of study of the history of Zen and the history of the influence of Zen practices on Japanese poetry was that many

biases about poetry have kept on trickling away from my mind; and my vision, hindered in the haze of those biases, has kept on being cleared unknowingly.'

(‘Atmanepad’, p.48)

This process of being relieved of biases can be very well understood by an example of Ajneya's poem 'Chidiya Ki Kahani' compiled in 'Ari O Karuna Prabhamay'. The poem reads as follows:

*Ur gai chiriya
Kanpi, phir
Thir
Ho gai patti.*

In 'Atmanepad' Ajneya has described the event that inspired him to write these lines in 1951. But after writing them he could not be sure whether these lines make a total poem or not. He was not even sure whether the idea or feeling that aroused in his mind after that event (The bird's sitting on the plant) has been fully expressed in these words or not. A number of times he tried to revise or improve it but no change satisfied him. And for a long time this poem remained like a thing kept aside. Further he writes that when he went to Japan and read collections of Haiku poems he once again pondered over about this poem.

These notes of Ajney suggest the upheaval in his mind. They also suggest that for a long time he was trying to communicate with Japanese poetic writings but was not very convinced

about then. The idea of independent small poems was in his mind but without a base of its poetic tradition he kept on feeling that the immediate response to any event is an expression of 'intellectual reaction and not the mature expression of the emotion.' (Atmanepad, p.46). Until he was exposed to Japanese poems of Basho and other Haiku masters and Zen Buddhism he could not realize that the expressing in words the immediate impression of some thing or event could also create poetry. One who does not understand the aesthetics of Haiku would call such an immediate expression as hastiness. Only the person who knows Haiku understands that it is the expression of the situation of establishment of oneness for a moment between the looker and the thing looked upon. And this note of oneness gives a flash of idea, the expression of which is Haiku. After being exposed to Japanese poetry Ajney realised that the words written by him after seeing the bird on the leaf are a poem complete in itself and then he included it with other poems of 'Ari O Karuna Prabhamay' in 1959.

III

Lastly, I would like to refer to the poems, the sources of inspiration of which lie in Japan. I shall take up two poems—'Hiroshima' (1959) and 'Asadhya Vina' (1961).

'Hiroshima' was written two years after his visit to the place. Most of us who have visited Hiroshima realise after going there that listening or reading about

Hiroshima and visiting Hiroshima Peace Memorial are two different experiences. Seeing the reminiscences of the tragedy kept alive in their actual shape compels us to think and rethink about the development we have made and the power the mankind has gained. In a very calm, balanced and suggestive voice Ajney's poem 'Hiroshima' revives the memory of the scene of Hiroshima Atomic Bomb explosion and disaster after it. I quote the last stanza of it:

*Manav ka racha hua suraj
Manav ko bhap bana ker sokh gaya
Patthar par likhi hui yah
Jali hui chhaya
Manav ki sakshi hai*

In June 1961 in Almora, Ajneya wrote 'Asadhya Vina', one of the classic poems of modern Hindi literature. It is a long poem, narrating the event of the playing of Vina by the artiste—Priyamvada. For 'Asadhya Vina' Ajneya is indebted to Japan. The narrative has been drawn from a Chinese story which Ajneya must have come across during his study of Japanese literature. Okakura Kakuzo, in his 'The Book of Tea', has referred to a Taoist tale of the Taming of the Harp. I would like to quote it here:

Once in the hoary ages in the Ravine of Lungmen* stood a Kiri tree, a veritable king of the forest. It reared its head to talk to the stars; its roots struck deep into the earth, mingling their bronzed coils with those of the silver dragon that slept beneath. And

it came to pass that a mighty wizard made of this tree a wondrous harp, whose stubborn spirit should be tamed but by the greatest of musicians. For long the instrument was treasured by the Emperor of China, but all in vain were the efforts of those who in turn tried to draw melody from its strings. In response to their utmost strivings there came from the harp but harsh notes of disdain, ill-according with the songs they fain would sing. The harp refused to recognize a master.

At last came Peiwoh, the prince of harpists. With tender hand he caressed the harp as one might seek to soothe an unruly horse, and softly touched the chords. He sang of nature and the seasons of high mountains and flowing waters, and all the memories of the tree awoke! Once more the sweet breath of spring played amidst its branches. The young cataracts, as they danced down the ravine, laughed to the budding flowers. Anon were heard the dreamy voices of summer with its myriad insects, the gentle pattering of rain, the wail of the cuckoo. Hark! a tiger roars, - the valley answers again. It is autumn; in the desert night, sharp like a sword gleams the moon upon the frosted grass. Now winter reigns, and through the snow filled

air swirl flocks of swans and rattling hailstones beat upon the boughs with fierce delight.

Then Peiwoh changed the key and sang of love. The forest swayed like an ardent swain deep lost in thought. On high, like a haughty maiden, swept a cloud bright and fair; but passing, trailed long shadows on the ground, black like despair. Again the mode was changed; Peiwoh sang of war of clashing steel and trampling steeds. And in the harp arose the tempest of Lungmen, the dragon rode the lightning, the thundering avalanche crashed through the hills. In ecstasy the Celestial monarch asked Peiwoh wherein lay the secret of his victory. "Sire." He replied, "others have failed because they sang but of themselves. I left the harp to choose its theme, and knew not truly whether the harp had been Peiwoh or Peiwoh were the harp."

(The Book of Tea, p.192-194)

Being in English Okakura's 'The Book of Tea' is quite popular and Ajneya seems to have been so much impressed by it that on the basis of it he has created his own poem. But in spite of borrowing from this story and maintaining its epic grandeur Ajneya's talent lies in recreating it in Indian setting. It has been so much Indianised in atmosphere, mythology, sociology, folklore, classic tastes, etiquettes, nature, tradition, convention

of both masses and elite that it does not sound to have been borrowed from any foreign country. Rather in the process of naturalising the theme his original talent has created an epic grandeur and dramatic swiftness of activity:

*Han mujhe smaran hai:
Badali-kaundh-pattiyon par bundon
ki pat pat
Ghani rat main mahue ka chupachap
tapakana
Chaunke khag-shavak ki chinhuk
Shilaon ko dularate van-jharane ke
Drut laharile jal ka kal ninad.*

The Poem starts with arrival of Priyamavad in the Court of the King. The royal welcome, relating of the great history of Vina by Raja, Priyamvad's relinquishing of his ego and dedicating himself silently to the Vina, his concentration and thoughts of the greatness of Kirit tree dramatically create an atmosphere of grandeur. In the state of intense meditation i.e. 'Samadhi' he slowly starts playing the Vina which so far could not be played by anybody. The transcendental melody of its note would be heard by everybody according to one's temperament and state of mind.

What is worth noticing in both—Okakura's illustration of art appreciation through this tale and Ajney's writing the poem based on this tale— is that both of them have explained the process of creation of art and appreciation of the art by the reader or spectator or audience. The relinquishing of the self-pride and totally devoting to the work

of art makes one an artist or creator. And in order to appreciate the art or enjoy any piece of art or literature one has to reach the same state of mind – relinquishing of self and devoting to the work of art or literature. The Indian theory of 'sadharnikaran' and 'tadatmya' have been presented in their actual process both in the tale told by Okakura and in 'Asadhya Vina'. The line:

*Doob gaye sab ek sath
Sab alag-alag ekaki par tire*

tells the about the 'samajika', 'sahridaya' or 'pramata' (the ideal reader or spectator) who gets involved into the work of art and interprets it according to his own mind and heart.

This interpretation of the process of art appreciation by Okakura again raises a question in Indian mind whether the age old theory of 'Rasa' and 'Sadharnikarn' have not travelled to the far east with Buddhism and so many other things from India. There is a likelihood of it and it gives ample reason and scope for research. At the moment one can only say that there has been an ancient Asian approach towards appreciation of art and literature which is based on the theory that devoting one's own self to the piece of literature or work of art is essential to get the taste of its beauty.

References

1. Ajneya S.H. Vatsyayan, 1959. *Ari O Karuna Prabhamay*, Bhartiya Jnanpeeth, Kashi.
2. Ajneya S.H. Vatsyayan, 1960. *Atmanepad*, National Publishing House, New Delhi.
3. Dr. Nagendra, 1966. *Rasa Sidhanta*, National Publishing House, New Delhi.
4. Singh Dr. Namvar, 1968. *Kavita Ke Naye Pratiman*, Raj Kamal Prakashan, New Delhi.
5. Sharma Dr. Ram Vilas, 1978. *Nayi Kavita aur Astitwavad*, Raj Kamal Prakashan, New Delhi.
6. Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea*, Fox Duffield & Company, New York.

(Footnotes)

"The Dragon Gorge of Honan

Rita Rani Paliwal, born 1949, is professor of Hindi in Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi. She has done extensive study of drama and theatre along with academic work on Greek and Roman poetics. She has also translated Premchand's novel 'Karmbhumi' into English. She lives in New Delhi.

THE ANTI-COLONIAL DISCOURSE OF RAMVILAS SHARMA

Prannay Krishna

In post-independence Hindi literary thought and criticism broadly three models conceptualizing the 'colonial' were developed. First and the most prevalent one is the one which rests on the political-historical axis and lays emphasis on socio-economic categories. This model prescribes that modern Hindi literature should be read as a literature of anti-colonial national awakening driven by socialist impulses. It accepts humanism, rationality, scientificity, evolutionism, historicism, secularism, socio-economic equality and freedom as universal values and not as western constructs. Dr. Ramvilas Sharma who laid emphasis on "anti-imperialism" and "anti-feudalism" as the twin criteria of evaluating modern Hindi texts, is the foremost representative of this model. Anti-colonial nationalism translates into the concept of "*Hindi Navjagaran*" in this model.

The second model proposes reading of modern Hindi literature in terms of clash and synthesis of East and West within an overall paradigm of "Indian renaissance" (*bhartiya punarjagaran*). This model develops at the cultural axis and does not emphasize the political-historical categories of analysis. Dr. Ramswaroop Chaturvedi is the main exponent of this model.

