

# Storm in a Teacup and Other Stories

Avtar S. Sangha



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**Storm in a Teacup  
and  
Other Stories**

by

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## **Dedication**



**My Grandchildren  
Joban and Udham**

## About the Author



Dr. Avtar S. Sangha , a fictionist and essayist, is a prematurely retired senior lecturer in English from a degree college in Punjab as he had got permanent immigration into Australia in 2000. He was teaching English language and literature in Chandigarh and Punjab for 25 years before his immigration and after his B.A Hons. in English in 1972 (second in the Punjab University) and M.A. English from University Campus, Chandigarh in 1974. He also got degree of Ph.D. on American novel in 1988. His graduate diploma in Education from NSW (Australia) helped him get accreditation for teaching English and History in the educational institutions of NSW. After retirement he lives in Sydney now.

He has six books of Punjabi (two novels, three anthologies of short fiction and one edited fictional work) to his credit. His contribution of essay ‘Ageing Cautiously and Conscientiously’ to India level book ‘Life After 65’ has been well received and eulogized. At the moment he edits and publishes the bilingual newsmagazine ‘The Punjab Herald’ in Sydney. He belongs to village Chahalpur (Hoshiarpur) in Punjab.

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### Author’s other Literary Works

1. Sidni dian Railgaddian (Essays and Stories)--2009
2. Dilhu Muhabbat Jin (Novel)—2011
3. Balauri Akhaan (Anthology of Short Stories)—2013
4. Ghora Doktor (Anthology of Short Stories)—2015
5. ....te Prikhiya Chaldi Rahi (Novel)—2021
6. 5 Parvasi Kahanikaar (Edited Work)--2022

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## Foreword

‘Storm in a Teacup and Other Stories’ is derivation from my observation of the prevailing situations in which newly educated people of particularly the rural and semi-urban areas of India live and lead their peculiar way of life. Some of these stories were written between 1980 and 1990 when I was teaching as a lecturer in English in a semi urban college of Punjab. Education in the case of some of my characters has its roots in uneducation as their forefathers were either too sensitive to be impure and dishonest or they were too over confident to be pure and honest. Hence, some of them are prey to ‘to be or not to be’ syndrome. Some are corrupt and hypocritical under the throes of inhibition and prohibitions which they have to face in highly tradition oriented society or due to their clear cut intentions to become corrupt in a society where corruption and bungling have become a way of life. Sham and hypocrisy operating beneath the texture of social niceties is the theme of some stories. Two characters--one in ‘Serpentine Course’ and the other in ‘Tenants Extraordinary’--are victim to romantic fixation and houselessness respectively. Some stories were composed when I was the student of English Department of Punjab University, though even afterwards I did continue shimmering and scintillating my raw matter and manner jotted down in my uneasy moods. The Sikh genocide of 1984 is the content of one or two stories too. The Tribune, Chandigarh had used six stories (‘Official Tour’ - Nov. 6, 1983, ‘Never Again Please’ (New title--Save Me, My Sons)- April 15, 1984, ‘Tenants Extraordinary’ - June 16, 1991, ‘The Boys also Speak Sense’ - Sept. 8, 1991, ‘The Arranged Marriage’ - March 21, 1993, and ‘The Stag’) and VIPULA, a Telugu literary Monthly of Hyderabad published these above six and five more (‘Visa’, ‘Serpentine Course’, ‘The Only Ring’, ‘The Thief’ and ‘Beyond Municipal Limits’ after getting them translated into Telugu language.

Some stories took their shape in my mind when I had immigrated to Australia in 2000. The new experiences and ideas, when I was getting acculturated into Australian way of life, also provided a fresh impetus to my 'organic sensibility' and it ignited the spark in my mind for producing the yarns like 'In the Greener Pastures', 'Reaching the Unreachable', 'The Married Bachelor', 'Sat Sri Akaal, Sir', 'Any Other Vintage?' and 'The Voracious Reader'. The Punjabi version of 'Sat Sri Akaal, Sir' appeared in the Punjabi Tribune too in Nov. 2021 on Teachers' Day. Two stories named 'Ruchie's Horse' and 'Rambo' are a class apart. The former imbibes in itself the exquisiteness of art and embellishments and the latter portrays animal psychology with elegance and felicity.

I hope the readers will definitely relish this spicy bunch of fiction. Before saying bye to them I would like to quote Kamleshwar Sinha who has summed up the quality of Anton Chekhov's diction in these words: 'Chekhov's experiments with writing made him believe that brevity is the soul of art. He gave the cumbersome, incidental form of the Russian short story a crisp and evocative brevity.....Chekhov himself felt that his ambition was not to solve problem but to state them objectively and correctly.' I think my stories also focus on this trait of Chekhov's oeuvre.

That Dr. S. P. Singh, honourable Stephen Bali, revered Len Kenna/Crystal Jordan and respected Dr. Jagat Singh Nagra have promoted my venture through their valuable blurbs is a matter of pride and pleasure for me. I extend my heart-felt thanks to them. Special thanks to artist Sukhwinder Saggu of Canberra for preparing the abstract painting on the jacket of the book and to Azad Book Depot for its exquisite skill in consummating the whole venture.

The feedback, sweet or sour is welcome.

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## Tenants Extraordinary

An air force officer was allotted a type V government house in a plush colony of Delhi. I was living hardly three quarters away from him. One day, while on my evening walk, I came across his house and he exclaimed a polished hello by way of introducing himself to me.

“Hello, sir” all of a sudden I stopped and gave a smile to him.

“You are also putting up in the line?”

“Yes, very much near you. Earlier you were posted at ....?”

“I have come here from Bangalore,. I need the company of some good people. You are, of course, very cordial and sociable. A neighbour of my liking. My name is Flt. Lt. P. K. Menon.”

I thanked him for his compliments and went to my house. A few days later I went to his residence in a light mood. When we were sitting and thinking of having a round of chess, a man suddenly came to his house.

“Sir, I have come to know that you wish to rent out the servant’s quarters in your bungalow. As you have expressed your desire that the new incumbent of the servant’s quarters should do three jobs for you, I am ready for the same.” The stranger wanted to solve his problem of lodging free of cost in a crowded city, where there is always an acute scarcity of accommodation.

“So you will do three chores; sweeping, washing our clothes and cleaning our utensils. We shall give you our servant’s quarters. Settled?”

“Yes, sir.”

The very next day the man came to the bungalow with his bag and

baggage. His belongings were loaded in a truck. They included articles of luxury, not suitable for a person wishing to be accommodated in the servant's quarters. The man had a penchant for all articles of luxury but at the same time he was a niggardly fellow in some respects. The money that he saved through his style of living was used for the purchase of some articles of his extreme liking and also on some pieces of show and pomposity. Mr. Menon, on the other hand, was a spendthrift. He used to spend lavishly to satisfy his luxurious instincts. A huge sum of money was spent on costly buffet dinners to his colleagues and friends. His other hobbies swallowed a considerable sum of his salary in the first fortnight of every month. Though he had been in the armed forces for the past 10 years, so far he was not able to purchase some of the articles he desired to have. For example, a topnotch VCR. Though he had been cherishing the desire to possess it for a few months, his wish remained unfulfilled due to the paucity of funds. Last month he purchased decoration pieces worth Rs 10,000. The esteemed VCR still remained on the list of the items to be bought.

Mr. Menon's son, aged 10, would rush to the servants's quarter to see films there every day after coming from the school. Mr. Menon felt degraded in the situation. He wished the servants should not have been so rich. Their richness was causing embarrassment to him.

The next day the servant's wife prepared a Chinese dish. She offered it to Mr. Menon's daughter too.

“Aunty, the dish is really fantastic. What is the name of dish ?”

“Dear, this dish is called Chow Mein. Its ingredients include noodles, chicken stock, mushrooms, leeks, corn flour, flake garlic, ginger, soya sauce, vinegar, groundnut oil and water.”

“Aunty, you have given such a long list. How do you remember all these things? You seem to be quite an expert in matters of cookery. What a fine neighbour I have got! I shall get lessons in cookery from

you.”

Meanwhile, the girl was called by her mother. She told her mother that she had invited the neighbour to prepare a Chinese dish for them in their own kitchen. Mr. Menon showed squeamishness about all this and took her daughter to task for mixing so freely with the lowly woman.

In the evening some guests were expected in the servant’s quarters. The esteemed servant came to Mr. Menon and said, “Sir, my guests are coming today. Please do not call us your servants in their presence. They are coming to us in connection with a matrimonial settlement. Your labelling us as servants in their presence will mar the whole situation. Please say that you have rented out this part of your bungalow to us for a handsome amount. It will elevate our position in their presence, please.”

Mr. Menon was nonplussed. However, he consented after an iota of reluctance. But the presence of these people in his bungalow was causing queer feelings and lugubrious thoughts in him. Sometimes he would doubt this master-servant relationship. An article he had recently read about this relationship in a foreign magazine was also heightening his anger against his servants. It appeared to him as if his servants were his masters. But he was tolerating their lifestyle as otherwise they were doing all the stipulated jobs in a very spick-and-span way. Apart from washing clothes, they would not even hesitate to iron them. They would get the ironing work done through some further servant. The head servant had employed some subordinate servants to get the odd jobs of the officer done.

One day, the woman in servant’s quarters dressed herself in such a charming and fashionable way that she was looking like a *hour*. The *sari* she donned was presented to her by the people who came to her house as guests a few days back. It was really an excellent *sari*. It was

looking all the more excellent on the well chiseled figure of the elegant woman, the servant's wife. Mrs. Menon was stunned to see the lady dressed up so daintily. In fact, the servant's wife overshadowed the lady of the house though the latter had only recently visited a beautician's shop to tone up her otherwise modest looks. Even the costliest and most fanciful dresses did not make the latter look as beautiful as the former was in her commonplace attire. Mrs. Menon looked aghast.

"This weird woman will ruin my life. What will my husband feel if he sees her in this figure? I have already noticed some change in his behavior. She will no more live in this house. The humble people should live humbly. How can we tolerate ....?"

The next day the servant's quarter was looking desolate. Mrs. Menon was moving like a colossus in the sprawling lawns of the bungalow.

(This story was used by The Tribune, Chandigarh, dated June 16, 1991. Its translated version had also appeared in VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad.)

## **Rambo**

That day only our pet dog Rambo and I were in my house. My wife had gone to our daughter's house in Canberra and my son was away to Europe for his honeymooning. In those days I was working as a casual teacher in a Christian College of Sydney. The college used to call the casual teachers at 6.30 a.m. after scrutinizing the absentee list of regular teachers. The casual teachers usually get two or three calls in a week. Their perks are the same as those of the regular ones. I was, however, given better perks after considering my long teaching experience in Punjab prior to my immigration to Australia. A casual teacher has to be ready for call everyday early in the morning. My college was nearly 20 kms. from my residence. If the call came, then all the morning chores had to be completed very hastily. These calls were more frequent in winter season. The casual teachers hardly get any calls in the first quarter of the year as one month after Christmas is spent in summer vacations. Almost same is the case with the last quarter as regular teachers are mostly free for class room duties because of annual examinations. In this way, the calls are more regular and frequent from May to October. This is the time of acute winter in Australia.

The daily schedule of a casual teacher is like this: toiletry and morning ablutions--7 a.m., bathing and shaving 7.15 a.m., tiffin ready 7.20 a.m., have a try of car ignition 7.25 a.m., bag ready 7.30 a.m. and arrival at the college or school at 8.15 a.m. All the chores were to be done quickly in the morning. If I was alone in the house, then even more

quickness and nimbleness were required. Same was my fate today.

I got the call. I embarked upon doing all these chores. When I was almost ready for leaving the house, then I gave a call to Rambo. I called him many times, but he was not visible anywhere. We all family members had allowed him to move freely in the house without any restraint whatsoever. He was a short statured Maltese Silky Terrier pet. My son had bought this mongrel about 8 years ago from the shopping plaza. I continued calling him but he did not appear at all. I was worried about my reaching the college in time. A casual teacher has to be extraordinarily cautious and careful about his time management. A minor lapse on his part can cause suspension of calls. I was extra worried thinking Rambo might have stealthily slipped out into the street when I had opened the front door for checking the ignition of my car. I was all the more worried to imagine he might bite somebody in the street. He could run away too and get lost somewhere. I gave a loud call--Rambo! Rambo!! But Rambo was not visible anywhere. 'O my goodness! What should I do? If Rambo is untraceable, how will I leave the house? As per my nature I had very rarely pampered Rambo in the house. If I ever called him, he would very rarely come close to me. If he had some smelling that the house owners were going away leaving him alone in the house, he would very secretly and stealthily hide himself in some untraceable nook of the house. His whole body would shiver in such situations. He never liked to be left alone. If I ever moved to leave him alone in the house, he would skip towards me and would prevent me from going out by dragging the lower parts of my pantaloons. Now even his shadow was not visible anywhere what to speak of his full body. At the same time it was impossible for me to leave for my job without tracing him. Had I gone, I would have heavy concerns and solicitude for his life. I would never do my duty easily, had I gone without tracing him. One can do some blunder when one is in

predicament. If he bit somebody outside the house in the street, I would face legal action as per the law of the land. It was Australia, not India. I had no trace of solution in my mind. Rambo had become a big headache for me. Time was precious for me minute by minute. It came into my mind that I should call my son for seeking some solution of the predicament. When I looked at my watch, it showed night in Europe at that time. Then it came to mind that I should call my wife for seeking the solution of the issue. But she was in the habit of getting up late in the morning. Hence, I should not disturb her. Helpless as I was, I did call my wife. Hearing my problem and predicament she felt helpless. She brooded over it.

Then she said, "How can I help you? You should have opened the front door very cautiously in the morning. College you must go to as you have already agreed to do so. You are not a permanent teacher. You are temporary and casual. The casual employee must be cautious at every step. Let me wake our daughter up and consult her. Await a minute."

"Your dad is facing a problem, Rambo is the issue," said my wife while waking our daughter up.

As our daughter was in deep slumber due to her late night duty, she was taking time to wake up. My wife took time to wake her up. Time was flying and I was feeling more and more upset and restless. At last my wife was able to apprise our daughter of my problem with her earnest efforts. Our daughter murmured half woken up, "Mum, very simple. We have been noticing for a long time that Rambo is very prompt to respond to you when you call him in your peculiar musical tone. When he hears his name in your typical musical tone, then he takes no time to appear. Nobody knows from where he comes. Give him call in your same musical tone."

"He is too far. How can I give a call from here in Canberra to there

in Sydney?”

“Mum, you are so simple and ignorant. Can't you understand what I dictate you?”