The third model of conceptualizing the "colonial" takes shape in cultural essays and critical writings of Nirmal Verma and Ajneya. Nirmal Verma in particular, interrogates the "enlightenment project" of the West and also problematises its philosophical foundations in the light of the "authentic" Indian experience. This model has no attraction for categories such as "New Awakening" (*Navajagaran*) or "Renaissance" (*Punarjagaran*). Here colonial encounter is a source

of a permanent cleavage in the civilizational consciousness, the integrity of which can only be retrieved by a radical negation of coloniality.

The three models outlined above are not mutually exclusive. There are common grounds as well as contradictions. There are alternative frames as well, apart from these three models in which the “colonial” has been captured by scholars in the West working on Hindi literature. The role of Hindi literature in articulating the ‘idea of India’ and the nation in making whether as imagined community or otherwise has been amply captured by the rich discourse on coloniality in modern Hindi criticism, the examination of which may not only offer fresh perspectives on Hindi literature, but also on the challenges, problems and prospects of the country in an increasingly globalizing world of the 21st century.

Ramvilas Sharma has been the first Hindi critic who proposed overtly political-historical methods, approaches and criteria for evaluating literature. Ramchandra Shukla had underlined the importance of political, historical, economic and social contexts only as the background but he tried to develop the critical criteria from within literature. However, for Sharma, modern Hindi literature was not merely the reflection of the new national awakening (*Navajagaran*): rather it was a significant constitutive element of national consciousness itself. The political-

historical field of anti-colonialism was both, within and without, literature. He did not consider literature and politics as mutually exclusive. The two were just different forms of anti-colonial resistance and nation building.

The entire writings of Ramvilas Sharma are anti-colonial, a grand offensive to confront and transcend the colonial past. His prolific writings on language, literature and history are oriented towards a long drawn battle with colonial ideas and materiality in search of an authentic, liberating and sovereign “Indianness”. In this long battle, he opts for Marxism as his guiding principle. This grand-offensive by Ramvilas Sharma has generated a lot of debate in Hindi literary world.

As a literary critic, Ramvilas Sharma’s stance is that of an anti-colonial intellectual in an era of decolonization who seeks to undo the seemingly insurmountable colonial cleavage created in history, society and culture of his country. Given a project of this magnitude, it is hardly surprising that it would entail certain prejudices, contradictions and controversial epistemological methods and devices, which Sharma was never free of. More important however, is the necessity and direction of this project which bears the responsibility of identifying and problematising the complexities of history, culture and society of one’s own country with a view to solve them, learning from the greatest of

revolutionary intellectuals of the world, yet always bearing in mind the final responsibility of one's own.

Ramvilas Sharma stands out as a unique literary thinker in Hindi who developed anti-colonialism as a non-negotiable criterion of Hindi literary history writing and criticism. In his literary concept of '*Hindi Navajagaran*' (The new awakening of the Hindi people/nationality), India's first war of Independence (1857) occupies the centre stage so firmly that the rich debates of colonial history, politics and sociology became the necessary contexts of the entire Hindi criticism. Whether such contextualization was good or bad for literary criticism, whether it impinged upon the relative autonomy of literature and deflected the vital questions of creative process and poetic diction, whether it had an adverse impact upon distinguishing different tendencies in literature and representation of creative uniqueness of different texts and authors is altogether a different question. However such questions were hotly debated in the context of Ramvilas Sharma's critical practices.

The concepts of '*Hindi Navajagaran*' and '*Hindi jati*' (Hindi nationality) as propounded by Sharma are located in the field of anti-colonial discourse and for Sharma, in the context of India, the key to this discourse is 1857. It was in Marx's writings on India, that the events of 1857 were recognized for the first time as an expression of Indian

nationhood and not merely as a sepoy mutiny. Despite being journalistic, these writings of Marx were richly complex and controversial and have generated a lot of debate among Marxists as well as post-colonial thinkers such as Said. Even after 150 years, the debates on these writings continue unabated. A number of Hindi journals and magazines which published special volumes on 150th anniversary of 1857 bear testimony to this fact.

Ramvilas Sharma wrote a full length book on 1857¹ on the occasion of its centenary and quoted extensively from those portions of Marx's writings which ruthlessly criticized the British and sympathized with the Indian cause. However, he refused to accept any progressive role of the British in India. In fact, all his subsequent writings on language, culture and history deny this role of the British conquest of India. He probes deeply into the history and culture of pre-colonial India and painstakingly outlines those elements which could have transformed India into a modern nation without colonial intervention. All through, he self-consciously employs the methodology of dialectical materialism. For professional historians, this scholarly gesture of Sharma might be seen as 'counter-factual' and speculative, while rigorous Marxist scholars may take his stance as more of a nationalist or indigenist one rather than a strictly Marxist one. However, it is important

to note that Ramvilas Sharma, in his book on 1857, either puts forth or assumes many facts about pre-colonial India which diverged from Marx's account and were affirmed in Marxist history writing in India much later. To quote Aijaz Ahmad, "Modern research shows that each of the props of Marx's general view of India—self-sufficient village community, hydraulic state, unchanging nature of agrarian economy, and absence of property in land—was at least partially fanciful. Research in all these areas is still far from adequate, but the available evidence suggests that the village economy was often much more integrated in larger networks of exchange and appropriation than was hitherto realized; that the small dam, the shallow seasonal well and the local pond built with individual, family or cooperative labour were at least as important in irrigation as the centrally planned waterworks; that property in land and stratification among the peasantry was far more common than was previously assumed and that agrarian technology was, over the centuries, not nearly as stagnant. The fact that Marx did not have this more modern research at his disposal explains the origin of his errors, but the fact that he accepted the available evidence as conclusive enough to base certain categorical assertions on it was undoubtedly an error of judgment as well."² (Ahmad: 241)

Although Sharma, in his book on 1857, is prescient enough to foretaste

the findings of later researches however, ignores the crisis of 18th century India which had emerged due to stagnation of production and technology and was expressed in endless calamitous regional and dynastic wars due to which no effective front could be forged against the rapidly advancing colonial powers. Yet he cannot be faulted for concluding that colonialism was never even a mixed blessing. Aijaz Ahmad rightly observes, "Now, it is obviously true that colonialism did not bring us a revolution. What it brought us was, precisely, a non-revolutionary and retrograde resolution to a crisis of our own society..."³ (Ahmad: 224).

Marx wrote in his dispatch dated 22 July 1853, "All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social conditions of the masses of people. The Indian will not reap the fruits of the new elements of the society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether".⁴ (It is noteworthy that in a letter written to Danielson in 1881, Marx describes colonialism as a 'bleeding process with a vengeance'⁵ and the context of the letter is again India. It is therefore hardly tenable that he still had any progressive hopes from colonialism) While brushing aside the

notion of 'the new elements of the society scattered among Indians by the British bourgeoisie' whom Marx too couldn't pin his hopes upon for ameliorating the plight of the Indian masses, Sharma indeed drifts towards an indigenist logic. Nevertheless, his rejection of notions such as 'colonialism's double mission in India: one destructive and the other regenerating'; 'colonialism causing a social revolution in India, thereby becoming 'unconscious tool of history' despite driven by the vilest interests, etc. is not based upon any fanciful belief, whether nationalist or indigenist. Sharma's categorical rejection of such notions have been one of the reasons why he was dubbed as being 'undialectical', 'unMarxist' or even 'fundamentalist' by some of the Hindi Marxist critics of different generations.

Questioning Sharma's analysis of 1857 and British rule Dr. Virbharat Talwar wrote, "Dr. Sharma is famous as a Marxist critic, but he doesn't seem to agree with Marx's opinion that despite being driven by vilest interests, the British rule in India became a vehicle of social revolution in India. Dr. Sharma agrees that the British were driven by vilest interests but disagrees with the proposition that the British rule became a vehicle of social revolution in India. He cannot accept a dialectical process unless he flattens it. In his conceptualization of elements opposed to each other, he visualizes on one hand the vilest interests of the British and

on the other, the resistance of the Indian people. He doesn't see any dialectics in the role of the British rule itself. He imagines British rule as a barbaric invasion, fighting against which Indians achieved modernity. If British rule was merely a flat barbaric invasion; and there were no contradictory movements (the regenerative role of the British rule) within it, then how was modernity produced in the course of resistance to it? Dr. Sharma does not care for such questions."⁶ If according to Marx's analysis, the social revolution brought about by British colonialism and its role as 'unconscious tool of history' consisted in demolishing 'village communities', then obviously it could easily be countered by Sharma who knew all too well that the pre-British India was not merely a conglomeration of 'self-sufficient village communities', a fact he considered in great detail in the chapter titled '*Gram samaj aur samanti arajakata*' (Village communities and feudal anarchy) in his book on 1857. 'How could a thing be demolished which did not exist?' questions Sharma. It is the validity of this question which justifies Sharma's negation of the notions such as British rule as 'unconscious tool of history' or 'vehicle of social revolution'.

When Sharma was posing such questions, Marxist history writing in India (with the exception of D.D. Kosambi) was still in its infancy. The later Marxist writings in India did not prove Sharma absolutely wrong on that count. A Marxist

critic like Aijaz Ahmad, who has evaluated Marx's writing on India most insightfully and has summed up major currents of thought on the subject would not agree with Sharma on what could be called his indigenist slant in dismissing 'the new elements of society scattered by the British' whole hog. Nevertheless, Ahmad himself observes, "...Now, after the experience of history that Britain in fact made, who could possibly want an 'unconscious tool' of that sort?"⁷ (Ahmad: 225).

If the progressive role of the British rule is envisaged in the context of smashing feudalism in India, Sharma has an argument to make, "...What would be the objective consequence of an Indian victory in 1857? Many historians would unhesitatingly answer- 'Feudalism in India would have been restored.' However, in a place where 'village communities' existed (as Marx said), feudalism would not exist, what to talk of its restoration?"⁸ Sharma didn't stop there. He pointed out that by 1857, bourgeois democracy had not been established in Britain itself. Despite Industrial revolution, state-power had not gone into the hands of industrialists; rather it went into the hands of landowning classes who were in the phase of transition towards becoming bourgeoisie. Sharma dismisses the democratic role of the British rule on this basis. After all, how could one pin one's hope on the same Britain for demolishing feudalism in India, which

herself had feudal dominance back home on its state-power.

The full import of the colonial question is still a debatable issue amongst Hindi scholars and historians as well. In 1981, the historian, Harbans Mukhia raised the question whether there was feudalism in Indian history? The complexity of the question lies in the fact that scholars, including Sharma, who do not find the thesis of 'Asiatic mode of production' valid in the context of 18th & 19th century India, also differ on the existence or characteristics of 'Indian feudalism' among themselves. The debate is too elaborate to be discussed here in full. Suffice it to point out that Mukhia questioned the relevance of a category like 'feudalism' (the basic characteristic of which as a mode of production is non-economic coercion) in the context of India, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Instead, Mukhia preferred to characterize Indian economy of those times as that of 'Independent peasant production'. Mukhia raised an even more fundamental question that if capitalism is the only global mode of production in a true sense according to Marxism, then how could the systematic and universal stages and characteristics of pre-capitalist modes of production be thought of? In fact, the earlier texts of Marx such as 'The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' and 'Pre-capitalist Economic formations' do contain 'brilliant but flawed' speculations about a systematic, universal history

of all modes of production. His journalistic pieces on India were written in precisely this period. 'By the time he came to write 'Capital', the aspiration to formulate the premises of universal history remained, as it should have remained, but the realization grew that the only mode of production he could adequately theorize was that of capitalism...'⁹

Ramvilas Sharma does not raise such fundamental objections to the universal categories defining economy and society in Indian context, as compared to historians like Mukhia, yet he is not convinced about the understanding of Indian society as 'feudal' in the same sense as 'European feudalism'. In fact, many anti-colonial scholars and intellectuals have expressed discomfort over the definition of the development of pre-capitalist societies in classical Marxist categories. The communist manifesto of 1847 proclaimed 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. In the 1888 English edition of the manifesto Engels added a note explaining that what was meant was that 'all written history' of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Ignoring that important note would legitimately lead one to conclude from that proclamation that all those 'primitive societies' where no noticeable class formation was witnessed had no history at all. One does not know whether Amilcar Cabral, the legendary leader of the revolutionary independence struggle of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde

kept in mind the note appended by Engels or not, when he said at the Tri-continental conference in Havana (1966) that "...It would also be to consider...and this we refuse to accept...that various human groups in Africa, Asia and Latin America were living without history or outside history at the moment when they were subjected to the yoke of imperialism...."¹⁰ When Marx was writing on India in the middle of 19th century, the general state of knowledge about India prevalent in England was scanty, mostly misleading and prejudicial. As remarked by Aijaz Ahmad, "... the web of prejudice that enveloped that knowledge (but the prejudice was not the only and not even an isolable fact), the relative novelty of the subject matter for Marx himself, and the stage in his own development at which these pieces begin: the drafting even of Grundrisse, let alone Capital, was still some years away."¹¹ (Ahmad: 232)

It is also important to remember that at that point in time Marx had examples of capitalism in Europe and USA demolishing feudalism and other backward modes of production due to which he hoped for a progressive role of the colonial expansion of capitalism. Now after 150 years, we can assess the so called 'progressive role of capitalism and its colonial form' more objectively. There have been enormously enriching debates and studies within Marxism on the issue that may enlighten us now more objectively on the merits of the

rejection of the progressive role of colonial rule by anti-colonial scholars and revolutionaries such as Sharma, Cabral and Frantz Fanon among others.

Ramvilas Sharma also shares with many anti-colonial, non-white intellectuals, the discomfort with Hegel's philosophy of history which to them appears to be 'Euro-centric, racist and prejudicial towards the non-European societies'. The impact of Hegel's image of non-European, backward societies on Marx's early writings have been discomfiting even to the anti-colonial Marxist scholars. As Ahmad writes, "...that the image of so-called self-sufficient Indian village community that we find in Marx was lifted, almost verbatim, out of Hegel."¹² (Ahmad: 224) Hindi scholar V.B. Talwar has accused Sharma of neglecting the essence of Hegel's philosophy of history and emphasizing its trivial aspects, of devaluing the revolutionary dimension of Hegel's philosophy embraced by Marxism, of focusing on its orthodox aspects, thus vulgarizing the dialectical relation of Hegel's philosophy with Marxism.¹³ However unimportant and trivial it may look to scholars like Talwar; from an anti-colonial perspective, that dimension of Hegel's philosophy of history can hardly be over-emphasized. It was not Sharma alone who underlined the 'Euro-centric' prejudices of Hegel. Highlighting such prejudices on the part of Hegel does not make one less of a Marxist. It is no gainsaying that like

Sharma, Cabral, Fanon, C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, M.N. Roy, Aime Cesaire or any number of anti-colonial thinkers could demarcate between Hegel and Marx in no uncertain terms.

It seems that Sharma's scholarly gesture of decontaminating Marx's writings on India by purging influences of Hegelian ideas about backward societies is an attempt to underline the relevance of universal, revolutionary humanist essence of Marxism for the liberation of colonised people. It is a gesture of defending and fortifying Marxism, rather than vulgarising it. The post-colonial theoretical observation that the eurocentricity of Hegelian scheme of history hinges upon the 'othering' of non-European people, that the moment of colonial domination is also the moment of universalisation of 'enlightenment project' with humanism, progress, development, equity, freedom, rationality and human rights as core values of the 'civilizing mission' and that the same core values were throttled in the colonies by the colonialists is quite true. It was not without reason that Engels calls the colonisers 'civilization-mongers'¹⁴ in the same year of 1857. However, the theorization that all these values were merely European constructs presented as 'universals' vis-a-vis the 'non Europe' may not be acceptable to many 'anti-colonialists' such as Sharma. In fact, it is this theorization which picks up 'dialectics' and 'historicism' from Hegel as the main point of attack leading these

theorists to debunk Marx too. Edward Said sets one such notable example. There is a definite contradiction between the anti-colonial Marxist scholars and post colonial scholarship informed with post-structuralism. This contradiction can also be seen in the assessment of 'master-slave dialectic' taken by Marx from Hegel's phenomenology which has been interpreted differently as a metaphor of liberation as well as a metaphor of slavery in contradictory directions.

Sharma's conceptualization of the colonial represents the affinity and cleavage between the two discourses of 'Marxism' and 'Anti-colonialism' simultaneously, although keeping in view that both till date are unfinished projects. Ramvilas Sharma consistently worked upon developing an anti-colonial hermeneutics of Indian society, culture and history. Excesses were also committed in this mega-effort. However, more noticeable have been the excessive misreading of his concepts.

In order to counter the European representation of India, he went far back to Rig Vedas. He surmised that India was the original homeland of the Aryans (for which he was dubbed 'ultra-nationalist' by some scholars), yet he did not subscribe to the racial theory. He considered Aryans as 'linguistic community' much like historians such as Kosambi and Romila Thapar did. For him Vedas were the works of humans and interpreted them in secular, materialistic terms. His reading and

interpretation of Vedas demolishes the orientalist image of the Aryans as a superior, pure-blood race of horse-riding conquerers. He rediscovers Aryans as art-loving tribes who reveled in composing poetry, singing and dancing around bonfire. His reading has been criticized from many perspectives, yet he sticks to his own commitments summed up in his famous work '*Itihas Darshan*' (Philosophy of History) where he writes, "...The greatest impediment to the understanding of the linguistic and cultural history of India, West Asia and Europe is the unscientific theory of Aryan conquest of India. This theory is the contribution of Historical Linguistics which developed as a discipline during the 19th century imperialist expansion of European nationalities...The invading nations of Europe destroyed the developed cultures of North, Central and South Americas, committed genocide and ethnic cleansing, snatched away the land from the original inhabitants and settled themselves in their place. The natives who survived the genocide were pushed to the forests and mountains. They pasted the chart of their wrongdoings on the history of Ancient India."¹⁵ He wrote '*Bharat ke Pracheen Bhasha parivar aur Hindi*' (Ancient Linguistic families of India and Hindi) in three volumes published in 1970, 1980 and 1981 respectively. Negating the claims of historical linguistics, he proposed that there was no such original or mother language as

Indo-European. He negated the very concept of a mother language. Instead, he argued that linguistic elements drawn from different sources by different tribal communities get stabilized in a particular stage of social development. It is difficult to fix the original sources of the linguistic elements of Aryan and Dravidian group of languages. As Sudipta Kaviraj says, the fundamental function of self-image or identity of a nation/people is to give itself a history. Ramvilas Sharma strove to bear this responsibility all his life, both, through the medium of history writing as well as literature.

¹ Ramvilas Sharma: 'San sattavan ki rajya kranti aur Marxvaad', Lokbharati Prakashan, Allahabad, 1957

² Ahmad Aijaz: 'Marx on India: A Clarification', In Theory, OUP, Delhi, 1995(1992) pg. 241

³ Ahmad Aijaz: 'Marx on India: A Clarification', In Theory, OUP, Delhi, 1995(1992) pg. 224

⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: The first Indian War of Independence: 1857-1859, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1959, pg.33

⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: On Colonialism: Articles from the 'New York Tribune' and other Writings, International Publishers, New York, 1972, pg.339

⁶ V.B. Talwar: 'Hindi Navjagaran: Adhyayan ki samasyaen', Samna, Vani Prakashan, Delhi, 2005, pg.254

⁷ Ahmad Aijaz: 'Marx on India: A Clarification', In Theory, OUP, Delhi, 1995(1992) pg. 225

⁸ Ramvilas Sharma: 'San sattavan ki rajya kranti aur Marxvaad', Lokbharati Prakashan, Allahabad, 1957, pg.12

⁹ Ahmad Aijaz: 'Marx on India: A Clarification', In Theory, OUP, Delhi, 1995(1992) pg. 242

¹⁰ Cabral, Amilcar: Unity and Struggle, Heinemann, London, 1980, pg.124-25

¹¹ Ahmad Aijaz: 'Marx on India: A Clarification', In Theory, OUP, Delhi, 1995(1992) pg. 232

¹² Ahmad Aijaz: 'Marx on India: A Clarification', In Theory, OUP, Delhi, 1995(1992) pg. 224

¹³ V.B. Talwar: 'Ramvilas Sharma ki Vivechan Paddhati aur Marxvaad-II', samna, Vani Prakashan, Delhi, 2005

¹⁴ Engels, Fredrick: Persia and China, 1857, pg.123-24

¹⁵ Ramvilas Sharma: 'Rigvedic Arya aur unka parivesh', Itihas Darshan, Vani Prakashan, Delhi, 1995, pg.13

Dr. Prannay Krishna, born 1965, is an academician and literary critic. A student of JNU and Allahabad University, he is equally active in social and political fields. He edits 'samkaleen janmat' and works for human rights organisations. He has been awarded Devi Shankar Awasthi Samman for the year 2008 for his book 'Uttar aupniveshikta ke srote aur Hindi sahitya'. He lives in Allahabad and teaches in the University.