“No, Jasmine, no. Not at all!”

“Dial the number of dad on your phone. Then ask him to make his phone as loud as he can. Call Rambo loud in the same musical tone as you used to do in Sydney. Pronounce : Ra.....m....b...o!!”

My wife did the same following the instructions of Jasmine. The speaker of my phone was fully loud. When her voice vibrated in the interior of the house, it had a miraculous effect. Rambo appeared like an apparition in no time. In a ding-dong way he was slowly stalking towards me. Raising his mouth upward into the air, he was slowly weeping and blubbering like this: ‘you leave me alone and go away!’

Seeing Rambo appearing like this all my worries flew away on wings. I was overjoyed. I gave feed to him. Then I opened the back door for him for a minute or so. Then feeling totally relieved of all my worries, I left my house for my college. Actually Jasmine had made a new innovation (perhaps an invention) about the psychology of animals- an innovation regarding tackling them from distance through modern scientific devices. This innovation was always helpful to us in future.



## Serpentine Course

It was the fag end of the year. Simla was clad in white. Akaash came to this city on an invitation to see a match for matrimony. Kalpana was the only daughter of Mr. Kapoor, the S.H.O. in the city Kotwali. Akaash had already seen many girls for this purpose but none had appealed to the uncommon and unusual standards of his mind. Much had already been imprinted on his mind about Kalpana by his parents: her tall svelte figure with blue eyes, round face with pomegranate cheeks, long raven tresses and snow white well chiselled hands and feet. She was the product of the famous St. Bedes College of the city.

Akaash reached the house of the S.H.O. at about 8 p.m. without throwing him any prior information about the exact date of his visit. He pressed the button of the call bell of the small bungalow and Mr. Kapoor received the most worthy guest with great hospitality. Kalpana, sitting in her study, also immediately came out to see the visitor. But when she found that the man was none else but Akaash, she in no time beat hollow and under the complex of looking modest in her simple night suit, went immediately back into her room after bidding a polite polished wish to the genial guest. Akaash had the sudden seething impulse of uneasiness when he saw that the real Kalpana did differ, though not much, from the Kalpana of his dreams. Moreover, he had the long cherished wish to see the girl in her natural get up without the slightest signs of artificiality and make-up about her figure. In his earlier meetings he had seen the girls just for numbered minutes as these were the arranged parleys during which the girls had been presented before

him in their best possible adorned figures. He could talk to them for a few minutes, that too in the presence of their family members. But this meeting was a bit different one. He was supposed to stay at the same home of Mr. Kapoor for a couple of days and thus could see the girl for a longer time and make a better assessment of her physique and disposition. As by chance there was no servant in the house, Kapoor asked his daughter to prepare the tea by herself. In the meantime, he got himself engaged in the formal tete-a-tete with the guest.

“So you are straightway coming from Delhi.”

“Yes, uncle, I caught the bus a bit late in the morning. Had I done it early, I must have reached here before sunset.”

“How are your Mum and Dad?”

“They are fine, uncle. Dad has been on a business tour to Hyderabad for about a week. I got leave just for two days from the office.”

“You are in the Central Secretariat these days?”

“No, uncle; these days I am in Sanchar Bhavan. You know, we are too much busy as we are still trainees. This is the probation period for the I.A.S. officers. We are given lectures by the most senior officers. If we miss one lecture, we cannot follow the others so easily. Our departmental examinations are fully based on these lectures.”

“What post will you get after this training?”

“I shall get my first appointment as financial adviser. I am trying for Delhi. You know, sometimes they appoint the new entrants at remote stations.”

“I see.”

In the meantime, Kalpana entered with a tray in her hands. Now she was putting on a different attire with a slight make-up on her face. She placed the tray on the table and sat down on the sofa. Her father asked her to prepare a cup for herself also. All the three started sipping.

“Akaash Beta, my daughter has just completed her post graduation

in Home Science from the H.P. University securing good marks. These days I am busy in getting lecturership for her in her old college and I hope I shall be successful. After marriage you can get her appointed at Delhi if you so like. Do you prefer an earning hand?"

"Uncle, I do prefer job provided it is in the same city where I am posted."

"Kalpana Beti, what was your score in M.A.?"

"57%, Dad."

"This is a good score, of course", Akaash approved of her academic career by casting a stealthy glance at her.

The eyes met just for a moment. Though Akaash looked at her just in a natural way, there was a deep bustling ocean of ideas getting formed and faded in his mind. Then he thought of posing some common queries to the girl so that he could make a bit deeper assessment of her personality.

"What was your subject combination in graduation?"

"I had History and Home Science."

"Your Dad had told me that you had Music."

"No," Kalpana felt a bit dismayed.

"Akaash, I had simply told your father that my daughter has a keen liking for Music," Kapoor tried to placate the situation.

At the gesture of her father Kalpana lifted the crockery and went into the kitchen. Kapoor embarked upon the formal revelation about his career; how sincere he had remained throughout his career as police officer, how the people respected him in the cities of Himachal Pradesh where he had been posted from time to time and how he had solved the mystery of the most gruesome murders in the state. He told that he was awarded citation of gallantry by the President of India in 1975. Akaash listened all these things with an 'impatient patience'. Then both the guest and the host wished good night to each other and went to their

beds.

Akaash could not sleep even for a moment throughout the night. He remained pondering over the riddle of marriage and the suitability of the match. In his case it was not the question of merely the suitability of the match but it was the ever haunting question of a true copy of the girl whom he had missed by the mere onslaught of fate when he was doing his M.A. in Delhi University. He had tried his maximum to forget Shefila. But the imprints of love at first sight never, never get erased from one's mind. It was tragic that Shefila did not belong to his own caste and religion. His trip to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri in the company of Shefila and other students flashed before his mind times without number. Her wonderful airs and affectations! After this unrequited love he had made up his firm mind not to get married at all but later on, under the pressure of his parents, he had consented to go in for marriage. Thus, by seeing girl after girl he was both consoling his parents and ransacking a true copy of Shefila. That chiselled aromatic figure and melodious voice of Shefila coupled with her paragon of comeliness recurred to his mind thousands of times in his reverie :

Shefila had the voice unparalleled!.....Kalpana is not even a pale copy.....She is a goddess....Kalpana is a bitch. Life brimmed through her changing smiles...How can Kalpana equal that? No, not at all.....not the least. She exhaled aroma..... Kalpana's fragrance will never, never emulate that ....Hobson's choice! Helen is no match for Shefila....Diana herself stands nowhere....How can Juliet?.....Shefila's affability is ineffable!!! What a hell is our marriage system! ..A mere yoking together of two strangers!!...Fie on a society that has no place for inter marriages! Our society is worse than even the primitive one....Down with forgetting the modernness in the quagmire of tradition and putting the cart before the horse!....Shefila!....Kalpana?....Shefila!...Kalpana? ....Shefila!!....Kalpana??....Shefila!!.....Kalpana???....Shefila!!!!

Akaash answered the 'Good Morning' of Kapoor with the same unslept eyes which he had at the time of 'Good Night'.

Kapoor and Akaash had the morning tea in the same happy mood. Kapoor had already rung up his office and got the leave for the day. He wanted to show the city to his guest and thus impress him the best way he could. He wanted to exhibit the charisma of authority he was wielding. He wished to show him how the people saluted him when he had a usual walk at the Mall Road. He liked to impress him by providing him a chance to listen to the stories of his valour from the mouth of his colleagues. Could his valour and skill prove the worth in nabbing Akaash? He thought that he would certainly be successful as failure, he mused, was an impossibility in his case. He was sure that Akaash would feel highly impressed by the charms of the city--a queen of hills and valleys.

After taking his breakfast Akaash told the S.H.O. that he was leaving for Delhi. This sudden decision of Akaash worked like a bombshell for the host.

"Akaash Beta, it is impossible. You should stay for one more night with me," said the host in an easy mood as he thought that Akaash was only formal in his expressions.

"My stay for one night more is next to impossible, uncle. You know I am a mere trainee these days. Leave for one day more is an unfeasibility in my case," Akaash was quite informal in his tone.

"You can wire, Beta," the host tried to solve the problem. Wire? No. When leave is impossible, what effect will then the wire have? Moreover, uncle, I do not intend to prolong my leave for another day."

"Intend!" the word struck Kapoor through his ribs.

"This is my hearty request. I can pay another visit," Akaash tried to convince him.

"So, Akaash, our case is settled now. When should I come to Delhi

to perform the betrothal ceremony?”

“I shall talk to my Dad and then we shall inform you accordingly.”

“Beta, you approve the match just now. My intuition says that this is the most suitable match, Akaash. Beta, you know that Kalpana lost her mother at her young age. I am also nearing my retirement. I feel too much depressed due to my responsibility with regard to my daughter. I have also started building a house in Simla. It will happen to be your permanent residence during the summer season. Akaash, you are my son now. I think the case is settled now.”

“Uncle, I cannot say ‘yes’ now? Please understand my helplessness. Let me think over it for a while. I have great respect for you.”

The host requested him to stay for a while. Then he went into the kitchen and returned with a plate in his hands. There was some sugar in the plate. He put his hand into his pocket and fetched out his purse. He placed the sum of rupees one hundred and one in the plate and asked Akaash to get the amount as the first '*shagan*' along with a bit of sugar. Akaash was bewildered at the strange action. He, as was natural with him, flatly refused to accede to the ritual. The host persuaded him by his choicest possible tactics to accept the '*shagan*' but the latter firmly refused to get it. The S.H.O.'s effort proved a failure and then he gave up his futile persuasion.

Then Akaash, the bachelor, perhaps the confirmed bachelor, after the formal expression of reciprocating to the host the further programme and with his heart sunk into his boots bade bye to him and took to the serpentine course while looking at the yawning valleys of the city.

(The translated version of this story was used by VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad)

## In the Greener Pastures

I have been driving the Sunday evening shift of taxi for a long time. One day a white guy of about 35 caught my cab from Blacktown. He was going to Penrith. A few minutes after getting into my cab he started interacting with me :

“How going, mate ? When did you start?”

“I started at 3 O’clock, only two and a half hours before.”

“It is too hot today?”

“Yea, it is 36 degree. Really it is very hot. But in car it is cool and nice because of AC.”

“I am too tired.”

“You seem to have finished job?”

“Oh, yes. Just finished at 5 O’clock.”

“What do you do?”

“I am a machine operator.”

“When did you start?”

“Started at 7 am and finished at 5 pm.”

“It means you had ten hours shift.”

“Yes, today is Sunday. Double time.”

“What is your hourly rate?”

“20 bucks an hour.”

“It means today it was 40 bucks an hour?”

“Yes.”

“It means you have made \$400. It is really good money.”

“My friend, everything is very expensive. This much money has no

value these days. Do you have family? I mean, are you married ?”

“Yes, I have been married for 35 years.”

“Oh, really! What about children?”

“I have two children. They are grown up and are self-dependent.”

“Where are you from?”

“You mean country?”

“Yes.”

“I am from India.”

“Do you like here?”

“Yes, this country is fantastic.”

“What is the major difference between India and Australia?”

“Infrastructure, demography, ecology, currency, landscaping, geography, polity, civic sense, crime rate, topography, tourism--juxtapositionally all are poles apart.”

“Oh, really? Are they better?”

“Of course, they are overwhelmingly better.”

“It means you have come into heaven.”

“Of course! What about you?”

“I am sad here.”

“Why?”

“This country is very expensive.”

“I do not agree. If you work normally, you can easily lead a good life. One must not be lavish. As compared to many other countries of the world, this country is really providing better facilities and living environments to the people. That is why people from all over the world are getting attracted towards these greener pastures. Do you have family?”

“No, I cannot afford.”

“Do you own a house?”

“No, it is too expensive.”



“It means, you are renting?”

“Yes, I am. Do you make good money from taxi driving?”

“Last Sunday I made \$ 200 for me in 10 hours. I think it is good money.”

“I am surprised you call it good money. In my opinion, even 400 earned by me in 10 hours is not a good money.”

“You may be spending lavishly. Do you drink?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Which brand?”

“All brands?”

“Beer, wine or spirit?”

“All.”

“Where do you dine? Do you prepare your food at home?”

“No, I do not prepare at all. I always dine outside in a good restaurant.”

“What about marriage?”

“I cannot afford at all.”

“How many girlfriends?”

“Not now. I had one or two before. Women are money suckers.”

“What about libido ? Do you go anywhere?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Once in a month?”

“No, once in a week.”

“How much do you spend?”

“300 bucks every week.”

“How much do you earn in a week?”

“I work five days a week. I take home \$ 1200 after tax. 450 for house rent + 500 for dining and drinking + 300 for whorehouse = 1250. No sufficient money for travelling or outing, no money for paying the bills, no money for festivities.”

“What was the need of catching this taxi? You could easily go to Penrith by train.”

“The next train service is after forty minutes. I cannot wait. I am too tired. Moreover, I need to catch a taxi from Penrith station for my home. That further costs me \$ 25.”

“Why don't you keep your private car?”

“I cannot afford. Moreover, it will be too expensive. Buying it and then maintaining it. How will I pay the penalties? White elephant!”

“Do you catch the taxi everyday?”

“No, not always. Only when there is railway track work or I get late here. How can I afford taxi every day? You have seen my income. You are really joking. It is unbelievable how young migrants afford everything in new pastures.”

“John, I think there is something wrong with your money management. Everybody can save something frugal even in adverse circumstances unless he is totally unemployed. I also work ten hours. No doubt, taxi is a twelve hour shift but I work only ten hours. If I work six days, I can make one thousand. I was making this much for six years when I was a regular driver two years ago. How many years have you been working?”

“The same length of years as you.”

“It is really amazing that you saved nothing for owning a home or private car. We people usually think you are the better planners as compared to us.”

“My friend, we are better planners in a different way. We can plan a better tour, a better picnic, better artistry, better aesthetics, better gardening, better tapestry, better diplomacy, better landscaping, better horticulture, better counselling so on and so forth but we cannot plan better money management. Only those of us can do better money planning who have massive income. I have frugal income. How can I

plan it?”

“John, when we migrants arrive here, we even have less income than you. In the beginning we were depending only on dole or social security. With the help of that meagre income we developed some skill in us. On the basis of that skill we started doing some job. We start saving from the very beginning. You can also start doing so even at this stage, my friend.”

“I am surprised at your saving skill. I cannot understand how you people afford to buy a house. I am all the more surprised how you pay off your home loan in ten or fifteen years. You get uprooted from your homeland and then you arrive here. You start from the scraps here. You are great. You are really wonderful. Your commitments to your families are also wonderful. How can we emulate you?”