HINDI FILMS ON RUSSIAN SCREEN

P.A. Barannikov

Translated by
Dhiraj Singh

The popularity of Hindi films in Russia is perhaps as old as the relationship between the former USSR and India. The two countries since then have not only had many exchanges between their filmmakers and actors but also jointly produced many films.

First Contact

The first Soviet cultural delegation to arrive in India included members from its film fraternity. These were people like producer Pudovarkan and actor Nikolai Cherkasov. Both were to take back with them fond memories of India. Cherkasov, in fact, even wrote a book on India. After the Soviets it was the turn of the Indian delegation to come to Russia, this included actor Balraj Sahni. On this trip Cherkasov met Sahni and for hours he shared with Sahni his experience of India. This was the time when theatres in Russia were showing films like *Do Bigha Zameen* (Two Acres of Land).

This period was followed by the era of Raj Kapoor. We were introduced to him with *Awara* (I am a Tramp) whose famous number 'Awara hoon' was a big rage in Russia in those days. Later came the equally famous *Shree 420* (Mr 420) whose great song was on every Russian's lips:

'Mera joota hai Japani,

*Yeh patloon Inqlistani,
Sar pe lal topi Russi,
Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani.'*

Or

*'My shoes are from Japan,
My trousers, from England,
The cap on my head is Russian,
But my heart is Indian.'*

The film's star pair of Raj Kapoor and Nargis also became household names in the USSR. Their names and faces got immediate recognition in our part of the world.

Such was the popular appeal of these films that small towns across the Soviet Union regularly showed Hindi films in their cinema houses. Hindi films in fact became an important representation of India abroad, especially in the Soviet Union. These films introduced their foreign viewers to a world of Indian music, dance, fashion, culture and daily life. It was thanks to Hindi films that Russians became interested in things Indian, such as the Hindi language, Indian dance, the *salwar kameez*, *bindi* and *ghungroos*.

Russianisation of Hindi films

Hindi films were often dubbed in Russian for the Soviet audience. Interestingly, the songs remained as they were but the dialogues became Russian. Such was their popularity that in Leningrad's over 100 cinema houses there were at least

12 to 15 that regularly showed Hindi films. A large part of this was that Russians girls often liked to see these films not once or twice but up to a maximum of 100 times. When Raj Kapoor started making out-and-out commercial cinema the popularity of Hindi films skyrocketed. Dimple in the early '70s film *Bobby* and Mandakini in the '80s hit *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* were as big stars in Russia as they were in India. Before them Parveen Babi, Zeenat Aman, Hema Malini and Rekha too had enjoyed a similar popularity in the USSR.

Amitabh and Dharmendra

In the last 20 years Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra have also enjoyed a cult status here. In fact *Zanjeer* and *Sholay* are two classics of their time that still enjoy an appeal among Russians. Personally, I am a big fan of Rekha's whose *Suhaag*, *Umrao Jaan*, *Mister Natwarlal*, *Bhrashtachar* I have thoroughly enjoyed many times. My favourite however remains *Agar Tum Na Hote*, a film in which Rekha and Rajesh Khanna were both incredible. My favourite song not surprisingly is also '*Agar tum na hote...*' from the same film. There was a time though when film posters and music were not freely available in the market. So Russian girls found an ingenious way to counter that. They started taking tape recorders and cameras to the cinema houses. Not to mention that both methods proved to be inadequate in bringing home some

film memorabilia but the girls were nonetheless much pleased with the results. Today, film posters of Indian film stars are freely available and they come not just from India but from Pakistan and the Arab countries.

Fan Clubs

The popularity of Hindi films was not just limited to the viewing of films but started a trend of fan clubs in many cities across the USSR. These clubs became venues for screening the latest Hindi film videos. Russians have had a long affair with Rekha, Mithun Chakraborty and Mandakini. Mithun especially made a big place in the hearts of Russian girls with his *Disco Dancer*. Till today Russian girls put up his posters on their bedroom walls. And their Mithun photo-collections run in to hundreds, sometimes even thousands.

Newspaper publication

Thanks to such a huge interest in Hindi films I started a newspaper. It's called NIK or Novosti Indiascopo Kino which translates as the 'latest news from Indian cinema'. I have so far only brought out three issues of NIK. This is not due to a shortage of news but a shortage of funds. Russia is facing an epidemic of rising prices that has also affected the price of publishing a journal such as this. But despite this I plan to increase the scope and frequency of my publication. In the last three issues I gave a broad history of Hindi cinema

as well as listed short biographies of actors. These have included Juhi Chawla, Aamir Khan, Faisal Khan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Divya Bharti, Ayesha Julka, Shah Rukh Khan, Rekha, Pooja Bhatt, Nagma, Raj Babbar, Shilpa Shirodkar, Shilpa Shetty, Mithun Chakraborty, Karishma Kapoor, Govinda, Sridevi, Madhuri Dixit, Sunil Shetty, Sanjay Dutt, Sharmila Tagore, Saif Ali Khan, Tabbu, Meenakshi, Dharmendra, Sunny Deol, Harish and Sushmita Sen. I also give out a list of new releases and a little information about them. In the last issue I introduced readers to *Aao Pyar Karen* (Let's Fall in Love) and in the next one I plan to talk about *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (Who Am I to You?), a cult film that made Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit very popular in Russia. Although I can't really say how long it would take me to bring out the fourth issue as each issue costs me about Rs 10,000. If I am to make NIK a monthly I would need about Rs 12,00,000 which is almost unthinkable these days. NIK also has a section on the past greats of Hindi cinema which has already featured Devika Rani, Mohammad Rafi and Manmohan Desai. There is also a section on Hindi grammar as well as a Hindi-Russian glossary.

NIK's popularity

Area-wise Russia is still one of the world's largest nations. And NIK has the privilege of reaching more than 306 cities across Russia. This number is increasing by

the day. My only worry is that I am now almost 70. I wish I was younger by 20 years. But I can assure you that I would keep NIK alive at least for as long as I live.

In the days of the Soviet rule when Indo-USSR relations were at their peak, we were constantly kept abreast with the latest in the Hindi film scene. This hugely contributed towards a better understanding and friendship between

the two peoples. But today's Russia is fast being Americanised. Cinema houses today don't show any Hindi films leaving a lot of fans heart-broken. The good thing however is that the film clubs have now taken over the function of cinema houses keeping fans up to date with the latest releases with the help of their VCRs.

Courtesy: ICCR, Delhi.

Petr Alekseevich Barannikov, born 1925 has worked towards promotion of Russian and Hindi language and literature. He has translated Russian fairy tales into Hindi and has worked in India for All-Soviet Society. In Russia he worked in the Institute of Linguistics. He has been honoured with International Nehru Award, Grierson award and Sahitya Vachaspati Samman by Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. He is also interested in Hindi cinema.

Dhiraj Singh is a short-story writer and painter who lives in Delhi.

ELOQUENT PARROTS

Mixed language and the examples of hinglish and rekhti

Ruth Vanita

MOST URBAN INDIANS TODAY speak variants of a new dialect, sometimes termed 'Hinglish'. English spoken in non-formal settings tends to be spiked with many Hindi/ Urdu words, phrases and sentences, while almost all Hindi/Urdu speakers incorporate numerous English words in their speech, not just words like 'email', or 'TV' but also words like 'sorry', 'tension' and 'minute'. Many words that used to be well known in Hindi/Urdu are now almost incomprehensible to native speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents, for example, 'ball' now replaces '*gend*' both in daily speech and in cricket commentary on radio and television. Most TV dramas, comedies and even newscasts that are purportedly in Hindi are now actually in the new mixed language. When English words are used in Hindi, shades of meaning sometimes change, so that resulting formulations are comprehensible only to those familiar with Indian English. I was once searching for a friend's apartment and had forgotten the number. When I told the apartment building doorman her name he did not recognise it. I then described her as short and stocky with short hair, at which point he remarked, with dawning recognition, '*Ab to mujhey doubt honey laga hai*'. This literally translates as, 'I'm now beginning to have doubts', by which he meant that he suspected he knew her, and indeed he did direct me to the correct apartment.

Today, most Hindi television dramas and news reports are cast in this mixed language, which perhaps first emerged on a national scale in Bombay cinema, especially in songs. In the films of the 1950s and early 1960s, serious romantic songs tend

to be couched in the high language of Persianised Urdu or, less often, in the high language of Sanskritised Hindi, while comical songs may incorporate English words. In this early example, from Shehnai (1947), a man woos a woman in a mix of Hindi and English, offering to take her to Paris and London, and regale her with whisky, brandy, and eggs, all of which she rejects in chaste Hindi. He then continues, *'Aana meri jaan meri jaan Sunday ke Sunday... Aao haathon mein haath le walk karein hum/Aao sweet sweet talk karein hum'* (Come every Sunday, my dear, Come, let's walk hand in hand, Let's engage in sweet talk).

By the 1970s, serious songs could include English refrains, such as, *'My heart is beating, keeps on repeating, I'm waiting for you'* (Julie, 1975), and in the 1990s, songs commonly jumble English with a number of languages, especially Punjabi, Haryanvi, and Bihari Hindi.

The language of women?