Meanwhile, Penrith came. John requested me to pull up at the wayside bottle shop. He bought a carton of booze and travelled further. His residence came. I dropped him and came back pondering over the ten hour shift both of us were doing. His way of life and our way of life! Poles apart!!

## **Storm in a Teacup**

Prof. Deepak was transferred from Chandigarh to a rural college at Wazidpur. The sudden transfer from a forward area to a backward college became a problem with him and his total mental apparatus was to undergo a radical change, if he was to make him a complete success in the rural environments. While handling his subject of English literature at his previous college he never felt any hitch in pondering over the purely sensual aspects of English literature and he would explain every detail with desirable skill and aesthetic exuberance. His students would let their feelings ejaculate into the high flown caprices of his lecture and he was celebrated as a perfect success by them.

The college at Wazidpur was situated in the lap of pastoral surroundings. No doubt, it was a congenial place for the handling of the pastoral aspects of literature but the naked clarity of English poets about the love-tones presented in their works became a problem with Prof. Deepak as the girls, being orthodox, in his class were very much touchy about these aspects. The environments all around were suffocating and his mental reins could at any time be pulled at the behest of the wiseacres of the area. The integrity of his personality was to be sacrificed at the altar of false and staunch traditional views, if he was to establish himself as a respectable figure in the college. It was surely the laceration of his mental whole, his lips were not to be the reflection of his brain, his mental make-up was to be fragmented. He was surely to fumble between the two worlds -- the world of his complete mental expression and that of the college that he was working

in. The barred outlet of his feelings might throw him into the dungeon of mental dissatisfaction, such a sensitive man he was. The literature---whatever the genre may be---is a very delicate subject to be handled by delicate brains and the perfect involvement in the lecture was the essential aspect of Deepak's personality. He would lose his identity in the class room and his fancy would roam with the fancy of the poet himself.

As usual the professor took his class in that college. He gave the general idea about the teaching of English language. He tried his best to impress the students by his gesticulating method of teaching. He continued his work for a few days and there was a gleam of happiness and satisfaction on the faces of his students. However, he often watched the impression of interrogation on the faces of a couple of girl students but they never dared to express themselves. The impression of the whole class was, of course, receptive. The students were one day in an easy mood and they did not seem to be serious about the studies. The professor mildly persuaded them for the lecture but their unwillingness was quite evident from their faces. A few of them desired him to speak on some general topics. After telling a few things about the national and international affairs he posed them some general questions which ranged from their education at the school to the changing environments at the college level.

“How many among you have done your Matriculation Standard in the big cities ?” the professor intended to gauge the mental calibre of his students.

Three or four students raised their hands.

The teacher observed that a back bencher was feeling impatient and was elbowing the other student. So, he ordered him immediately to stand up.

Then the student stood up and vomited out his feelings, “Sir, I pine

to ventilate my feelings about co-education.”

The teacher was reticent but the student kept on remarking, “sir, sir, this is for the first time that we are studying in a co-educational college. Never before did we get an opportunity to sit and study among the girls. Sir, my feeling is .....

Immediately a girl stood up like a whirlwind and interrupted her class-fellow by addressing the teacher in a shrill voice, “Sir, what does he mean by it?”

“This is his impression and you should take it easily. Isn't it so?” the teacher tried to pacify her .

The boys expressed their consent with the teacher.

The girl, however, gave way after the mild persuasion by the professor. The peevishness was writ large on her face. The next day the teacher was to teach a love poem in which the lover is infatuated with passion and he craves for the caresses of his beloved. He will die if the beloved does not shower her dotings on him. The poem ended with the lines:

I fall upon the thorns of life,  
I die! I faint! I fail!  
Let thy love in kisses rain  
On my lips and eyelids pale.

The adolescent students took very keen interest in the poem and the teacher explained it fully by giving complete expression of his feelings.

Some of the girls who had been living in the suffocating backward area felt discomfited in the class when the teacher explained the poem..

Talking about the love in backward rusty environments of some families is a curse and the girls in these houses are kept completely suppressed. Afterwards when they get married, they cannot pass

through the society freely and frankly and this tinge of their personality becomes a lifelong disease and sometimes they themselves feel dwarfed in the circumstances in which they have been placed after marriage. Their personality remains half grown and it has a dire psychological impact on them.

When the professor explained the line, 'Let thy love in kisses rain', the heads of some of the girls were cast down and the expression was that of complete uneasiness. The fire, however, smouldered into flame when the same girl stood up and made a challenge to the university publication bureau and to the professor by her harsh remarks.

"Shame! Such things are taught to spoil us. Sir, we cannot tolerate such 'loose' talks in the class."

She was speaking as if she was the representative of the whole womankind. It was somewhat natural that the teacher should say something about the mentality required for the co-education and the study of literature. He made the student sit by his best persuasion and said certain things about the environmental effects on the mind of a man. He also realized what a big gulf was there between the minds of the girls in the big cities and those of the girls living and studying in the parochial and sordid surroundings of the rural areas. He also expressed his surprise how he would tackle the implications of his subject in such an ideologically backward place. He also felt there should never exist the curse of co-education in such places. He was wonder-struck at the intolerance and touchiness of the girls.

All these feelings of the teacher were considered a dishonor by that girl and she stood up and went out of the class room with these words :

"I will let you know how to deal with the girls. I will level twenty charges on you and mine will be victory. Pooh! You dishonour the girls in the presence of boys."

Deepak had heard much about the defiant and stubborn nature of the villagers but he had never imagined that he would himself be the victim of such fussy and farcical circumstances. He had never thought that the village girls would make a minor thing their prestige point and to protect their prestige they would charge him for no reasons. Moreover, he had never come to know that the head of the institution was a puppet in the hands of some influential figures of the area--the figures who had helped the head settle his case of embezzlement by putting false evidence before the court. Deepak had no idea that the girl who defied his authority in the class was a girl from the family of those so-called prominent figures. The principal was a shrewd man and was born and educated during the pre-independence days and was hence, well-acquainted with the policy of the English people who had ruled over India by their policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Chaos and disorder prevailed in the institution due to the tricky policy of the head who was, in reality, an unprincipled principal. He would divide the staff members into groups and watch their abusive and quarrelsome attitude towards one another by sitting in the corner of the institution. He was really a snake in the grass.

So, the new comer Prof. Deepak was the victim of this farcical atmosphere. He was at his wit's end to think what would happen. Moreover, it was the case of a girl--a case which can never be tolerated by the uneducated rustic people of the area.

As soon as he left the class, he came to know that the girl had also submitted her complaint to the principal. He was at that time sure that the principal would weigh the pros and cons of the matter. Rather he was certain that the principal was wise enough to know the exact situation. He had no idea about the partial attitude of the principal.

Deepak, at the guidance of his lawyer room-mate, also next day submitted his complaint to the principal against the student. Though he



thought that it was simply a trifle and there was nothing serious about the issue, keeping in view the attitude of the principal he thought it wise to follow the advice of his lawyer friend. He, however, remained unruffled about the issue and there was no fear of any surprising furtherance. After teaching two periods when he was basking in the sun in the college lawn, he saw a peon coming towards him. The peon requested him to put his signature on a confidential register and receive a letter from the principal. The professor received the letter and read its contents:

Dear Sir,

I have received the complaint of a girl student, Miss Ranjit, against you. I have also received your complaint against the girl. The complaint of the girl student was received on 12th instant and your complaint came on 13th. The girl student was earlier found weeping in the girls room.

The student has complained:

1. That you said such things in the class as cannot be said to a girl student.
2. That you are in possession of her writings.
3. That you have characterized her immoral in the class room .
4. That you say such things in the class as show the girl community downgraded in the presence of boys.

You are given an opportunity to explain your position immediately.

Yours faithfully,

Sd/- Principal.

Prof. Deepak was flabbergasted at the attitude of the principal and the charges of the girl. He thought that woman is the strangest product of the universe--a product that can entrap you by both the positive and negative means. If she has the intention to rise, she can touch the very light of the heavenly bodies and can help you at the cost of her own

life but if she wears the garb of a devil, every pore on her body will be a piercing needle that can prick you at any time and can thrust your mouth into the dirtiest gutter. Her airs continue changing at the smallest units of time and the contemplative and reflective brain of man may at any time miss the moods of her mind.

Moreover, the wrong siding of the principal with the girl was a bewildering incident for the professor. He had never thought of the strange charges of the girl and the queer attitude of the head.

The head of an institution is always expected to be fair and impartial but this attitude of the head would surely expose him to be incapable of the impartial and supreme chair of a head. The hard-boiled cry and slogan-shouting for justice is all galore in our beloved country. Justice is not a paragon of flesh and blood that she should hold a whip in her hand and snub the wrong doers with her kingly mein.

The age of the tyrants and dictators is over and a new ubiquitous light of freedom and liberty is prevailing in almost every nook and corner of the world. What can the insertion of the word 'justice' in the constitution do, when the high authorities are corrupt and partial in their dealings. Can you expect any honesty from the big mass of the people, if the chief minister of a state and the prime minister of a country have bad intention towards the deliverance of goods? Be before what you have become. See again what you have seen once. Down with the chairmen! Alas for the uneducated educated!!! Hell with autocracy!!! Such was the shuttle-cocking of the different ideas in the mind of Prof. Deepak.

He was yet to give a reply to the explanation letter served by the principal when another sudden thing happened.

In a spur of moment, he was called into the office of the principal. When he entered the office, he was stunned. To his extreme surprise, in the office he saw two sturdy villagers equipped with shields and swords sitting in the office. When he entered, they looked at him with

fiery eyes. Asking him to take the chair the principal said :

“They are the respectable and influential men of the area--the guardians of the girl you came in conflict with. They have expressed their desire to simply see your face. Moreover, they want to question you about the incident. Mr. Deepak, you know one has to bow before the influence of the people of the area, if one is to gain respect in an institution. You know, they are the popular figures and even the big officials are accountable to them for their activities. They are the old feudal lords and have been endowed with a *jagir* by the English government due to their help to the establishment. They can move mountains and even possible things are not impossible for them.”

“Sir, did I say anything wrong in the class?” the professor dared to ask.

The man with sword looked at him with fire in his eyes and said :

“Boy you do not know that we will punch the man who speaks so straight-forwardly in the class rooms. If you are doubtful, confirm it from any guy in the area. This is our college; we are its patrons; you need to remain under our control ; the principal is our man and we have done much for him. Mend your ways, if you want to spend a few days over here.”

Prof. Deepak was dumbfounded. He felt extremely sorry for the miserable set-up of things in free society.

The men stood up and went out saying bye to the principal.

“Sir, you did not call me to explain my position and simply issued me a letter without any verification from the class. By your activity you have put a simple girl on the platform of universal importance and have thought nothing about the dignity of a teacher.”

“Mr. Deepak, be cautious that you are talking to the head of an institution. Please, go now and do your work honestly. Remain cautious and careful in future.”

Deepak came out of the office of the principal. It was sure that it was the hour of victory of a simple girl and the teacher's status had been made a mere zero by the principal. He remained upset over the incident for many days. He was pained at the setting of things in the area. The college became an altar with him where the honesty of the persons like him was sacrificed with fun and frolic at the behest of bossism. Nepotism and goondaism prevailed everywhere. The race of supercession was at its full height. The college was a hell for a sensitive and honest man like Deepak. He resigned from his job and went to Delhi to join the J.N. University for his Master of Philosophy degree. At the same time, he started working for his Doctorate degree under the thesis : 'Teaching of English Literature in the Rural Areas.' He gave free and frank expression to his feelings in his thesis. The girl completed her graduation by fits and starts. Every new class rendered a change in her outlook. Mixing up and making friends with some girls of a bit forward nature made her a bit liberal in her outlook. The further study of literature in her graduation opened up new vistas of light in her brain. The common group dance of the boys and girls in the college festivals looked her odd and dirty sprees in the beginning but by and by she started enjoying them.

After her graduation she joined teacher's training course. She learnt much during the training. She met various types of teachers and students. As that college was situated in a big city, she got the chance to meet the advanced and fashionable girls. She started copying their manners, etiquettes and dress styles. Though these things were disliked by her parents and the illiterate woman folk in her village, education had drawn her out of the dungeon of mean and rustic thinking and a new morning of enlightenment had dawned upon her mind. As she was ascending the ladder of education step by step, she was realizing much change in her ideology too. If she dressed herself shabbily, her fellow girls would make mockery of her. Society made her a human being

from a mere rough and uncultured mass of blood and flesh.

After this training, she joined the university department Chandigarh for her Post-graduation in English literature. She completed one year of her post-graduation by remaining in the hostel. The hostel life had cast such a spell on her mind that the village now looked a hell to her. The glamour of the city beautiful had entered into her very vitals and she never liked to leave that city. She would sometimes ponder over her past life: how she used to play with her friends during her childhood--her tousled hairs daubed with earth, how her innocent creep into the college after school life looked strange to her, how she used to cover her head with *dupatta* during a few days in the college and how she had raised a storm over a small incident in the class of Prof. Deepak...all these things seemed alarmingly strange to her now.

She then joined the second year of her M.A. When she attended the class on the very first day, she was stunned to see the teacher in her class--same Prof. Deepak with sober and stylistic look. Deepak had put in such hard labour that he got his degree of philosophy standing first in the University. His Doctorate was also almost complete. Due to his bright career, he was offered a job by the Panjab University for the teaching of M.A classes.

After a fit of surprise, the girl felt thrilled with happiness. There was however, an expression of the curious blend of surprise and happiness on her face. She had got the chance to meet the man proper.

On the other hand, Deepak had never thought that he would teach the same girl at some stage in his life. Moreover, he could not recognize her due to the radical change in her dressing up. There was totally an uncommon change in her hair style, a wonderful transformation of physical curves--a changed personality altogether.

When Deepak came out of the class after teaching, he heard a feminine voice behind him.

“Sir, sir, would you please give me a few minutes ?”

“Of course, of course, why not.”

“Sir, how...how I should say....sir... I'm same Ranjit, sir...who did...th....a...t...fu....ss....at... Wazidpur... college. Excuse me, sir ! Excuse me !! I really repent for that ; I really feel ashamed, sir. You were quite right sir, at that time. My family environments have been my severest enemy, sir. However, it was not a fault of mine.”

“Oh, how wonderful it is that I see you again in my class, Ranjit! Really strange ! So now you have realized what reality is. Thank God! Does not matter, Ranjit. I know that it was not your fault but it was the fault of silly circumstances. The convicts in the prisons are quite faultless; you know, they are mere victims of environments. The wise people say that it is as impossible to escape the influence of environments as it would be to get out of one's skin. Environments are indeed like the overactive potters that mould our human clay. So now you have realized the value of education.”

“Yes, sir, I am fully changed now.”

“You know, the light of education makes our brain dazzle into hundred new panoramas. So now you have joined this department and try to study hard. Do not feel sorry for your previous mistake. I have no grudge against you. When the teacher bears a grudge against a student--however mischievous the student may be--he no more remains a teacher. He becomes a devil as that time. Teacher's duty is to reform, not to avenge. I will now guide you properly.”

“Thank you, sir. Sir, would you please recommend me some books ?”

“Yes, why not. I have some books here in my book shelf; you, please come and collect them.”

Both of them went towards the room. In a few moments the girl was coming with two books in her hand: ‘Rape of the Lock’ and ‘Much Ado about Nothing.’

## Official Tour

A light green Fiat stopped in front of the Sub-Divisional Office of the Public Works Department at Wazirpur. S.L. Sharma, P.W.D. Director, short, bald and fat alighted from the vehicle with an aristocratic air and straightway slipped into the office of the S.D.O. The S.D.O's chair was vacant and only a few of the subordinate staff were present.

The L.D.C. (Lala Dukhi Chand, as he was generally dubbed in common parlance) rushed into the office with a quavering sensation in the lower part of his legs and greeted the important visitor in trembling voice: “Ji Sahib, our Sahib left the office just few minutes before you arrived. Sir, he was to grace a tea party at his friend's house. Sir, Head Clerk Sahib also left just half an hour ago as he had received an urgent call from the hospital.”

Fortunately, the L.D.C. had immediately recognised the Director. He had met him once through a big gun to have his transfer orders revoked. The L.D.C. rushed back into the adjoining room and ordered the peons to bring snacks for the Sahib and to inform the S.D.O. and the H.C. of the sudden advent of the pest. Within minutes the S.D.O. and the H.C. were in the office with fallen faces. The S.D.O. met the Director after recovering his composure.

“So, you went to attend some party during office hours. Then we complain against the slow pace of work in the Department. Moreover, you have utilised the Government jeep for your private purpose. If you officers don't realise your responsibility how can you expect your subordinates to be responsible? Mr. S.D.O., if gold rusts, what shall

iron do?” Sharma snubbed the S.D.O. just when the latter was standing on the threshold of his office.

“Sir, I was absent just for half an hour. I beg your pardon, sir.” the S.D.O. explained in his heart of hearts abusing the L.D.C. for telling the truth. He wished the L.D.C. had told the boss that he was away on official duty.

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The situation returned to normal after Sharma and the S.D.O. took tea. They discussed many things about the sub-division. The latter told the former that the work of metalling the roads was going on quite satisfactorily and that the division was working well under his supervision. In the meantime, the inspectors, sub inspectors and S.O's. had been informed about the sudden arrival of doom and they also rushed to headquarters.

After exchanging views with the S.D.O. the director asked him to call the inspectors into the office. The S.D.O. rang the bell and the peon sprang into the room and snapped into military attention. At the order of the S.D.O. the peon called Sultan Singh into the office. Sultan Singh hearing his name called was stunned to his ribs.

He came in with a subdued expression thinking: ‘My work is okay. I have always remained honest. I am not corrupt like the other people in the department. I cannot guess why the Director has called me.’ He was directed to sit on a sofa in the corner of the office.

Then the Director asked the S.D.O. to call the second inspector. Verma entered sneakily with his thoughts: ‘I am the most honest man in the department even more honest than the *Bara Sahib*. I have no weak point like the other people. Why has the Director called me?’ Verma sat on the sofa next to Sultan Singh.

At the order of the Director the S.D.O. called the third inspector Aftaab Mohammad a robustly built gentleman from U.P. While entering



with apparent confidence, Mohammad was brooding: 'I am from a minority community. These officers have always behaved in a communal manner. I have been saying *namaaz* daily and have never thought of adopting corrupt means though the whole department stinks of corruption. Today, doom has befallen me I am undone. Nobody will safeguard my interests. Only my own guts and Allah will save me!'

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All the three inspectors sat on the sofa beneath the lordly gaze of the Director. The Director asked the S.D.O. if there was one more inspector in the division? But was told that there were only three inspectors. The Director thought for a moment and asked if there was one Mr. Chawla. The S.D.O. told his boss that Chawla was not an inspector but a sub-inspector. The peon standing in the door stealthily conveyed to Chawla that he was being talked about.

Chawla, sitting in the clerical office, was at his wit's end. He suspected some disciplinary action was at hand. Still he did not lose heart as he had a strong family background and could easily approach big officials if some action was taken against him due to corruption and dereliction of duty. In another minute Chawla was called into the office. Chawla stood near the S.D.O's table, his face had lost all colour.

The Director looked over his spectacles and said, "So you are Mr Chawla?" The sub-inspector's heart stopped throbbing for a few seconds as he thought of the thunderbolt about to fall on him.

He stammered, "Y.....y.....yes sir."

"You are sub-inspector, not inspector," the director quipped.

"Yes sir, I am sub-inspector." Chawla's voice was sepulchral.

"Mr. Chawla, I have come to appreciate you all for your commendable services."

The atmosphere in the room returned to almost normalcy.

"Mr. Chawla have you a brother who is S.D.O. in the Department

of Public Health?”

Chawla replied that he had.

“He is posted at.....?” the director probed.

“At Bahadurpur sir,” Chawla answered.

The Director got down to his real business: “Would you please help me meet him today? I have to talk to him about an urgent issue.”

Chawla was only too glad to help.

The Director asked the S.D.O. to send all the inspectors back to their duties. The inspectors bowed before their esteemed boss and went their way. Once out of the room they heaved a sigh of relief....

Admonishing the S.D.O. to keep everything in perfect trim, the Director departed for Bahadurpur in the company of Chawla. The sub-inspector now was in high spirits to find himself in the car of the big boss. He was thinking ‘Director Sahib is our own man. Now I need not fear adopting any corrupt means. The whole Division is under my thumb--even the S.D.O.! I can now get station of my choice. No body can stand in my way.’

It was evening by the time they reached Bahadurpur. The senior Chawla had gone to the house of his friend so they drove on to the friend's house. The car glided to a stop in front of a large house and the sub-inspector, leaving the Director in the car, went in.

Senior Chawla was taken aback to see his younger brother and more so to learn that the P.W.D. Director had come to meet him. He asked his brother to call the Director into the house. The message was conveyed but the Director insisted that he needed only few minutes and hence S.D.O. Chawla should come out. The sub-inspector again went inside and returned with his elder brother.

“Mr. Chawla”, said the director, “please come with me. We shall then sit at the guest house and discuss the matter.” Chawla got in alongwith his brother and the driver was ordered to proceed. At the

guest house the Director ordered the servants to set some chairs out on the lawn. The S.D.O. could not make out why he had been contacted by the Director of another department.

The Director began: "Mr Chawla, I am to talk to you on a private matter. I have a friend, Mr. Mehta. He is the Accounts Officer in the Department of Energy and Manpower. We have been neighbours in Chandigarh for the last 20 years. He told me about you."

"Director Sahib, I have not followed your point," The S.D.O. interrupted.

"Mr. Chawla did you give your matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper? I was asked by Mr. Mehta to contact you during my tour. You know my tour was pre-planned. This is a mere co-incidence. Please tell me what are your preferences and demands?"

The talk of Miss Mehta, the Mehta family and its position, financial and otherwise, went on for a while.

Finally Chawla said: "I have minted much money from my Department. Whatever Mr. Mehta gives willingly in dowry will be acceptable. I have no special demands."

The matter settled, the Director dropped the Chawlas at their residence. He turned in for the night at guest house, pleased that he had been able to help his friend Mr. Mehta---and all on Department expense. At Mehta's request he had arranged the trip as an 'official tour'.

(This story was used by The Tribune, Chandigarh, dated November 6, 1983. Its translated version had also appeared in VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad.)

## The Stag

It was a cold and foggy morning made all the more miserable by intermittent showers of rain. Most people shivered and stayed indoors due to the inclement weather. Still a number of farmers had arrived at Wazirpur grain market. As usual, they had come quite early and their carts and tractor-trailers were standing all over in one particular order.

Ruldu was standing before the shop of his employer, the rich grain dealer, Ram Rakha Mal. Ruldu in his deep hearty voice was enticing farmers to the shop. Suddenly there was a commotion in the market. Ruldu ran to one side madly chasing a stag. The hills were not far away and the stag must have wandered into the market during the night. The animal was terrified and ran helter-skelter. A number of farmers joined Ruldu in the chase. The bullocks watched their jungle brother with their ears erect and eyes frightened. With sticks and stones in their hands the men, at one point, had the animal cornered but it lunged past them and then in confusion it took a soaring leap that landed it in a shallow pond where it could not move easily.

Ruldu and the others followed it into the water. Overpowering it after a hard struggle they put a rope around its neck. With much difficulty they lead it out of the pond. To most of the people, who were seeing a stag for the first time, it presented a beautiful sight and they wondered at its soft skin, great spreading antlers and dark lustrous eyes.

It was decided to shut up the animal in Ram Rakha's shed. But then a quarrel began between Ruldu and the farmers over the ownership of

the big game trophy. The farmers maintained that they had put in more effort to catch the beast and, but for their help, Ruldu could never have overpowered it. Some of the farmers proposed that the stag be slaughtered and its flesh distributed among all who were involved in the catch.

They would have gone on wrangling but Ram Rakha intervened, “All of you are ignorant about such matters. Don’t you know that forest animals are public property and none can harm them? If you are caught slaughtering it, then you are the criminals in the eyes of law. The Government has banned *shikar* and whosoever is caught at it is heavily punished. Don’t you know that a few months back two *shikaris* were caught red-handed by the authorities and a heavy fine, apart from a few months sentence, was levied on them? You should immediately hand the stag over to the authorities.”

By this time the police had also scented their ‘game’. The S.H.O along with some constables drove up in a van and immediately took Ruldu and several other men into custody. The Police officer threatened those who dealt cruelly with the animal with severe punishment. Ram Rakha was also arrested as he had confined it in his shed. The arrested men were aghast at what had befallen them. They thought that they had simply caught the animal alive and this act should not be treated as a crime. Moreover, they had not whisked it away from its habitation and then caught it, nor had they killed it.

The S.H.O. telephoned the Divisional Forest Officer and after a few minutes the D.F.O also arrived. The D.F.O declared that the animal would either become the property of some zoo or it would be set free. Ram Rakha begged the police officer to release the arrested men. At first the officer adamantly refused but later on, after getting ‘*daan*’ (bribe) of Rs 5000/- , he let them go. The stag was brought to the *malkhana* in the *kotwali*.

“We shall hand over the animal to you in the morning” the S.H.O. told the D.F.O. when they were about to depart.

“I think we should meet in the evening and discuss the matter in detail,” the D.F.O. suggested.

In the evening both the officers met.

“S.H.O. Sahib, if you don't mind, let me suggest a plan. It will be beneficial to both of us,” the D.F.O. said and paused for a moment, a mischievous smile playing upon his face.

“You think we should swallow it?” the police officer nonchalantly asked.

“You have stolen my words. You know better than I how to hush up the matter.”

“ ‘Swallow it’ is quite literally what I had in mind. In fact, venison has become my favorite dish. My forest guards hunt and give me the lion's share every day. It tastes almost as good as my timber deals. Well, who does not avail of the easy chance these days?”

“Bald commercial transactions!” exclaimed the S.H.O., “We handle things tactfully. We create situations for the people to make us offerings. We never demand directly.” The S.H.O. poured another peg for his guest and picked up a savory piece of *tandoori* chicken, sent as compliments from the nearby hotel.

The next morning a police jeep loaded up the stag to take it back to the *jungle* and crowd gathered around the vehicle to have a last look at the fretful animal. They were glad that it would soon be happily browsing on the forest greenery.

An hour later the vehicle reached the heart of the forest where the magnificent Forest Guest House stood.

There the stag was swiftly done to death and the meat taken straight to the kitchen. That night both the officers and their subordinates feasted on tender venison while sipping pegs of smooth, amber Scotch.

It was settled between them that the hide, skillfully tanned, would go to the D.F.O. and the antlers would decorate the bungalow of the police officer. The bones were to be sold to a medicine man, the money earned thus to be shared by both officers.

Back in the town gentle, god-fearing folk said to each other, “Thanks heaven , the poor innocent stag escaped the cruel hands of Ruldu and the farmers and rejoined its folk in the jungle!”

(This story was used by The Tribune, Chandigarh, in eighties. Its translated version had also appeared in VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad.)

## **Roll No. 13420**

“How is your research work, Mr. Pathak? I think you will become a doctor in a year or so. What is your area of research-----?”

“Mr. Mathur, my topic of research is ‘Political Thoughts of M.N. Roy’. These days I burn midnight oil for completing my thesis. I am going through Roy’s book ‘India in Transition’ these days. See, this is the book. Lifting the book up Pathak showed it to Mathur, I have read an interesting story in this book. You will also feel impressed with this account.”

“This incident will be similar as is the wonderful memory of Lala Hardyal. It is said that the memory of Lala ji was so strong and indelible that he could explain a book chapter wise from backwards which he had read just once,” Prof. Mathur said while looking a bit above his specs.

“No, not at all. This incident is not in any way like the memory of Lala ji. It is related to a betrayal of one of the mates of M.N. Roy. Roy’s friend, Abani Mukherjee had helped him prepare the book ‘India in Transition’. He had actually prepared the manuscript of this book. When the book was ready, he declared that he himself was the author of this book and that M.N. Roy had stolen his matter and got it published under his own name. The Communist International which published this book conducted deep enquiry into the issue. It ordered Abani Mukherjee to relate the book chapter wise. Abani failed to do so. It was assumed from this action that the real writer was M.N. Roy. Abani was bluffing and plagiarising.”



“Mr. Pathak, see the character and moral standard of even the highly educated people. See, how much it has deteriorated. Only numbered professions like that of education in which we are uncorrupt. Nepotism, bungling, leg-pulling, favouritism galore! We teachers are the most honest lot of the society. Our conscience does not allow us to cheat anyone. Even then we are losers so far as the perks are concerned. We are gold. If even gold rusts, what will iron do? We have some status in society. We got it as a boon from our Gurus. Our profession is the mother of all other professions. We produced philosophers, provided guidance to millions of people, though in the eyes of general public we are simply teachers.” Prof. Mathur kept on constantly harping on the string of honesty till the time both of them parted company with each other after stepping out of the coffee house.