One ancestor of the Hindi/Urdu film song is, I have argued elsewhere, rekhti poetry, on which I have now been working for some years. Rekhti is a genre of Urdu poetry, purportedly composed in 'women's language', which arose in the 18th century and came into prominence in the early 19th century. Early literary Urdu, called rekhta, has a preponderance of Persian and Arabic vocabulary, but the language of rekhti, which approximates more to the non-literary language of everyday speech,

incorporates words and idioms from north Indian languages and dialects.

In rekhti poetry, this supposedly 'women's language' is indistinguishable from colloquial, less Persianised Urdu. Urdu literary critics identify it as 'women's idiom', by which they mean proverbs and sayings used by women, as well as exclamatory forms of address, such as *'Re'*, *'Haan ri'*, and *'Hai Allah'*.

However, many rekhti poems do not contain either proverbs or exclamatory addresses. They are merely written in less Persianised Urdu than is mainstream rekhta poetry. Conversely, some rekhta poems, such as those of Jur'at, do contain these exclamations.

What then was 'women's language'? Was it a code spoken by women that men did not understand? Clearly not. Most rekhti was written by men and not just by a few men privy to a secret language of women but at the height of its popularity, by numerous poets. It was recited at mushairas (poets' gatherings), and understood by both women and men.¹ One analogy could be classical Sanskrit drama, where elite male characters speak Sanskrit while women characters and male servants speak Prakrit, but the male characters do understand Prakrit while the women characters understand Sanskrit.

Educated people in North India were conversant with Persian, the language of royal courts and high culture, but most educated people were multilingual

and used more than one script to write Urdu and Persian just as people did with Sanskrit; this tradition continued throughout the 19th century. Many Urdu poets wrote in other languages too; for example, the last king of Avadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, wrote in Avadhi, Braj, Marwari, Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. Major poet Insha Allah Khan, who wrote under the name 'Insha' (Elegantly Stylish), 1756-1817, was a polyglot who wrote in several languages, including Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Hindi and Punjabi, and composed both rekhta and rekhti poems.

Rekhti poets' use of a female persona is closely integrated with their use of a relatively non-Persianised Urdu. Women of upper class Muslim families, especially in the urban centres, were likely to be able to speak some refined or Persianised Urdu, but they would also speak to servants, neighbours and relatives from middle class backgrounds in local languages. Fluency in local languages was required to converse with Hindu women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

Under the Islamicate, it was more common for Muslim men to marry Hindu women than for Hindu men to marry Muslim women. Muslim kings, nobles and gentry often married Hindu women. For example, the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, an accomplished poet in Urdu, Persian, Brajbhasha and Punjabi, had a Hindu mother. Many Muslims, both men and women, were

recent converts and maintained links with their Hindu kin.

For both Muslim and Hindu elite men who spoke the language of high culture in public, 'women's speech' was the language of their private lives, of emotions and of significant imaginative domains. It was the language of the women servants, both Hindu and Muslim, who raised these men in the women's quarters before they reached puberty; it was the language of many of their mothers and sisters, family friends and neighbours, cousins, aunts, and wives. It was the language of domesticity and the marketplace, and was often close to the mother tongues of the courtesans and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

While many courtesans were accomplished women, who spoke Persianised Urdu in public, they spoke 'women's speech' in private. Permitted, even expected, to speak more freely of erotic matters, they could spice up literary Urdu with jokes and obscenities that respectably married women might use among themselves but would not be expected to use in men's presence. The mixed clientele of the kothas (homes and workplaces of courtesans) also encouraged the use of mixed speech. Rekhti poet Sa'adat Yar Khan, pen-name 'Rangin' (Colourful), 1755-1835, claimed he learnt the language of rekhti from khangis, married women who discreetly engaged in prostitution, and thus represented the overlap between normative households and courtesan

households.

'Women's speech' was closely related to the languages of villages and small towns, which were also heard in the streets of Delhi and Lucknow. Used in devotional songs, both Hindu and Muslim, and in romances, it was employed to different degrees in the standard Urdu ghazal (love poem).

Most of the idioms employed in rekhti and identified by Urdu critics as 'women's idioms' are not at all specific to rekhti. Examples include blessings like 'Bathe in milk and be fruitful of sons' and curses like 'aag lagey' (burn up) or 'bhaad mein jaye' (go into the stove). These are also among the idioms that late 19th century Muslim male reformers criticised Muslim women for using. Reformers considered these usages inappropriate because they were unislamic.² These idioms are still widely used today.

Eloquent parrots

Because Persian was the language of high culture, most Urdu poets composed in Persian as well, and literary Urdu tended to be highly Persianised. Some major poets and many minor ones wrote rekhti as well, which, arguably, had the effect of helping make colloquial Urdu more acceptable in poetry.

Rekhti poets, drawing attention to the elegance of their language, emphasise both its non-Persian ambience and its Indic urbanity. As opposed to later critics who characterise rekhti as trivial pornographic entertainment for men,

rekhti poet Mir Yar Ali 'Jan Saheb' (1817-1896), posits it as the symbol of Lucknow's high culture. He laments the British massacre of Lucknow's citizens after the 1857 rebellion, and their destruction of its sophisticated culture:

*Jan! You are reading rekhti in Lucknow
The nightingale is singing in a ruined
garden.³*

In another poem, Jan Saheb characterises his language as emblematic of Indic (Hindustani) creativity:

*Foreign aunt! You are a nightingale
of Shiraz [in Persia]*

*I am a parrot of Hindustan and my
tongue is eloquent...*

*The wretched native hill crows cry 'caw,
caw'*

*I will hide my face if they can ever
speak my language.⁴*

If the nightingale (bulbul) here stands for Persian poetry, the crow represents the supposedly rustic dialects of semieducated Indians. Invoking the Indic symbol of the parrot, which has a long ancestry in Indian literatures as a figure of creativity, not mere imitation, this Urdu poet proudly claims that his language is sophisticated as well as specific to his native land.

Jan Saheb writes almost entirely in rekhti. Although he always writes in the female voice, he does not confine himself to conventionally female themes. He addresses a variety of topics, including politics, poetic convention and poetic

rivalries.

As nationalist social and religious reform movements developed on the subcontinent in the later 19th century, the lines between Hindus and Muslims hardened. The unfortunate identification of Urdu with Muslims and Hindi with Hindus became institutionalised when, in 1947, India became independent, with Hindi as its national language, and Pakistan was formed as a Muslim state, with Urdu as its national language. While Hindi became increasingly Sanskritised and purged of Persian-based words, Urdu became increasingly Persianised and purged of Sanskrit-based words. Partly as a result of this, rekhti poetry of the early 19th century, with its unashamed hybridity, came to be denigrated and excised from the canon of Urdu poetry.

Despite the efforts of purists, however, hybrid colloquial modern Urdu/Hindi, or what used to be called Hindustani, with its infusion of words from many other languages, continued to flourish in non-academic and non-governmental domains. Bombay cinema played a central role in disseminating

and developing it, as did Hindi popular fiction. The emergence of Hinglish is not, therefore, indicative of a new process but the continuation of an old one – the hybridising of language in urban milieus. It represents the fusion of father tongue and mother tongue, the language of public thought with the language of private emotions and intimacy.

1. In his history of Urdu, Darya-e Latafat, poet Insha recounts an anecdote told by a poet to a courtesan, about a famous rekhti verse that men and women in Lucknow and Delhi used to recite. Quoted in Azad, Muhammad Husain. 2001. *Ab-e Hayat*, translated and edited Frances Pritchett. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2. See Minault, Gail. 1994. *Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana*, in *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* ed. Nita Kumar. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
3. S.S.M. Naqvi, S.S.M. 1983. ed. *Intikhab-e Rekhti*. Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akademi. All translations are by me.
4. S.S. M. Naqvi, S.S.M. 1983. ed. *Intikhab-e Rekhti*. Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akademi.

Ruth Vanita is professor of Liberal Studies at the University of Montana, and former Reader of English at Delhi University. She was a founder of 'Manushi' and co-edited it from 1978-90. She is the author of 'Sappho' and the 'Virginmary: Same-sex Love' and the 'English Literary Imagination', and co-author of 'Same-sex Love' in *India: Readings from Literature and History*; a collection of her essays on gender and sexuality and her translation of some Hindi fiction by 'Ugra' will appear later this year.

HINDI: AT HOME IN TRINIDAD

Suresh Rituparna

Translated by
Dhiraj Singh

Not too far from the South American tip of Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea is a nation of evergreen islands called Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad is famous the world over as a tourist attraction because of its natural beauty, awesome beaches and its annual carnival.

When in 1498 Columbus set out in search of India he took the opposite direction and reached these very islands thinking he had reached his destination. He was actually the first Westerner to see the southernmost tip of these islands that are home to the 'Three Sisters': three peaks known today as the 'Holy Trinity'. Trinidad takes its name from this epithet. Though today indigenous groups in Trinidad mainly comprise Arawaks Columbus called them all Indians. But such is the irony of fate that about three hundred and fifty years later on May 30, 1845 a ship named Fattel Razack bearing some 213 Indians landed at Port-of-Spain to lay the foundation of a little India in the Caribbean.

This was part of the British policy of sending indentured labour from India and its other colonies to work in the fields of foreign shores. Even though the days of slave labour were officially over the British began a new form of slavery, a trend that began in 1835 and continued right through till 1917. Under this new slave trade thousands of Indians signed up for a five-year agreement to work in places as far away from home as Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam and Fiji. While some returned after completing

their five-year 'Girmint' many decided to stay back to make these countries their new home. The children of these labourers gave birth to an Indian diaspora that today is over one hundred and fifty years old. And this diaspora of Indians has continued to keep alive the language and heritage of their parents' homeland.

On May 30, 1995, the Trinidadian Indian community celebrated 150 years of their arrival in the Caribbean. And it is to their credit that Hindi language teaching has been kept alive in Trinidad. This has made research and documentation of this immigrant group a historical imperative in the history of the Indian diaspora. Though these immigrants came from all over India their largest numbers were from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. These were speakers of different dialects of Hindi that included Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Brajbhasha. As a result the teaching of Hindi became an important part of their immigrant experience.