When Mathur reached home, he saw an envelope in his letter box. When he opened it, he saw a railway receipt in it. Wasting no time, he rushed to the railway station on his scooter. Showing RR to the station master he took hold of the big bundle of answer-books and drove back home. He took rest for half an hour and then he tore open the bundle. He counted the plethora of answer books and checked all the papers which were found in the bundle. He put the blank award sheets at one side. Now the test instalment was flashing before his eyes. This instalment of 20 answer books was to be dispatched to the head examiner in 24 hours. The bundle was already bit late.

Mathur started examining the answer books quickly, at the same time he was murmuring:

“Very poor lot--It looks like some rural college--The rural students have no grip of English--Even urban students are also not good in this foreign language--Four done--Two more done--I need hardly two more hours for examining all twenty.”

Mathur marked the sheets so quickly and non-chalantly that he

was able to prepare the test instalment in two hours. The big bundle of 300 answer sheets was done in one week. The university wants an examiner to mark 100 answer books in one week. Mr. Mathur finished the job of three weeks in one week. He very quickly prepared the award lists and dispatched them to the university. He put the counterfoils in safe custody and locked them. Every examiner is supposed to keep the counterfoils in safe custody for six months. It is done so to prepare new sheets in case the university secrecy branch loses them. Once it had so happened in the secrecy branch of a university that the result was destroyed in a fire and then it got it anew from the counterfoils which the sub-examiners preserved for stipulated duration of time.

Three days elapsed since Mathur had sent the papers book to the head examiner. Mathur was sitting in his study and was calculating the money he would make from this marking assignment. There was a knock at the door. He opened the door and saw a colleague of his old college Prof. Sat Pal, standing at the door. He was really surprised to see Sat Pal.

“Sat Pal, you did not sound me at all that you were coming to me. God knows from where you have suddenly appeared. Are you still in the same Arya College or somewhere else?”

“Mathur sahib, I am still there. I had the notion you do not have provision of telephone at your residence. Had I mailed a letter to you, then it would have been too late. It is a quick job. Moreover, we know all the lecturers are still stuck at their places because of paper marking spree. All go for outing after finishing their paper marking work. Punjab has introduced table marketing system because of militancy there. Here in Haryana, we still have the same old system. We receive sheaves from railway station. Sometimes, this old system is useful too.”

Sat Pal was still speaking when Mathur interrupted him, “Brother, what do you mean when you say old system is useful.”

“I will explain everything. First, let me know how you are. We had spent centuries together in that college. Then you joined Govt. College. I am still there. My college is good too. We could not meet each other in the club in the evening. We could not meet each other in the college for a long time as I was most of the time in playgrounds. You know, physical education is such a subject.”

“Sat Pal, I am fine. Remained over busy in paper marking. Now I am free. Now I am going to Shimla with my family.”

Meanwhile, the maid servant came with tea and snacks. Both the professors started sipping tea.

“Sat Pal ji, you have covered long distance, you look tired. You could have sent simply an errand if you had something urgent in your mind. Your sudden physical appearance smacks of something important and urgent.”

“Mr. Mathur, you are right. I do have something special.”

“Then why do you rouse my curiosity? Please tell frankly what you mean.”

“Mathur sahib, I came to know that you have got paper marking job from my university too. Our university was facing the problem of shortage of examiners. That is why it hired some examiners from Punjab university. You are doing double duty, this time. Minting double money! I have approached you after digging deep into the answer book of a student. If he fails, it will be hardly by three or four marks. He is a good football player of my college. You are marking paper B,” Sat Pal handed the roll number to Mathur, “I know it is secrecy roll number. The candidate has left one or two easy identities in his answer book.”

“What are they?”

“He has fully inked the hole of the answer-book--the hole which is used for stitching it with supplementary answer-sheets. I also know the way the candidate has serialised his questions. I have the hand

writing specimen of the candidate with me too. I can call the candidate here if you so wish and allow. He will quickly identify and trace his answer sheet. If you allow, we can make him add one or two answers here in your presence.”

“Brother, “this is all useless. I had sent the total bundle to the head examiner four days ago. All marking finished. You could do whatever you wanted if I had the answer-sheets with me.”

“Mathur sahib, you did the job very quickly. I came by wasting no time but you have done it quicker than me.”

“Actually, I had plans to go to Shimla. University holiday home has already been booked. I had job of two universities. I worked like a machine. Do you wish to get some extra ordinary advantage from this candidate?”

“Mathur sahib, the father of the boy is Tehsildar. He himself became Tehsildar through reservation quota. The boy remained more involved in sports. He could not devote time to studies. The public land near the canal is being allotted to the people. The people are mad after getting this allotment. Whosoever influences the Tehsildar more vehemently he will get better location. Tehsildar has assured me to give me better location if I am able to do this favour with regard to his son. He has wanted me to simply manage pass marks for the boy. Next year he would hire a long-time tutor for the boy.”

“I follow your point. Mr. Satpal, the answer-book is gone. I can simply see the roll number after comparing it with the same on counterfoil. I can tell you how much score the boy has achieved. I am able to do so as you have also brought the original roll number with you.”

“Ok, let us see how much score he has got. The real roll number is 25482. The secrecy branch has allotted 13420 to it.”

“See, Sat Pal ji, 13420 has 15 marks. The pass marks are 17 as the

total marks of the paper are 50.”

“Very bad, Mathur sahib. The boy has failed by 2 marks. Don't you pass the margin cases by giving them one or two concessional or grace marks? The universities have many times directed the examiners to pass the margin cases by having a second compassionate look at the answer book.”

“Sat Pal ji, I promoted 16 to 17 but I did not pass the one who was getting 15. Do not worry. I have another novel method of addressing and satisfying your query.”

“What is that?”

“See, Prof. Sahib, your university has two papers of this class--A and B. The father of the candidate has approached you for paper B only. I have many blank award sheets as all examiners have. I will put the roll numbers on one blank sheet starting with 13412 and going up to 13432. Then I will award marks opposite these roll numbers. I will write 17 opposite the roll number you have approached me for. I mean I will award pass marks to this roll number. Then I will give you the photo copy of this fictional and fake award sheet. Show this sheet to Tehsildar and also tell him that you left no stone unturned to trace and then influence the examiner for having his son passed. In this way, Tehsildar will relent and think you have got his work done.”

“If the boy does not get pass marks in A paper, then he will fail in the total of two. Your university does not show marks on the card separately for both the papers. Only aggregate or total is shown. If this candidate fails, then tell his father that his son must have got fail marks in paper A. You should take your firm stand emphasizing that whatever job he wanted you to do, you have done it. You had not taken responsibility of paper A. This whole strategy has saved us from any real cheating and forgery too.”

“Mathur sahib, you are really a mastermind. The candidate was

telling that his attempt in paper A was good and he was sure to pass it.”

“Go, get the plot allotted at a nice location by paying maximum less as you can. One more point. Paper A was very early in the date sheet and it must have been marked much earlier. All the land will be allotted till the time the results of the university are out. As Tehsildars cheat the people, same way you play your card of bluffing. You should learn to be a bigger cheat with them. I will have a look at your block of land and will also share sumptuous dinner with you.”

“Mathur sahib, do come. You never came. Sumptuous cocktail party will grace your presence. Thanks a lot.”

## Saaro★

Saaro was born into a Jat family of Punjab. He was one among five brothers---sons of one mother and two fathers. After giving birth to five babies in less than seven years she died when the youngest kid was hardly three years old. The fathers were illiterate and had a small land holding not sufficient for the family's upbringing. After affording four or five years of schooling of the kids, they were left to their fate.

Saaro chose Delhi to search for some job at the age of twelve as he was given the address of a man of the village by his father. The man could help him get some job. Saaro went to his foundry on New Rohtak Road. The owner employed him as his page boy on meagre salary. He allowed him to stay for the night in the foundry as he was in the acute need of a night watchman too. He was trained to do some welding work during the day time. A village lad acquainted only with the scenic surroundings and untrimmed beauty of the village life felt like a fish out of water for some time. His raw emotions began bubbling to see the trimmed beauty of the metropolitan city. While in the village he had never been to cinema but now a desire for moving in the company of his fellow employees had become a passion with him. He saw the first film of his life and spent a sleepless night contemplating the scenes and the onslaughts of his own fate. Time and again he imagined the gulf between his life in the village and his stay in the city. At village he would get up in the morning, run to the fields for defecation, let the buffaloes go free, graze them in the company of some swains, play cards with

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\*Dedicated to the genocide of the Sikhs in 1984

them, come back to his house and tether the animals at his house and would disappear into the village in search of company of like minded lads to enjoy their noon in some pastime---sometimes hide and seek and sometimes *gulli danda*. The diet in the village was heavy as compared to that in the city. He was not allowed to visit the nearby small town quite often as he was kept busy in agricultural chores--bringing fodder for the animals, watering the fields with the help of an old type of gadget run with the help of oxen as the tubewells were not in vogue those days, reaping the harvest with sickles and thrashing of wheat with the help of oxen. But in Delhi he found extraordinary agility in every human step and deftness on every human face. If in the village he had to suffice only with the shorts, here he got some pantaloons stitched. In the village the roads were dusty and muddy. He would drag his bicycle to the nearby town in the rainy season. There was no electricity in the village at that time. Here in Delhi his eyes were dazzled to see the glint and glamour of man and machine.

The foundry on the New Rohtak Road had some other employees too. They were hailing from the different regions around Delhi. Mr. Bhim from Dehradun, a charge hand, by and by became familiar with Saaro. He understood the problems of Saaro, the major among them being the problem of marriage. He wanted to hook one of his five sisters-in-law who had been parentless since their childhood. Saaro was a good match for one of them, Bhim used to muse. The girl was called to Delhi and Saaro was given the chance of seeing her at Bhim's house. Though an illiterate lass, the airs, affectations and rotundity of her face had appealed to the raw and backwardly forward instincts of the country boy crazy for possessing any tolerably so so and mediocre female figure. Since that day onward Saaro started coming more close to Bhim who was more clever and manipulating in his heart of hearts. Bhim went on rousing the curiosity of Saaro by putting on different



postures and poses till the day the latter could not help putting forward his demand for the marriage.

Kanta, the wife of Saaro came to his house, only in three clothes. The couple started living in small rented hovel in Tilak Vihar. Saaro started searching for a small shop on meagre amount of rent where he could start his own welding works--a profession in which he had gained much proficiency and expertise by that time. Bhim and Saaro would start their search every evening for such type of rental shop arrangement but would return without tracing any in the city of exorbitant rents. After their search for one full month they were able to trace one of the smallest shops in Wazirpur on small rent. Saaro started doing his welding work in this shop. After day's hard labour he would feel thrilled with exaltation to have a nice company of his wife--a company which obliterated all the signs of fatigue and fret from his body. He would regularly bring some eatables for her while returning from his shop in the evening. On Wednesday the market at Wazirpur would remain closed and Saaro could get sufficient time to be at his house. By this time he had purchased a second hand vehicle too. They would go to a cinema house to enjoy some film there. The wife had gathered much knowledge about the film actors and actresses and Saaro also felt a touch of this knowledge. They would discuss the naming of their expectant sibling. If he would prefer some Panjabi name, she would insist to name the baby after the nomenclature of U.P. 'I shall name him Rajiv,' Kanta quipped. 'I shall christen him as Kuldip Singh,' Saaro showed his stubbornness. Then they would reconcile to call him Raju as a baby and enter his name Kuldip Singh as a school going kid.

The hopes of the parents came true when a male baby was born to them. When the child was three, the husband and wife pleaded with each other, 'I shall have Mundan ceremony,' the mother insisted. 'I shall prefer Chhati ceremony,' the father said. However, their infatuation

for each other overpowered their whims for celebrating two different ceremonies. Saaro would weld the relations which sometimes seemed to fall apart because of the conflict of two cultures. Though Saaro had predominantly assimilated himself into the Hindu ethos by this time, yet the love for Panjabi culture in him had not perfectly died down. During the coming seven years the couple had two more sons and a daughter. Each child had two names--one assimilating the background of Hindu nomenclature and the other imbibing the spirit of Panjabi culture.

Under the influence of his wife Saaro had developed in him sense of worship of the Hindu temples like that at Mathura and Vaishno Devi. The family did pay visit to these places at least once in a year. However, they visited the famous gurudwaras of Delhi too. The business of welding was also flourishing and this prosperity was owed to the worship of deities. Meanwhile, the family was able to construct a small house in Tilak Vihar. Saaro's relatives from Punjab who had previously totally forgotten him had now also begun paying visit to him. His wife and children would also sometimes pay visit to Punjab and the simple people of the village would praise Saaro for having happily settled down at Delhi. Some permanent bachelors would feel sore over their fate.

They would repent over their folly of not leaving the village to settle in some city where, they thought, fortune would have bountifully smiled on them as it had done on Saaro. They would abuse their unsavoury luck.

Then those fateful days of November 84 came. The mobs with the burning fires in their hands were stalking like hydra-headed monsters the roads of Delhi that was virtually burning. Saaro was on the outskirts of Tilak Vihar. Someone from the rabble shouted 'He is Sansar Singh! The son of a Panjabi bitch. Fie on his being clean shaved! Throw fire on him.' The mob pounced upon him. The next moment the flames of

fire were rising from his half burnt body that was swaying hither and thither crying for help. The mob moved fast to find other Saaros on the roads and in the suburbs of Delhi. Some people moved towards the house of Saaro. One of them shouted: 'Put his house on fire! His concubine whore! That Hindu woman who committed a sin by becoming his wife!'

The mob was, however, stopped by some people of the locality with hard efforts. A typical Hindu in *shervani* exclaimed, 'That woman is not to blame. She is Hindu. She has named the children after Hindu nomenclature. She persuaded the man to worship Hindu deities. Why to kill the whole family? It was her poverty that brought her to this extreme pass.' The mob felt convinced and moved toward another side.

It was really a miraculous escape for Saaro's family. But the children were rendered fatherless. How could the widow tend such a big family? Even the eldest son was hardly ten and he could not save the business from getting eroded. Kanta imagined herself again plunged into the dungeon of poverty. She had no source left except for a small piece of land at the village in Punjab. "Should I go to Punjab and claim my share of land from the brothers of my husband? Will the people of village help a Hindu woman like me in these days of communal conflagration in Panjab? How can I face the fiery eyes of those sturdy Sardars whose high voltage resentment is somewhat natural as a reaction to this naked death dance in Delhi? How can I dare to go there and demand that piece of land, though it is my legal right? Will not they say that Delhi has swallowed their brother? That complex ownership of two fathers' property ! Nobody will guide me properly to seek legal help from some expert lawyer. Everybody will try to exploit me." These questions were flitting before the eyes of this poor helpless widow times without number.