Significantly, where on the one hand language was an important tool of communication in a foreign land it also became the bearer of cultural identity.

By the coming of age of a second generation of Indian Trinidadians the importance of Hindi teaching had gained further ground. This began with the opening of small village schools where Hindi became an important part of the curriculum. Interestingly, this took the form of a quasi-religious instruction as the textbooks in these village schools

comprised scriptural passages from the Ramcharitmanas and the Hanuman Chalisa. And the teachers were those among the labourers who had even a rudimentary knowledge of their mother tongue. But in the absence of a strong foundation many of these attempts at Hindi instruction had a short life span. This was not a very auspicious start for the revival of a language on the path to decline. One big reason for this was that the British overlords did not favour educating the sons and daughters of their bonded slaves.

But things began to change when around 1864-70 the Presbyterian missionaries in the islands realised that Hindi instruction could become a handy tool in winning over the Indians to Christ. As a result by 1870 the Presbyterian Church had under Reverend John Martin established a 'Rev Kenneth James Grant'. John Martin was given the task of teaching English and Hindi to the children of the labourers. In a few years the situation began to turn. While a generation of the Indians who were now grandparents and parents still spoke Bhojpuri, Hindi or some other dialect their children and grandchildren spoke fluent English.

The Presbyterian Church seeing its dream of an 'Indian congregation' take shape also started giving Hindi a back seat. On the other hand its teaching started climbing down in the priority list of the government due to the state of politics in the islands. A large part of this was the thinking that suppression

of language would lead to a diminishing interest in 'Indian culture' as well. This was to be later proved true in places like Jamaica and Granada.

The Indian Independence however was to inject a heavy dose of self-confidence in the Indian diaspora. It began to see itself as a nation in exile, a nation that had a 'mother culture' to look up to. The new Republic of India from its side began to take a deeper interest in the affairs of its diaspora through its embassies. A new foreign policy began to lay stress on the teaching of Indian languages and culture to people of Indian origin abroad.

A suitable foundation was now being laid for the setting up of Hindi language and Indian culture courses in Trinidad. In 1952 the then Indian ambassador Anand Mohan Sahai set up a 'Hindi Educational Board' whose first director was Edward Joseph Pillai. The Board saw hectic activity in its first five years then followed a period of dormancy. The India-based Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) also lent a helping hand to the Hindi Educational Board in its efforts to teach Hindi in Trinidad. Things began to look up at the Board when Indutai Kelkar was sent by the ICCR to help out. This was followed by the arrival in 1966 of Harishankar Aadesh, an event that was to go down in the history of Trinidadian Indians.

Harishankar Aadesh was to combine Hindi instruction with the teaching of Indian music, an act that was to become

a raging success. It was a move that recognised the need of some fun and frolic in a curriculum that could become too heavy. It was a godsend for young Indians eager to learn Hindi in a lighter atmosphere. Hindi music especially Hindi film music had for a long time been a great attraction for them. They could now learn Hindi and find immediate ways of expressing their knowledge in a fun way. They were also eager to become popular icons in their own context. And a large part of doing this with success was through the language that had the potential of unlocking a wealth of cultural and musical traditions.

Aadesh started courses in Indian classical music and kept the medium of instruction Hindi. By 1969 he had established an 'Indian Educational Society', an organisation that played an important role in the years to follow. Its presence is still felt in Trinidad through its efforts at Hindi and Indian music instruction at its various centres across the country. People like Uttam Maharaj, Kumar Satyaketu, Mohan Samlal, Kalicharan Duki, Uma Budhram, Kamla Ramlakhan and Leela Musai have enriched the Society in their association with its activities. Kamla Ramlakhan was in fact the first person to publish a detailed and well-conceived book on Indian education in Trinidad called *Prabhat*. This book written with Trinidad's diasporic requirements in mind, adequately represents its needs. Kamla Ramlakhan is a well-known and respected

educator in Trinidad. She published the second part of this book in 1994.

The Indian Educational Society organises an annual 'culture camp' every year on Balandra Beach where a three-to seven-day Hindi language and Indian music programmes are held. These include Hindi elocution, debate, *antakshari*, essay writing competitions whose winners are given out Hindi books and other prizes.

Post 1950 many temples, schools and colleges were also set up under a 'Shree Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha' established by Bhades Saggan Maharaj. Today these educational institutions are more than 50 in number. Where the original thrust of these institutions was towards the spread of Hindi language they gradually became more concerned with religious instruction about Hinduism. But thankfully now the organisers have realised their mistake and the trend has been reversed, bringing back the stress to Hindi education. A 'Bal Vikas' (children's development) programme has been started under which Hindi language and Indian cultural activities are organised for children. This has been possible under the able and enthusiastic leadership of Linda Savitri Maharaj.

A similar significant effort has been initiated by the noted social worker and educationist Kamla Tiwari with a 'Secondary Sanskritic Sangam' (secondary cultural collective), an organisation that involves itself in the cultural development of secondary school students. The Sangam

organises regular Hindi language and Indian music competitions for secondary school students.

In 1986 Hindi education in Trinidad got another shot in the arm after the setting up of 'Hindi Nidhi' a body led by the energetic vision of Chanka Sitaram and his associates. This organisation took a more scientific approach to Hindi education, establishing through various surveys and researches the prevalence of Hindi in day-to-day discourse and the usage of Hindi words in non-Hindi conversations.

Hindi Nidhi's constant endeavour has been to get Hindi included as a foreign language in school curriculums across Trinidad; the way Spanish, French and Latin are taught as optional languages. This has not been without its small successes. Many schools have already introduced a pilot project for Hindi as a foreign language course. Under this project evening classes are organised in schools where there are students eager to learn Hindi.

Within six years of its inception Hindi Nidhi managed to organise several workshops, seminars and Hindi conferences in its efforts to put Hindi back on the map of language education in Trinidad. The biggest feather in its cap however was the organisation of the First International Hindi Conference in 1992. This was an event that brought together Hindi scholars and delegates from over 17 countries across the world. Trinidad's then President Noor Mohamed

Hassanali was the chief guest at the inaugural-eve banquet and the Conference was inaugurated by Prime Minister Patrick Manning.

Encouraged by the success of this Conference Hindi Nidhi decided to coincide the 150th anniversary of Arrival Day with the Fifth International Hindi Conference held once again in Trinidad in 1995. This suggestion was made by the Trinidadian delegate Ravindranath Maharaj at the Fourth International Hindi Conference in Mauritius in 1993.

The Indian government through its embassy in Trinidad has also played an important role in Hindi education in the country. The embassy appointed a Hindi Director on its premises, an event that contributed hugely to the success of Hindi discourse in Trinidad. Since 1986 the Indian embassy in Port-of-Spain has been conducting two regular classes under its 'Hindi Education Programme'. These were started by the then Hindi Director Girish Pandey in 1986. This writer had the good fortune of being part of this Programme from 1988 to 1992. Through this Programme many students and those interested in the language have benefitted from the literature and Hindi journals made available to them by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. It is to the credit of the language's appeal that many among Trinidad's elite including Members of Parliament, barristers, politicians, professionals and actors have learnt Hindi. In fact it would not be incorrect to add that the Programme has greatly

contributed in cementing bilateral relations between India and Trinidad.

It was also due to the efforts of the Indian mission that in 1988 the University of the West Indies included Hindi in the BA course of its St Augustin campus. An inclusion that continues till this day. This writer once again had the privilege of setting up this course at St Augustin's. As a further encouragement the embassy also instituted many awards for proficiency and excellence in Hindi for University-going students as well as those studying at the other language centres. Professor V. R. Jagganath has in no small way contributed towards the building up of the Hindi course at St Augustin's.

The embassy also began a 'Spoken Hindi' course for students who had been to India on Indian government scholarships. This course was started in the city of Coova in 1988.

Trinidad's NIHERST also began Hindi language courses at its School of Languages. To run this course the Indian government agreed to appoint a tenured lecturer to the School of Languages. Professor Y.V. Rao has been a prominent appointee to this post.

Besides these there are many spiritual/religious outfits that have constantly endeavoured towards the spread of Hindi and Indian culture in Trinidad. These have included organisations such as the Gandhi Sewa Sangh, Divine Life Society, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Edinburgh Hindu Mandir

and Hindu Prachar Kendra.

In this context the contribution of Trinidad's own cultural organisations can in no way be denied. Some among these have included the National Council of Indian Culture (NCIC), Nrityanjali Theatre, Mastana Bahar, Indian Cultural Pageant and Shiv-Shakti Dance Group. Many cultural and Hindi film-music events organised by these outfits have indeed won many Trinidadian hearts for Hindi as a language. In the past few years 'Chutney Singing' programmes have earned a lot of popularity among Trinidadians of Indian origin. This unique genre involves the fusion of old Bhojपुरi folk songs with high tempo beats, something that's tailor-made to set the house on fire. Chutney Singing' programmes in fact often take the form of competitions. Prominent among these competitions is an annual one where a 'Chutney King' is selected from among the contenders. The past years have thrown up names like Anand Yankaran and Budhram Holas, two notables who have gained popstar status among Trinidad's Indians.

Hindi film troupes such as 'Naya Zamana' and 'D. Ramprasad Indian Art Orchestra' have for a long time entertained Trinidad's Indian diaspora. These and the voices of singers like Polly Sukhraj, Rubeena Khan-Ghuftar, Rinad Diyal, Najmul Khan, Lili Ramcharan and Sally Edward have managed to equal performances by Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle, Mukesh, Rafi, Shamshad Begum

and Noorjehan with their renditions of popular Hindi film songs.

Hindi film music that reached the Caribbean through cinema houses, radio and TV has also greatly contributed to Hindi learning in Trinidad. The film songs act as an introduction to Hindi's rich poetic and musical traditions and very often also serve as a bridge to Hindi language courses, as the adequate knowledge of a language enhances the enjoyment of its poetry and literature. This is helped by the diaspora's eagerness to understand and get connected with its Indian heritage.