Last time I met her in a small room in Tilak Vihar. This room was the office of the Sikh Forum. When she finished her tale of woe, a resident of Block-32 of Trilokpuri who had lost fourteen members of her family in this holocaust started relating her incident:

“The day Indira Gandhi was killed I was away to Noida as usual to work in an export company. At noon the owner of my company asked me to leave for my home as some danger was quite at hand. My 25 years old son Mohan Singh was working as a coolie at the railway station and my second son Gurdip Singh, 16, was employed in a tape recorder shop in Lajpat Nagar. Shortly after my reaching home Gurdip Singh also arrived and he told me that there was a lot of communal tension on the way and the driver had hidden him under the seat. Soon we heard the raising of some slogans in the street. My elder son went into the street and did not come back until now. Next morning a huge crowd came into our house by breaking open our doors with the help of iron rods. The rioters started giving blows to my son with the rods. I entreated for his safety. They tore open my clothes. They looted everything from the house. My son had not expired by this time. I covered him with a piece of cloth. Meanwhile, another mob came and shouted, ‘Kill him, all other members of his family have been done to death.’ They killed all the male members of Block-32. Then all the ladies were forced to move towards Chilla Gaon. There some young men raped the women at will for three days. The mothers were forced to offer urine to their kids for quenching their thirst.”

After she had finished her speech, a political leader who had come to visit this office of 'Sikh Forum' to pacify the people finished his speech with these words:

“The government has given rupees twenty thousand as a compensation for the death of each member of a family. The government has always been sympathetic towards you and will also remain so.

Suffice with this amount. The government cannot afford more. Please forget the past. *Is paise se hi saaro!*"

But Kanta's Saaro would defy all such petty, poor and politics prone prices. Monetarily he was beyond all such prices! In her heart of hearts she was really spitting at the face of this leader!

## **The Last Duty**

I had worked as a lecturer in a college of Punjabi University, Patiala for one session of 1975-76. Apart from this, I had worked in the same capacity for 25 years in Panjab University, Chandigarh. The college of Punjabi University had come into existence in 1975 and the total staff was appointed on temporary basis up to March 31. In this way it was my first and last term in this college.

The annual university examination was approaching. The staff got duties of invigilation for this examination. I also got my duty as invigilator in a nearby college. I reported to the centre superintendent for this duty. The situation in the college was pleasing as well as displeasing. It was a Khalsa institution and its managing committee had two hardcore groups--one group owing allegiance to the Congress Party and the second one to the Akali Dal. The former one was running the college at that time and the latter were out of power. The state government was also Congress government. I had good equation with a lecturer of this college and he allowed me to stay in his house with his brother-in-law who was also appearing in the examination there. He himself had got his duty somewhere else. Usually, I was coming from Chandigarh for this duty. I spent the first night of examination at the house of this lecturer as the duty was starting very early. One evening before the commencement of examination, a group of four students came to me.

“Sir, we are the members of Sikh Students Federation,” One of them broke the ice.

“May I know your name, please?”

“Sir. My name is Harbans Singh.”

“How have you come? I mean, your purpose of coming here?”

“Sir, we have not come for the purpose of any unfair means or copying in the coming examination. Rather we have come for the purpose of strongly stopping unfair means in the examination.”

“Carry on, please.”

“Sir, there are two groups of students in our college--Congress group and Khalsa group.”

“I came to know about it the moment I entered the premises. The Congress group is in power now. The current acting principal also belongs to this group. The Khalsa group has its separate office in the premises. It is sealed. Both the groups have been fighting with each other. The principal appointed by the Khalsa group was dismissed by the court. The court case against this dismissal is still going on. At the moment the charge is given to the acting principal selected by the Congress group, is it really so?”

“Yes sir, you have up-to-date knowledge of the situation here.”

“We will discuss your issue a bit later. First you explain to me where there is a strong confrontation between two parties for stopping the functioning of each other. How can administration work there? The Sikhs, whether they are from Congress or Akali Dal, indulge more vehemently in factionalism than the Hindus. The Hindu party has less polarization.”

“Sir, I do not fully agree with you. The current municipality of our town is fully torn apart. Jan Sangh taught a harsh lesson to Congress during the last elections. Now the president belongs to Jan Sangh.”

“I do not know what you are explaining. My view is that the Hindus remain united quite often. The Hindus overthrow a Hindu very rarely but the Sikhs fight against a Sikh tooth and nail. I do not see any easy

factionalism in Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarathi Parishad. The Sikh organizations always have divisions and sub divisions in no time. Do you think it happens so because many members of a Khalsa organization believe in hegemony and they start considering themselves as Sardars or leaders. The Sikhs remain disciplined only when their leader is much awe-inspiring and dominating. Same thing had happened at the time of Banda Singh Bahadur, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Baba Baghel Singh. After the death of Ranjit Singh no leader had that spirit of dominance as Ranjit Singh had. Everybody started considering himself leader in a sense. Inter-wars and inter-feuds were galore and they killed one another. The Britishers ruling on the other side of river Sutlej kept on waiting and watching.. When Sarkar-e-Khalsa became too much weak, the Britishers came over and annexed Punjab into their empire. Do you agree?"

"Sir, we do not have deep knowledge of history. We will sit with you some other day and will discuss the issue in detail. Today we have called upon you for a particular purpose."

"I am sure your purpose will be to teach a lesson to some opponent. Is it really so?"

"Sir, your guess is really correct."

"Tell me the purpose, please."

"As the Managing Committee of our college has two segments, similarly the students also have two hard-core-groups--Khalsa Group and Congress group. We owe allegiance to the Khalsa Group and the other group belongs to Congress party. We have a Congress guy here named Mr. Rajinder Singh who is so cunning and crooked that he is the root cause of all fights and feuds among the students here. He is a shrewd manipulator and seasoned backbiter. Now he is appearing in B.A. Part II examination. He has his examination of Economics after five days. Both the centres will merge that day because the number of



candidates is less than one hundred. The clerk assisting the superintendent is very close to us and he has disclosed it to us.”

“You mean you want to involve and implicate Rajinder in false UMC?”

“No sir, you are misunderstanding us. We swear by Waheguru and assure you that he will definitely use unfair means in the paper of Economics. You will be allotted duty in that room where he will be taking the test. Sir, do catch him only if he uses unfair means. Once he is nabbed, please do not be lenient to him.”

“Let me see my duty list.”

“See it please. Be sure that you are on duty that day.”

I had a look at my duty list which confirmed my duty on that particular day.

“Sir, please do not disappoint us. We will provide every service to you.”

“Dear, I do not need any service or favour from you. We invigilation staff has to see how the overall examination is going on. If the college follows the policy of strictness and harshness then we have to be strict. If the college dictates the centre superintendents that they should not allow anyone to use unfair means but at the same time do not make any Unfair Means Case (UMC), then we take the incriminating material from the candidates and throw it out. Do you know what type of stance is being followed this time?”

“Sir we know very well. This time there is too much strictness. Fifteen unfair means cases have been made so far. If you do this job, it will not be odd, awkward and out of the way at all, sir.”

“The boy is a leader. It is risky to nab a leader.”

“Sir, you take him seriously for no reasons. He is a cowardly fellow. He has only a few followers behind him. We have big group with us. Please do not relent. Sir, we beg of you for this favour.”

After making such implorations, Harbans and his mates went away. I assured them that if Rajinder used unfair means in the examination then I would certainly catch him. When I was lying on my bed for going to sleep at night, strange ideas started flashing before my mind's eye.

'Rajinder belongs to the political party that rules Punjab now.....The acting principal in the college at the moment also belongs to same party. If I catch the boy, some big-wigs may intervene for sheltering him..... How is the center superintendent?--He has come from Kirti College Nihal Patran...Now this college has been taken over by government.... Which action will the superintendent take?--If he does not endorse my case, then I may have to write to the university against him...It seems the superintendent will play neutral and will counter-sign my case...How many more duties I have after that?....'

I continued doing my duties till that fateful day. Harbans and company used to avoid meeting me in the college premises. But they did nurse the feeling to meet me at least once again before that day. I was changing my bus at Ropar. I was surprised when I saw Harbans and his mates coming towards me hurriedly at Ropar bus stop.

"Sat Sri Akaal sir."

"Oh, you guys! Where are you hanging about?"

"Sir. We have come to make the last humble request to you. He has his examination tomorrow."

"I know it very well. Do not worry guys. If he indulges in unfair means then I will definitely book him and charge him."

"Thanks Sir."

Then they went their way. I was contemplating over the impending risk. I reached the centre the following day. The examination timing was from 2 pm to 5 pm. I had my duty in the same room where Rajinder was taking the test--not only in the same room but also in the

same two rows. When nearly 40 minutes elapsed, Rajinder started copying from printed paper of book. I took a round past him in such a way as I was indifferent to what he was doing. When I came back, I snatched his answer book along with the incriminating material he was copying from. He tried his best to win over me but I did not relent. I gave a second answer book and started writing the report. When the report was ready, I put it before Dr. Sharma who was incharge of the row close to me. Dr Sharma endorsed my statement by writing three words on it: I corroborate it. Little commotion was visible outside the centre but it did subside after the intervention of the police constables on duty.

But Rajinder was non plussed. He was not writing any more but was simply waiting for the intermission when he could be allowed to go out. We forwarded the UMC to the centre superintendent who also counter-signed it. When half time was over, Rajinder handed over even his second answer sheet to me. I allowed him to go out. I was looking through the window. Both groups were organizing themselves. The invigilation staff was wondering what would happen when we go out after the examination. After submitting my bunch of answer books, I also went out. The moment I stepped into the ground outside, Harbans and his party took no time for providing umbrella of shelter to me.

“Sir, please accompany us to Keshgarh Sahib. We will have langar (food) there and then we will see you off.”

I agreed with them. We started walking toward Gurughar. The rival group led by Rajinder was following us at a distance. No untoward incident happened. Meanwhile, we were back at the bus stop. Harbans took the same bus with me upto Ropar for the purpose of providing security to me. When bus came near the college, Dr. Sharma also caught the same bus as he was teaching post graduation classes of MA English at Govt. College, Ropar. I offered seat to him and Harbans did

the same for me. Now Dr. Sharma and I was sitting on the same seat. I saw a book entitled 'V' in hands of Dr. Sharma, The name of the writer of the book was Thomas Pynchon. I took the book from him and had a look at it. It was a novel written in 1963.

"Dr. Sahib, I have seen this novel for the first time. The name is really strange 'V'!"

"Oh yes, Pynchon is a post-war novelist of America. I teach American literature to the MA classes in the college."

"Something about the theme of this novel, sir!"

"Brother, Pynchon's novels have many themes but here I would name only one i.e. his theory of Entropy."

"Sir, what is that in brief!"

"Entropy means measure of disorganization for a closed system. Pynchon borrows it from Henry Adams. It is a mark of cultural decline. It is also related to chaos, chance and randomness. When chaos overtakes civilization, energy signals the death of human systems. Random events are the marks of entropy. Human systems and institutions require constant maintenance, conscious efforts and unremitting labour. They need orderly repair. But when they do not get it, chaos approaches and indicates the collapse of these systems. In this artificial society, this collapse generally takes place owing to entropy. The world is ever found succumbing to entropy."

"Thanks for explanation. Do you think the system has also collapsed in the college where we are coming from? There groupism is galore. Two segments of committee and two principals!! This polarization is galore too among the Sikhs upto the top level. The theory of entropy also seems to be working vehemently here. Do you agree?"

"You may state like that but I prefer to analyse it by applying it to the bigger systems of the world."

Meanwhile, we had reached Ropar. We got off from the bus.

Harbans went his way back after thanking me and bidding bye to me. Prof . Sharma also took rickshaw towards his residence near Govt. College. I continued my journey to Chandigarh.

That was my last invigilation duty in that college. That was perhaps also the last day of my job in Punjabi University as the total staff was already relieved and the new fresh appointments were to be made in June.

## Sat Sri Akaal, Sir!\*

A couple of month ago I went out on a picnic in the Blue Mountains area near Sydney along with two Punjabi parents who were on visitor visa in this country. They were staying with their grown-up children but could not go back early because of Covid-19. At the initial stage they came close to me because of my journalistic and literary tastes but by and by they became almost friendly with me. At last an outing was arranged with them and I drove them to Blue Mountains. As we had taken some eatables with us, we had our first halt at Springwood for refreshment. While doing justice to the eatables, we fed the pigeons too with the spare crumbs of muffin and Punjabi *pranths*. They discussed with me my long teaching career in Punjab before immigrating to Sydney in 2000. They also discussed the private school of my wife by questioning me, “How come you were able to buy your own land for the school? How come you were able to construct your own building in a short span of ten years? How come you were able to get affiliation for the school?”

I started relating the story of my initiative for that venture.

It was 1987. I was appointed centre superintendent for the university examinations at Govt. College Hoshiarpur. It was a very busy centre and both the morning and evening sessions were occupied with heavy examinations. I had to arrange my night stay in the city for the first at least two weeks or so. I contacted one of my remote relatives in a village near Hoshiarpur. He told me that somebody close to him had his

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\*A Sikh and Punjabi salutation

big house in the city in which some tenants were living. He had kept one spare room with him for emergency stay. He would give the key of the room to me so that I could stay there when I felt like doing so.

The examinations started on a good note. On the very first day I went to the Centre from my home town and conducted the morning session. I was free from it at 5:30 pm. Then I thought of staying for the night in that designated room. Reaching the mansion I coaxed the button of the call-bell and a young married lady came forward to open the gate. I was surprised to see her feeling delighted to receive me when she exclaimed 'Sat Sri Akaal, Sir!' What stunned me extraordinarily was the epithet 'sir' used by her. I responded her salutation with the same warmth and veneration. As soon as I stepped towards the specified room, she could not help addressing me with these words : "Sir, come with me. Make yourself comfortable in our drawing room. My husband will be coming soon from the bank." I presume you have some appointment.

"I have come to stay for the night."

"Even then, you are welcome sir. After all you are my teacher."

The word 'teacher' made me seriously more thoughtful and inquisitive.

"But I am unable to remember, recollect and identify you", I tried to peep into my past.

"Sir, my name is Anjula, I was your student in 1977."

"Oh, I see. It means you have your background somewhere in my area."

"Yes, sir. I belong to Noorpur but I am married at Wazirpur near here. My husband is loan officer in Bank of India and we are tenants in this Kothi. Sir, how come you have paid visit to our place? Do you have any bank related appointment? I am surprised how you can have a bank appointment at such a distant place. You have many bank

branches in your city, sir.”