Music is in fact a big uniting factor for Trinidadians of different ethnic origins. It is often said of them that Trinidadians don't speak, they sing and they don't walk, they dance. '*Suhani raat dhal chuki, na jaane tum kab aogey* (the beautiful night has passed, wonder when you'll come)', '*Aayega aane wala* (he will return)', '*Saranga, teri yaad mein* (Saranga, in your memories...)', '*Hum us desh ke wasi hain, jis desh mein Ganga behti hai* (we are from the country where the Ganga flows)', '*Chaudvin ka chand ho* (you are the moon of the 14th night)' these classic songs have to this day a special place in the hearts of all generations of Trinidadian Indians. In fact no singing programme is complete till the song '*Suhani raat...*' has been sung.

Religious festivals have a two-way function of connecting the diaspora to its heritage. Where they connect them

to the land of their forefathers they also give them an opportunity to partake of their cultural context as well. Not surprising that Diwali is a national holiday in Trinidad. The National Council of Indian Culture has been celebrating Diwali with a cultural extravaganza called 'Diwali Nagar' in middle Trinidad since 1986. This week-long extravaganza is a like a tableau of Hindi and Indian culture. Holi is marked by some more music and dance and the singing of Phagwa songs. Other festivals like Raksha-bandhan, Janmashtami, Ramnavmi and Shivratri are also popular celebrations in Trinidad. Especially attractive for the diaspora are the songs sung during these celebrations.

Households are abuzz with songs and music on the occasion of marriages and births as well. Sohar and Vidai songs and the 'Cooking Night' musicals of the marriage eve celebrations keep every

foot in the family tapping and every hand clapping.

The fact of an Indian way of life surviving a century and half in the Caribbean is ample proof of the diaspora's love and longing for its motherland. Like the trapped smell of earth released in the air during the first rains, the memory of an Indian past continues to live in the hearts of Trinidad's Indians. A past that is not without its years of struggle in a strange and alien land. It is indeed this troubled past that goals the present generations to learn Hindi and perhaps better understand the struggles of their ancestors. Even though they're at home with English, Hindi very often becomes their spiritual umbilicus to an ancient but living heritage. A fact that augurs well for the future of Hindi and the ageless Indian thought that it makes accessible.

Courtesy: ICCR, Delhi

Suresh Rituparna has been a professor of Hindi in Delhi University and in Japan. He has also been visiting professor in Mauritius, Fiji and Hungary; was cultural Secretary in Trinidad and Tobago. He often visits India.

TEACHING LANGUAGE: PHILOSOPHY, GOALS, AND PRACTICES

Susham Bedi

**“Knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom”
Standards for Foreign Language Learning
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages**

All linguistic and social knowledge required for effective human interaction is encompassed in the above ten words. Communication is at the heart of the human experience. Like Wittgenstein among other philosophers, I believe that there are no thoughts without language. Therefore, the effectiveness of any language programme should be judged by the learner’s ability to communicate, specifically to speak, read and write with ease and accuracy in the target language.

I fully recognize that there is more than just one way to learn a language: there are many different types of learners and every student has different learning needs. The presence of ‘heritage’ and ‘non-heritage’ learners in the same class adds to the challenge of finding one solution to meet their needs. Therefore, I strongly believe that a learning programme must be learner-centered and integrate the language using a variety of interactive and experiential learning processes.

My teaching is based on the following principles:

- Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is relevant to the personal interests of the student.
- Cultural context must be at the core of language learning.

- Learning is more easily assimilated when external threats are at a minimum and the students are in safe environment.
- Self-initiated learning is the most lasting and effective. Ideally, my role is that of an enabler and a facilitator rather than simply a transmitter of knowledge.

The instructor must guide students to become self-motivated and independent learners by encouraging them to develop their own learning strategies ranging from cognitive (e.g. analyzing, reasoning, transferring information, taking notes and summarizing) to meta-cognitive (e.g. organizing, evaluating, and planning their learning).

- The organizing principle of my teaching is proficiency: the learner must be able to function effectively using Hindi-Urdu in a real-life context. For each course, I identify the areas of content (topics such as family, home, travel, and the related vocabulary), degree of accuracy (grammatical concepts), and communicative functions (asking and answering questions, description and narration) that I want students to master. Subsequently, I develop a sequence of instructional activities intended to lead to that mastery.
- Equal and simultaneous emphasis is placed on developing all major skills: reading, listening, speaking,

grammar competency, writing, and vocabulary.

- Technology is an integral part of language learning. While technologies continually change and media evolve, our language laboratory must progress accordingly. The use of video and television in language teaching has become commonplace and computer-assisted language learning is gaining acceptance.

In summary, to create an innovative and effective language curriculum, I strive to combine effective pedagogy and current language acquisition approaches with cutting-edge technology.

Goals, Curriculum and Practices
My curriculum addresses learners' goals in terms of Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities– the 5Cs of foreign language education as identified by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The link between these goals and my methodology is described below:

1. Communication: This is perhaps the most important goal of my curriculum. Communication takes place at various levels in a language and is comprised of three components– Interpersonal, Interpretative, and Presentational.
 - Interpersonal Communication: Before introducing any new material to my students, I put it

in its appropriate context, personalize it, and make its learning meaningful to them. I frequently begin my classes by introducing familiar topics such as greetings, self-description, family, home, geography, food and dining, weather, and shopping. From that level, I gradually build students up to conversations about festivals, travel, vacation, biographical experiences, gender, the generational gap, marriage, religion, and politics, etc. Simultaneously, they are provided with tools like vocabulary and grammar to facilitate their conversation building skills. In addition, they practise their newly acquired knowledge and skills through exercises which include role play and conversations with one another in break out pairs.

- Interpretative Communication: Students develop interpretative skills through a variety of assignments and exercises in reading and listening comprehension.

☞ *Reading Comprehension:* Students' reading skills are developed through simulated text where they are asked to read aloud individually or in pairs and groups while I monitor their pronunciation as well as explain grammatical implications and the meaning

of the new material. In addition, I assign segments of authentic materials (e.g., newspaper **clippings, advertisements, biographies, and folk literature**) to students **combined with pre-reading, intensive reading and post reading activities** which help develop their reading strategies and interpretative skills.

- ☞ *Listening Comprehension:* These skills are developed through listening to short segments of authentic video materials in class and then answering a set of questions about their comprehension. This method gives them tools and strategies to listen for the overall meaning and then work on linguistic details. In addition, listening to audio tapes, watching videos in the lab, and working with websites enhances students' interpretative skills.
- Presentational Communication: Students are asked to make presentations to the class. The topics vary according to the level of the class. For example, at the beginning level they make sentence-level presentations about their families or themselves and as they progress to the intermediate level, they are expected to recite poetry, stage skits and narrate stories. At the

- advanced level (Reading in Hindi), they give presentations on the topic of their choice. This requires them to read and interpret media or books related to that topic.
2. Cultures: Since language occurs in a cultural context, it cannot be mastered without understanding the culture of its speakers. It is essential to comprehend the perspectives that generate a particular culture and its mores. I try to provide this component in two areas as described below:
 - Cultural Products: Example include reading folk tales and episodes from Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, seeing classic and contemporary Hindi-Urdu movies, learning popular songs and poetry, and reading modern literature
 - Cultural Practices: These include greeting one another, celebrating festivals, tasting Indian cuisine, discussing issues such as arranged marriage, comparing Indian and American norms and values.
 3. Connections: Students can use their skills to access other disciplines and bodies of knowledge in the target language. In my classes, I try to connect our language learning to different aspects of Indian society, politics, family structure, philosophy, history, and mythology
 4. Comparisons: Learner is able to

compare one language with another and thus get an insight into one's own language too. This way, one gets a better understanding of the way a language works. Learners in my classes are made aware of grammatical concepts and linguistic structures highlighting similarities and differences between the target language and learner's native language such as English.

5. Communities: A learner is gradually able to move out of the classroom environment and start interacting with the community where the target language is used. I generally invite guest (native Hindi-Urdu) speakers from the community to interact with the class. Learners are given assignments requiring them to interview native Hindi-Urdu speakers.

Assessment and Evaluation

I ensure that students are keeping up with the learning by giving them daily homework as well as testing them through frequent written quizzes. I hold four individual mini-conferences per semester where I check each student's progress in oral proficiency. I use dynamic (interactive and individualized) as well as standardized assessment to test them for their achievement, performance and proficiency.

There is no compulsory grade curve. Students are encouraged to compete against themselves and give their best. Since their backgrounds are varied, this

is the best way to provide them with a non-threatening and safe learning environment.

Students must attain a certain level of Hindi-Urdu proficiency by the end of each semester. I evaluate their performance on the ACTFL scale that provides an excellent tool to measure their fluency, vocabulary, accuracy, and socio-linguistic capabilities. The following benchmarks will illustrate this:

- End of the first semester: Students should be able to communicate minimally with formulaic and rote utterances, list and phrases. This is considered novice-high level.
- End of the second semester: Students should begin to create with language, initiate, maintain, and bring to close simple conversations by asking and responding to simple questions about personal subjects like their families, vacations, schedules and plans. This is the intermediate-low or mid-level.
- End of the third semester: Students should begin to summarize simple stories, describe various festivals and their vacations. They are still at the intermediate low or mid level.
- End of fourth semester: Students should be able to handle a range of familiar topics using all the principal tenses. They are at the intermediate-mid or intermediate-

high level.

It may be worth noting that some heritage learners attain a higher level of proficiency than the benchmarks outlined above.

Other Activities

Finally, I strive to create an environment that will make Hindi-Urdu learning an enjoyable, exciting, and effective experience. I keep regular office hours (two to three hours per week) and encourage all learners to see me for any help or to simply practise their conversational Hindi-Urdu. These office hours also provide me with an excellent opportunity for feedback. I see teaching as a two-way street where not only my students learn from me but I also learn from them and their evaluations. I am a strong believer of the view that no teaching method is perfect. My teaching must not be static and must evolve to reflect and accommodate the needs of changing times and the student population.

I keep abreast of developments in the field of language teaching through involvement with ACTFL, exchange of views with my peers, and collaboration with other universities, such as University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and New York University, in the development of technology-based teaching materials. Some of my projects include:

- I have been a language proficiency tester for more than ten years and am certified by ACTFL as a Trainer

of other teachers in Hindi– a distinction shared with only one other person in the United States.