“Ok. I understand now. Now I am going to relate my story why I have come to this place. I am appointed centre superintendent in the university examinations here at Government College. My evening paper was over at 5 pm and I am coming straightway from the college. Sardar Bakhtawar Singh Sandhu of Talwandi is the owner of this mansion. My sister is married to one of his relatives. She gave me the key of one room in this building so that I may stay for night here when I feel like doing so. However, it will be my pleasure to meet your husband.”

My mates and I had now arrived at Lawson where we spent an hour, enjoying sightseeing and feeling mild drips of rain. We shared meal with one another and then started sipping tea. When we were engrossed in light tete-a-tete, a young man of about 35 was on the way to slip past us by raising his hand and by loudly exclaiming, ‘Sat Sri Akal, Sir!’

“Come on, bro. come and share hot tea with us. We have sufficient quantity in the thermos.”

“Thanks you so much, sir. Enjoy yourself, sir. How come you are here today? I am really pleased to see you, sir.”

“Thanks a lot, but I have not recognized you.”

“Sir, I was the student of your school. You were teaching in the college and your wife was running the school. I completed my schooling from there and then I came to Sydney on student visa. About three years ago I was selected as a teller in the bank. Now I finished my job in the bank and am going to catch the train from the railway station.”

“Your name, dear?”

“Sir, my name is Harish. My dad had a paint shop in the city. Maybe you know him. His name is Joginderpal.”

“Oh, I know him. That shop in the corner of Honda Hospital. Now



I remember you too, There is a wonderful change in your personality!”

“Sir, you too are totally changed. Even then I recognized you. Okay sir, my train is coming in ten minutes. I should leave now.”

Harish moved towards the Lawson railway station by bidding bye to us.

“Recapitulate the yarn of the same story. What happened next with that bank couple of Hoshiarpur. Today you are greeted with the epithet 'sir' everywhere. Your students are spread all over the world,” said one of my mates.

“Anjula's husband Raj Kumar, also arrived meanwhile. He too felt overjoyed to meet me,” I told them.

“How is madam, sir? Is she also lecturer somewhere?” Raj Kumar wanted to know the career my wife was pursuing.

“No, Raj Kumar. She is not lecturer. She had opened her own school two years ago. We have got it registered as a society. We will seek affiliation for it after a couple of years. What position do you have in the bank?”

“Sir, I am loan officer. Tell me all things frankly. Does anyone need subsidy based loan for any small business? As your wife has started her own school, she can avail of this facility of loan. The amount is Rs. 25000/-. The people are hankering after this scheme. How do you feel?”

“Raj Kumar, I do not have much knowledge about banking and finance. If you guide me, then I can follow and practise your suggestions.”

“Sir, we have received about 500 applications. You can also fill up the application form. We will approve your case on priority basis. You get it signed by your wife. She need not come to the bank the day the cheques will be disbursed.”

“It is a miracle that a person does not want to take subsidy loan and

the loan is coming towards him like a big sought after trophy.” said Harcharan, “what next, sir? Did you avail it?”

“I filled up the form. I was called after about fifteen days. A crowd of about 500 people were waiting for their turn in front of the bank. Raj Kumar came out of the bank and addressed me by exclaiming, ‘Sat Sri Akaal, Sir.’ Come in and take your cheque.”

“I made my way through the crowd. The people were looking at me. I took the cheque and came out. Reaching home I discussed it with my wife and we planned to buy a block of land by adding some money to it. Within a year or so we had a small building built on it for her school. A managing body was formed and the affiliation was granted to it by the education department. The sudden windfall from the bank helped us a lot for starting this venture. Moreover, we had no plan to leave Punjab.”

“What do you mean? Why did you then leave Punjab and come to Sydney,” Harcharan seemed curious to know.

“Why I came to Sydney, it is a long story Harcharan. My immigration to Australia was also a chance. I will relate it some other time.”

Then we felt like leaving Lawson for Katoomba. From Katoomba I turned my car towards Three Sisters. We saw a large number of people at Three Sisters as it is a historical place. Four or five tourist buses were also parked at one side of the botanical area. We went towards a café and started sipping coffee. I stealthily had a vast look around and saw some familiar faces standing at a remote place on a cliff.

Meanwhile, our second mate Manmohan who was retired advocate from Punjab and Haryana High Court expressed his surprise by addressing me. “Dear, you are coming across your old students everywhere. A teacher’s area of familiarity is really very vast.”

“You have also been a renowned advocate of High Court for a long

time. I presume you also must have vast area of familiarity and intimacy. I will be proud of you if you can find somebody known to you at this place,” I coaxed Manmohan.

“You seem to challenge me, bro. It is impossible to trace a familiar face in such a remote place across the seven seas. If you by chance got a student at Lawson, it does not mean you can trace a familiar face everywhere. Accept my challenge here. Find someone here! You have become so much vainglorious and pompous that you have started challenging us. I provide one more privilege to you. We will stay here for two hours. The tourists are coming and going. Find someone in two hours. I am ready to bet too.”

“Manmohan, let me brood over the issue for a couple of minutes.”

Meanwhile, I had a stealthy squint of my eye towards the same familiar face at a distance on the hillside. We moved closer to him too and I became cent percent sure that the familiar face was my old student.

“Manmohan, I accept your challenge and bet. How much is the bet?”

“\$100,” Manmohan felt conceited.

“Two hours time too?”

“Yes,” hell with your boasting!

“Done? Sure?” I confirmed.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Manmohan was overjoyed to accept the challenge.

Then all three moved towards Three Sisters. It is really a pleasant scene of valleys and mountains. We had hardly moved 15 or 20 steps when a guy who looked Punjabi stepped fast towards me and spoke out: “Sat Sri Akaal, Sir!”

“Oh, Parmar, how come you are here?”

“Same as you, sir! I am part of a tour.”

“Parmar, you had once met me at Gurudwara. When were you

my student?"

"Sir, I had done my B.Sc. in 1988."

"Oh, I see."

"Sir, the same year you directed a play of Safdar Hashmi for the youth festival. The name of the play was perhaps 'Halla Bol'."

"Where do you live now?"

"I live in Oran Park, sir."

"It is really my pleasure to meet you, Parmar."

I introduced Harcharan and Manmohan to him.

Parmar went his way. Manmohan was stunned at the chance encounter which he called an apparition. Of course, he had lost the bet. He proclaimed, "Brother, a teacher really has a vast ambit of familiarity and social intimacy. I am foiled ! Take this \$ 100 note as I have lost the bet."

"No, Manmohan, not at all. I will not take the money from you. It was simply fun. We will plan it this way. New year eve is quite at hand. We will sit in a restaurant on new year eve for an eating and booze spree. Your \$100 will be utilized along with our share in that common party."

It was a good outing. Then we came towards our car and I drove them towards Sydney. While parting company with one another Manmohan could not help exclaiming humorously the emphatic mimicry of my student's style of pronouncing the salutation:

'Sat Sri Akaal, Sir!'

Harcharan and I also reciprocated the same in our own day-today style.

(This story was used by Punjabi Tribune, Chandigarh, on Teacher's Day in 2021.)

## The Dent\*

In those days Gurpreet Singh was posted at Delhi. His department had sent him on deputation to visit some cities of Punjab. The communal frenzy was at its highest both in Punjab and Haryana. Panipat was the most tension torn city. The tension was mounting day by day and the climax came on the day Gurpreet was returning to Delhi. The Sikhs in Haryana were cruelly treated in reaction to what was happening to the Hindus in Punjab. Being a Sardar (turbaned guy) Gurpreet was also perplexed at the beginning of his journey from Chandigarh.

There were only three Sardars in the bus. Gurpreet was highly grieved and stunned to think ‘what man was making of man.’ The communal carnages at the behest of religion in India were hovering heavily over his head. He was imagining how the height of communal frenzy had been assuming the shape of homicide in India and in some other countries. The bus had by that time crossed Ambala. All of a sudden Gurpreet heard a Haryanvi muttering abject words: “Spit on these bloody Sardars! These swines have created a trouble for the rest of the country. A handful of hollow heads! Hell with the autonomy they are demanding! We shall make mice of them!! Shit!!” He was however, mollified by the conductor till he got down at Shahbad Markanda. The Sardars remained silent but lugubriousness was writ large on their faces. They were also stealthily exchanging glances with one another.

Meanwhile, the driver of a bus coming from Delhi threw a hint to the bus driver of this bus that in the ensuing journey the Sardars should

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\*A mini story dedicated to the genocide of the Sikhs in 1984

remain cautious about their safety. In the meantime, some goondas also boarded the bus. The moment they saw the Sardars, they started heaping insults and abuses on them. An old woman sitting near Gurpreet Singh turned sympathetic and compassionate towards him and she assured him that she would do her best to protect and save him. The other two Sardars were not as sensitive as Gurpreet was. They were posing non-chalant. Panipat was hardly fifteen kilometers when one of the ribalds in the bus directed the driver to stop the vehicle. The driver felt scared and the bus came to a sudden halt. Some more robust people entered the bus. One of them made the shrieking announcement: "The Sardars should immediately get down." But Sardars remained stuck to their seats despite this rum and queer outburst. Then those robust fellows went forward in a huff and got hold of two Sardars and pushed them down with wild force. Some more hooligans standing down started hurling many types of humiliations and insults at the Sardars. Those who had entered the bus started ransacking the other passengers. When they came near the seat of Gurpreet, the old woman sitting near him started blubbering, "Here is a patient and I, being poor, have used the bus for taking this patient to the hospital." The ruffians, however, took pity on the woman and went their way.

The Sardars who had been made to get down the bus were first ordered to cut off their hair with their own hands. The ruffians slapped their faces. A hefty fellow beat them with lethal club and left them to their fates before fleeing the scene. All the passengers in the bus remained engrossed in slow religious incantations. Nobody even dared to have a stealthy look at the victims. Gurpreet recuperated the life in him only when these ribalds ordered the bus driver to go his way. The bus then reached the city of Panipat. The provocative slogans against the Sardars were quite audible. Highly scared and frightened as he was, the bus driver halted the bus just for a minute at Panipat. When

the bus covered only a few miles after crossing Panipat, a Sardar truck driver overtook the bus and entreated the driver to stop the bus. The bus driver gave way to his beseeching and stopped the vehicle. The truck driver asked the Sardar passengers to board his truck for the rest of the journey as the buses were being stopped, assaulted, hunted and targeted to look for the Sardar passengers.

The savior of Gurpreet in whose puckered wrist was tattooed Krishna Devi, then undid the blanket from Gurpreet and handed him to that truck driver who, by chance, happened to belong to the same district of Punjab where Gurpreet originally belonged. The truck at the outskirts of Delhi bore hundreds of dents caused by the stones thrown at it by the anti Sikh elements.

The Sikhs started developing a dent on their psyche at the time of ASIAD 1982 and Vaisakhi 1978. Since that time this dent kept on becoming gigantically bold and indelible culminating in Operation Blue Star and Sikh genocide of Nov. 1984. No Government during the last thirty years tried to wipe out, decimate and obliterate this dent from the minds of the Sikhs. Such dents in history have always been proving tremendously fatal for that country. They have been proving turning points too.

Down with Dirty and diabolical political manoeuvrings!!

## The Wrestlers★

Jetha Singh is the landlord of my village. During the pre-partition days, he was wielding a great authority in the village as he had been endowed with a *jagir* by the Britishers. But with the dawning of the new era of democracy his influence in the village was diminishing, though still the down trodden held him in high esteem. The low caste people would get the chance for an easy employment in his fields and they were all praise for him. A wrestler in his lifetime, Jetha Singh would go far and wide to compete the wrestling bouts. He would often go to meet Gama *Pehalwan* whom he was considering his *ustaad* in this field of his special liking.

Jetha Singh has now crossed the middle age and his only hope has been his son, Sarwan, who is twenty four. Jetha Singh has been teaching his son the most ingenious tricks in wrestling and has always felt overjoyed to see the aggrandizement of his son in the area. Now no wrestling bout in the *ilaqa* is considered complete without the presence of Sarwan. Sarwan holds the key position in every *kushti* as he wins the last decisive bout by acquiring the *patqa* in the venture. The people of the area feel overawed of him and it is the common voice that Sarwan is an invincible figure, a cynosure of the area.

The other adolescent boys of my village are getting some inspiration from Sarwan. Though unable to gain the vigour and vitality of esteemed Sarwan, they think that they can also work wonders in the field by their continuous practice. Some of them minutely watch the tricks of Sarwan and feel dismayed to think that they themselves cannot practically

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\*An Indian story based on casteism



perform those tricks. One of those aspirant swains is Sagli.

Effervescing with youth as he is, he has already adopted Fazla as his *guru* and every Sunday goes to him to listen to his discourse while sitting at his sacred feet. Fazla was the celebrity of the *ilaqa* during the pre-partition days and he is not an easy man to be reckoned with for his guruship. But Sagli had so much mastered the quality of humility and loyalty that by and by Fazla agreed to become his benign *ustaad*. Sagli purchases some dry fruits and then goes to the dera of Fazla where both the *guru* and *chela* partake of the energetic mixture prepared out of the grinding of these fruits. Sagli has remained so much submissive to his *guru* that by and by he has gained an enviable proficiency in the art of wrestling. Now he quite frequently goes to compete in the bouts and has also gained a considerable recognition among the masses.

On the last Baisakhi day the people of the village arranged a bout in the village. The arena was prepared and was kept cordoned off. The village *panchayat* members were in their element. The *pehalwans* of the area were making their way towards this place. Consequently, the place was crowded scene of tractors, carts and such other vehicles compatible with the nature of farming extravaganza.

Some shopkeepers also made their makeshift arrangement to set up their stalls. As the sun was getting down and down, the time of the bout was coming nearer and nearer. The drum beater with his heavy beats was inviting the people from the far and wide. At last Zamadar Mubarak Singh of the village commenced the bout as he had been performing the duty of umpire since the time he got retirement from the army. Though a bit reticent creature, he was a man known for his agility. The first pair was off the field just within a couple of minutes. Most of the *kushtis* were over by 6 pm. But one special *kushti*--the last decisive one--was still to be performed. The pair in the *kushti* was Sarwan and Sagli. Sarwan was taking it just as a child's play. He was the formidable lion of the *ilaqa* and he thought that none was yet born

to defeat him. People also held the view that Sagli was running a great risk by agreeing to fight with Sarwan. But at the same time, the people were happy at the courage and fortitude shown by Sagli.