- Development of Reading and Listening Comprehension Materials which are being used by many universities in the United States.
- Development of Situation Cards for role-playing.
- Development of tools to measure Reading Proficiency: My students were enthusiastic participants in this project.

Looking ahead, I am involved as the co-chair in the development of National Standards for Hindi. This project is in collaboration with **ACTFL** and some other universities.

I am also developing a **Virtual Hindi text** comprised of short stories by women writers.

I believe that language teaching is an art as well as a science. One has to be open to new technologies and at the same time allow oneself to teach language in a multi-faceted and dynamic fashion, being sensitive to learner's needs.

Susham Bedi, born 1945, writes short stories and novels in Hindi. She is the co-ordinator of Hindi-Urdu Language Programme in the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Culture, Columbia University, U.S.A. She is also a tester and trainer in Hindi for American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Her recent novel 'Morche' from Vani Prakashan was well received by critics and readers. She is also interested in poetry, drama and linguistics.

HINDI AND URDU ARE BEING TAUGHT IN JAPAN FOR A CENTURY NOW

Harjendra Chowdhary

Translated by
Ravi Nandan Sinha

The word 'Japan' reminds us Indians of a number of phrases associated with it, some which are 'the land of the sunrise', 'the land of sakura (cherry)', 'a Buddhist country', 'a country excelling in technological and economic development', 'a country of people who have suffered the trauma of the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki' as so on. At the same time we are also reminded of various socio-cultural traditions and expressions like 'geisha' (a Japanese hostess trained to entertain men with conversation, dance and song), 'kabuki' (a drama form), 'Haiku' (a form of verse), 'zen' (the Japanese tradition of Buddhist 'dhyān'), 'bonsai' (the art of growing miniature plants) and so on.

But for us Indians another aspect of Japan too is important, and that is its being the country that has had the longest tradition of teaching the 'Hindustani' language (that is Hindi and Urdu)! Very few Indians are aware of the fact that in Japan a full century has passed since Hindi and Urdu began to be taught under the name of 'Hindustani'. There must be several other countries and university in the world which have been keeping the torch of Hindi teaching aflame, but Japan is a rare country in the sense that there in 1908 the teaching of 'Hindustani' began at Tokyo School of Foreign Languages which still continues. Despite facing such natural calamities like earthquakes and the world war cause

by man's arrogance, the Japanese have achieved a singular success in keeping the teaching systems going. Even Europe has not been able to achieve such success. For instance, in Poland the teaching of Indology was discontinued during the world war and could begin again only in 1853-54 after a break of many years. Hitler started the Second World War by attacking Poland and by dropping atom bombs on two cities of Japan—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—America tried to make a controversial attempt to 'end' it. Both these countries—Japan and Poland—had faced the terror of the World War, but the continuing of the teaching systems in Japan is a great achievement of the Japanese people!

The Tokyo School of Foreign Languages where teaching of Hindustani began in 1908 was later named the Tokyo College of Foreign Affairs and in 1949 it became the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Since then this institute has been known by this name only. On the pattern of this institute, in 1921 the Osaka School of Foreign Languages was established in western Japan, where in 1922 arrangements for the teaching of the 'Hindustani' language were made. In course of time, the name of this school was changed to the Osaka Academy of Foreign Languages. Finally, since 1949, this has been known as the Osaka University of Foreign Studies. The present writer has had the privilege of teaching at this university as a Visiting Professor during 1994-1996. At present it is not

an independent university but is active as Foreign Language Research Institute under Osaka University. The study and teaching of Hindi continues here.

Besides these two universities, in some other universities/institutes of Japan also there are primary level arrangements for the teaching of Hindi. In this context, Asia-Africa Language Institute in Tokyo, Tokyo University, Tokushoku University etc. can be mentioned. Besides, in its own way the Hindi service of Radio Japan is also playing a role in the propagation of Hindi. This service has been in place since June 1940. The Hindi service of Radio Japan broadcasts for Indian audience information about Japanese language and culture and it is a proof of the fact that the Japanese people and their government give much importance to Hindi language and Indian culture. At the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and the Foreign Language Research Institute of Osaka University one can study for an M.A. degree in Hindi language and literature and also do research in the subject at the highest level. Other universities/institutes, within their individual limitations, are also giving importance to the teaching-learning of Hindi at various levels.

It is natural for us Indians to ask: why is there so much interest in the Japanese youth in the learning and teaching of Hindi language and literature or in studies related to India? And that too, when studying Hindi cannot become a job-oriented course for them. It is

obvious that for a career or a livelihood, the study of Hindi does not prove useful for most youth. In fact, behind this interest and enthusiasm there are cultural and historical reasons. The comforting dynamism of India's economic growth may also be a reason but most probably it is not an effective reason. The mutual cultural relationship between India and Japan may be seen as an important reason for the enthusiastic interest that the Japanese youth evince in the Hindi language. For roughly one and half millennia Buddhism has been the major part of Japanese culture. In the whole of Japan there are Buddhist temples, statues of the Buddha, Bodhisatvas and Hindu gods and goddesses with changed names or forms; like the Indians they too join their palms and bow before these statues; the Japanese families in large numbers visit temples at the beginning of the New Year (from the midnight of December 31 itself) and they too pay homage to their ancestors. These are some of the sights in which one can see the image of India.

In the mind space of a Japanese, besides Mahatma Buddha and the Buddhist Bhikshus who have become 'history' (such as the Indian bhikshu Bodhisen who was honoured in the royal court) some other great Indians also have made their presence felt. Mahatma Gandhi has a presence in the minds of everyone in the world. In the first half of the twentieth century apart from people such as Rash Behari Bose and Netaji

Subhash Chandra Bose, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, and two great writers of Hindi—the essayist Sardar Poorna Singh and the writer-thinker Rahul Sankritayan—visited or stayed in Japan for different reasons and left their mark on the Japanese mind. The freedom movement of India is connected also with Japan through a short, courageous and controversial chapter in it. For the Azad Hind Fauz of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose the Japanese students gladly acted as interpreters, a fact that suggests that the tradition of teaching Hindi in Japan has resulted in a variety of uses. After the Independence of India (especially after 1952 when diplomatic relations between the two countries were established) a variety of activities related to the cultural exchange between India and Japan have been going on.

Recently (12-13-14 December 2008) on the eve of the completion of a century of Hindi-Urdu teaching in Japan an international conference was organized by Tokyo University of Foreign Studies with the active cooperation of the Foreign Ministry of the Government of India (the Indian Embassy in Tokyo). The responsibility of this conference was shouldered by Professor Suresh Rituparna, the coordinator, Professor Takeshi Fuji and Professor Yutaka Asada, chairman and vice-chairman of the organizing committee respectively. The conference was a great success which was evident from the fact that students of the university and the Japanese lovers

of Hindi and Urdu actively participated in it. In this conference not only did the Japanese scholars of Hindi, Urdu and Indology participate but delegates from other countries were also invited. Besides Professor Herman von Olfen, the head of the ambitious 'Hindi-Urdu flagship' programme in Texas University, two professors of Indian origin—Syed Akbar Hyder and Vishnu Shankar—who are also associated with the programme came from the USA. Professor Tatyana Oranskaiya from Hamburg University of Germany and Professor Danuta Staschik from Warsaw University of Poland also came to Tokyo to participate in this conference. A delegation from Pakistan also came. From India, besides Dr. Rakesh Kumari, Deputy Secretary (Hindi) in the Foreign Department, Dr. Narayan Kumar, Dr. Harjendra Chowdhary, Shree Balendu Dadheech, Shree Rakesh Pandey, Professor Ashwini Kumar Srivastava, Professor Arun Chaturvedi, Dr. Kunwar Bechain, Dr. Harish Naval and Shree Lalitya Lalit etc. went to Japan to as members of the Indian delegation to this conference.

During this international conference the Japanese showed an avid interest in Indian languages (Hindi-Urdu) and Indian (South Asian) culture and also displayed a sense of connectedness with them. The Japanese students of Hindi and Urdu staged the story 'Angulimal' related to the life of the Buddha and the Urdu story of Rajinder Singh Bedi called 'Nakle Makani' in a very lively

manner, which proved how strongly attracted the Japanese mind was to Hindi-Urdu and Indian culture. Both the dramatic presentations attested to the seriousness, sincerity and hard work of the Japanese students.

All those students who are learning foreign languages in different universities all over the world seem to me to be the 'ambassadors of future' and ambassadors of peace' because the basic and final aim of teaching a foreign language is to develop a better understanding at the international level which will lead to the creation of a solid base for mutual cooperation. It was natural to feel satisfied when I saw the enthusiastic participation of the students on all the three days of the conference.

Both Hindi and Urdu languages (or language styles) originated in India. The birthplace of both is the same. Going a step further it can be said that the two languages are sisters born not only of the same womb but they are also twins. In the three-day conference in Tokyo I felt this very intensely that in the Indology departments/South Asian Departments in the universities of the world Hindi and Urdu are taught and learnt together or in a parallel manner because they are twins. The language called 'Hindustani' the teaching of which was started a hundred years ago in Japan, was Hindi and was also Urdu. Then the two were not considered separate.

In the three-day International Hindi-

Urdu-Teaching Centenary Conference there was meaningful and interesting discussion on the various issues related to the teaching of foreign languages. Need was felt to use new techniques and methodologies in teaching Hindi and Urdu as foreign languages. The possibility of using information technology and computers in the teaching and propagation of languages was explored. A new concern for these Indian languages was created.

In this age of globalization when a number of languages of the world are facing the danger of contraction and extinction, when the 'budgetary crunch' affects languages the most, the hundred-year old tradition of teaching Hindi and Urdu in Japan can be seen as a lighthouse that is getting brighter by the day and is showing a new direction to the ships of mutual cooperation and world peace. This indeed is a happy state of affairs.

Harjendra Chowdhary, born 1955, teaches in Delhi University, College of Vocational Studies. He has taught in Japan and Poland. He writes short stories and poems. He lives in Delhi.