Both the *pehalwans* were going towards the nucleus of the arena and the eyes of the people were focused on them. The discreet Zamadar then blew the whistle and started the bout. Both the wrestlers then had the traditional *dastpanja*. Then Sarwan masterfully took the ankle of Sagli in his hands and had a severe *nakaal* but in vain. He then again gripped the waist of Sagli in his steel hands, screwed it in such an agile way that both of them fell upon the ground with a thud, the later in the tight grip of the former. In the twinkling of an eye Sagli got Sarwan's grip loosened and he was again standing upright on the sacred Mother Earth. There was clapping from one side of the arena. The people were wonder struck at the quick masterful action of the young *pehalwan* who was just a novice in their eyes. Sarwan tried hard to practice a *dhobipatra* but was miserably unsuccessful. Then in a moment, Sagli slapped such a tight grip of his hands round the neck of Sarwan that the latter with his back touching the earth was lying on the ground and the former with his hands raised upwards was sitting on his magnificent frame. There was a great hue and cry from the spectators. Some were saying 'well done!' and others were crying 'foul play!'.

In no time, to the utter bewilderment of the people, some twenty men with big sticks in their hands came into the arena. While using the scurrilous language they attacked Sagli with their lethal weapons. People rushed in to save the victim. He was somehow saved, though with much difficulty as the number of his saviors was very small. Most of the people had their support for Sarwan, the beloved son of their esteemed *jagirdar*. Some voices were also audible from the hullabaloo which made the sense like this: "How can a menial *Balmiki* vanquish the son of our *jagirdar*?"

## Beyond Municipal Limits

Yesterday a petty politician happened to visit the outer area of the town where I have constructed my new house. A neighbour of mine brought him to my residence. I was happy to receive this politician as the residents of the area had some grievances which could be addressed and redressed by such big wigs. After a formal tete-a-tete, the neighbour embarked upon relating the tale of the woes or problems of that slowly developing outer area of the town: “*Shrimanji*, the town has expanded a lot towards this side. You know, our locality has also extended a lot beyond municipal limits. As the municipal elections have not taken place for a long time in the state, the current administration is working non-challantly and does not care much for acquiring and engulfing this area. The municipal committee that was existing before the elections was redundant as it had exhausted its term long time ago. The people, as per their wont, went on purchasing land and doing constructions on it. You see, there are no metalled streets and roads in the locality, there is no drainage system, no street lights, no proper medical facility, no branch of the post office.”

The politician did not feel convinced and he interrupted, “Now as the municipality elections have taken place, your area must have already become a ward. You must have elected a municipal councillor for you. He can help you a lot in getting your grievances redressed.”

“No, no, sir, we do not have any municipal councillor at all, nor do we have *sarpanch*. This area neither falls into the town nor does it properly form the part of any village. We have not been able to get the municipal limits extended despite our best possible efforts.”

“Why should you have the municipal limits extended? There seems no sense in it. I suggest a plan to you. The same plan we applied to a locality in my city at the time of past elections. We also had a similar locality at the outskirts of our city. In that locality almost all the residents are government or semi-government employees except for a few petty vendors and shopkeepers. I got the area declared a village by using my influences and political links. You are well aware that a village is in many respects better than a city in these days. The government has an extensive plan to give tremendous help to the villages in the form of grants-in-aid. You know it has a special scheme for the development of rural areas. Getting a locality declared a village in these days is really a boon. After getting this area declared a village we faced another problem too. Nobody in the locality was either eligible or willing to become a *sarpanch*. Law did not permit many of them to become a *sarpanch*.”

“What a contrast! In a village the position of *sarpanch* is a coveted one. So strange, here nobody was willing to get this position! Then how did you solve this problem?”

“Along with some of the residents of this locality I met a wayside bi-cycle repairer. We requested him to become the *sarpanch* for our sake. He seemed quite skeptical. He had never expected the big people approaching him like this.”

“*Babu ji*, I am a petty repairer. How can I dream of becoming your mentor. Moreover, how can I find time for the chores expected to be performed by a *sarpanch*?” pasting a patch on the punctured tube of the bi-cycle said he.

“You are not to do any big jobs. You are to simply put your thumb impression on different types of papers. Those papers will help us get grant-in-aid from the government. These grants are so enormous that they will make this small locality a heaven in a year or two. Your fate will also take a turn with the development of this colony.”

“Sir, I am quite complacent with my petty menial business. You big

people wish to entrap me by your crooked plans. Let me earn my bread the way I like. Moreover, the job you want to confer on me is very risking. Have you not seen the fate of the sarpanches during the last few years? Many have been killed by the militants. Some face litigations. Do you plan to make me your scapegoat? I am not so simple as you think. Please go and knock at some other door,” the bi-cycle repairer had a sarcastic glow on his face.

The politician then told us that he had also approached a cobbler for the same job. The cobbler, without paying any heed to them and bending over his implements, said in an indifferent tone, “That you big people have come to entice me for a high job is a matter of happiness for me. But I do not have vote in this locality. I reached here only a few days ago. You know the registration time for new votes is already over, otherwise I am willing to serve you the way you deem fit.”

This politician and his associates then approached an old haggard lady who would address everyone of the locality by the label of *beta*. She was told to put her thumb impression on some papers. As per her wont, trusting that her ‘sons’ had approached her for some humanitarian task she put her thumb impression on the said papers. Unknowingly and unconscionably she thus became the *sarpanch* of the locality. However, nobody showed much reluctance for becoming a *panch*. In this way *panchayat* came into existence. Now this colony is a well developed area. It presents even better sight than most of the well developed areas of the town.

Acting upon his advice we contacted some people of the locality. They felt convinced with our suggestions. After a couple of months the government declared the elections of the local bodies too. We were able to persuade some persons to become the *panchayat* members unanimously.

Last month this colony in the name of a village received huge fundings from the government for its developments. I am happy to see it developing by leaps and bounds.

(The translated version of this story was used by VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad)

## Reaching the Unreachable

I like one taxi shift in a week as it provides me a platform for talking to some multicultural people. It also provides discipline to me--one day before I start getting ready for it and the following day I enjoy sound sleep for covering the sleeplessness of the night which I have worked through. Preparing for, doing and then gurgitating over it are three good stages which keep me disciplined because it is all preplanned and rostered.

Last month when I was working in St. Mary's area, I had a job flashing on my computer. It was for Amanda from Colyton. I accepted it and drove to pick her up. In almost four minutes I was in front of her house. She came out and jumped into my cab.

"Where are you going to?" I asked her.

"Westmead", she answered.

"Which way? Motorway or Highway?"

"I am in a hurry, better to go by Motorway."

I turned around and drove towards Roper road for entering into M4. In a couple of minutes my cab was on the motorway and I was rushing towards Westmead hospital. When I crossed the Reservoir road exit of Blacktown, I noticed the traffic slowing down. In a minute or two it was a screeching traffic jam. My customer was upset. She had two reasons for going by motorway-1. She was in a hurry to meet her sick mother in the hospital. 2. She had the presumption that the fast speed would cost her less.

"Driver, the traffic is at a standstill. What should we do? I am in

hurry to meet my mother who is in critical condition,” the lady customer entreated.

“I agree but there is no way out now except for waiting. You know it. We cannot exit from freeway anywhere we like. This is not highway. There may be some accident ahead. The police will take time for clearing the traffic. We need to have patience. Why did you not take the Great Western Highway? That would have been better for such a short distance like Westmead.”

“You did not guide me, driver?”

“You did not prefer that. At the very outset I had asked you which route you would prefer to follow. You opted for motorway. I followed your advice. We cab drivers always follow the route nominated by the customers.”

“I agree, driver. But what about the fare? It is going up. From Colyton to Westmead normally the fare is \$ 50. It is already 50 now. The way we are waiting it may go to 80 or 90. Can’t you give me some concession?”

“No, we cannot give any concession. I can give concession if something happens due to my fault. Now it is happening by chance. Exit from motorway is impossible.”

“But driver, I must meet my mother who is dying. I had got a call from the hospital that she would be no more after one hour. My other relatives have already reached there. I must talk to her before she breathes her last. Cumberland Highway exit is not far from here. Any solution please? Explore some solution please. I must say my face-to-face bye to my mother before she ceases responding,” she was blubbing and the traffic was still not moving.

I was contemplating like this, “ What should I do? My profession emphatically pronounces ‘always care for your customers. Keep the air con on if the customer likes. Keep slow if there is a speed hump.

Pay extra care to the veterans and aged people. Solve every viable problem of the customer, otherwise he/she can complain against the driver to the enforcement officer. The driver must have problem solving skill.' How can I solve this problem? I have emotional sympathy and empathy with her but I can do nothing. I cannot exit the free-way, nor do I have some solution in my mind."

The customer had started weeping bitterly now. Her blubbers had become a bit loud. I was also very earnestly gurgitating over the issue. At last a vague idea came into my mind. I explained it to her, "You see, Great Western Highway is quite close from here. The traffic on the highway is quite visible. If I call another cab for you on the highway, will you get off from my cab and walk towards the highway through these shrubs, small trees, small ups and downs. The fence is a bit damaged. It is barricaded for repair. I will explain everything to that cab driver on the phone. He will park his cab on highway and come forward to escort you. But you should beware of the police. No doubt, this step is wrong but it is not illegal as it is being taken for the welfare of the customer. It will be done through my call. I have a fellow taxi driver who also does the Sunday shift. Otherwise he works other five days in a chicken factory of Toongabbie. Should I try him?"

My customer nodded 'yes' and there was a glint of hope on her face. I called my fellow cab driver. He was free and was also very close i.e. on Toongabbie road, Toongabbie. I briefed him everything quickly on the phone. He came and parked his cab on the highway and came forward through the bushes to take the customer with him. I told him that the customer is paying \$80/- to both of us-40 for me and 40 for him. She must meet her dying mother in the hospital. She is getting call after call from her relatives in the hospital. My fellow cab man came forward through the bushes.

As I was in the left lane, I drove my cab out of the traffic and



parked it on the shoulder of the road with my hazard lights on. I took the fare from the customer and gave half of it to my fellow driver who escorted her towards the highway. He drove her fast to Westmead. She was in the hospital in 20 minutes. After entering the ward she sobbed, blubbered and hugged her mother and all others present there had tears in their eyes. Amanda uttered, “Mum, I have come! Mum I have arrived! Mum! Forgive me! I took time! Wait Mum! Where are you going, Mum?.....!”

Mum could only exclaim in a sigh :

“Don’t worry, Amanda ! May God bless you!!”

And the old lady breathed her last howling; A...m...a...n...da!  
My darling A...m...a...n...da!!

## **The Boys also Speak Sense**

After migrating from Lyallpur to a village in Jalandhar district in 1947, Mohinder was a financial wreck. He saw the worst of days in the transitional years when Pakistan was in the process of formation. His belongings had been looted in his last train to India. He started his life anew after the allotment of a piece of land to him in this new village.

He could not continue his studies in India because of adverse circumstances. The F.A. he had done from Murray College Lahore, remained the total qualification in his case at the time of his getting a job as a teacher in a private school. But he did not give up his efforts to improve his qualification privately. He would often say to his wife, “Parkash, what I could not do due to adverse circumstances will be completed by my sons. I shall provide every facility to them. They will get good schools. They will get good diet. I shall leave no stone unturned to make one a doctor and the other an engineer. At the same time I shall work hard to improve my qualification.”

When Mohinder completed his B.A., one of his sons was studying in the fifth class and the other in eighth.

One day, when he was in contemplative mood, he recalled his life as a child and told his wife, “Up to the age of six I could be seen moving in the streets of my village. No one in the family ever thought of sending me to school. My father, being a marginal farmer, had the greed of getting the work done in the fields. He would make me get up very early in the morning and carry me to the fields with him. I would till the land, tend the crops, irrigate the fields, sow the seeds, reap the harvests

and graze the cattle. When it was 7 a.m., I was asked to pick up my school bag and go to the school on foot, that was 8 km away from my village. There was hardly any bicycle in the village in those days. The teachers were the cruelest creatures. My headmaster, Ghulam Haider by name, was the paragon of cruelty. He was teaching us English and Social Studies. Five students in our class were the victims of his wrath daily. They would be made to come to the front of the class one by one. The lashes of rough *danda* brought by me on order from the bank of the nearby canal would fall one by one on their hands. The victim would move step by step back ward and the headmaster would go on lambasting blow after blow on the hands of the victim student. The dunce would at last reach the last corner between the third and fourth rows. He would stop projecting forth his hard-beaten hand and the headmaster would start giving blows of the *danda* on whatever part of the victim's body was exposed to him until the *danda* would break into pieces.

The students of the class would see this frightful scene twice or thrice in a week. I was so much sensitive that I would prepare all my lessons under the simple throe and thrust of this dreadful scene. As I was the monitor of the class, I was to bring five *dandas* from the canal on each fateful day. The victims would entreat me to fetch the soft pliant *dandas* but the headmaster's wrath would coax me to bring rough and tough *dandas*."

Mohinder started doing his M.A. in English after getting the job of teacher in a better school. At the same time he started contributing articles to Panorama, a weekly magazine published from a nearby city. He would get good remuneration for his articles. His wife, too, started improving her qualification after her Matriculation. Such craze in highly adverse circumstances would provide them exultation and a pleasing intoxication. Society would praise them for their hard labour despite

being financially hard pressed. Their neighbour, Harmesh and his wife had a self made career. They had really enjoyed improving their qualification. Moreover, they had thirst for knowledge. Learning this way, without any dictations and impositions from the parents, is perhaps the best type of education. I gave their example to my kids who, despite every facility at their disposal, had no such inner urge and obsession. They would always discuss films, cheap video cassettes, fashions, hair-styles and every other cheap topic under the sun. I do not say that the students should not have facilities as the excessive wherewithal has many a time spoilt the kids. They get lost into the glamour and face-valour of these things and bid goodbye to the pursuit for better things. I do not want that the danda should rule the roost in the school. But the total absence of even any slight type of fury from our teachers is also not commendable.

The sons of Mohinder, Aman and Avinash, were now in the college. Their progress was not up to the expectations of their father. If a man would find his pre-medical course difficult, Avinash would take more interest in games than in his studies. In his heart Mohinder had made up his mind to arrange every provision for their higher studies, but he was very much upset over their progress and line of thinking. He shared his views with Harmesh about the career of his sons. The latter admonished him, “My dear Mohinder, if you have become a scholar by dint of hard work, you cannot take it for granted that your sons will also become the protagonists of your long-cherished dreams. One of my friends is an officer. His father, a J.B.T teacher, would declare thrice in a month that his son would become engineer though the latter would always dislike his long lecture on this topic. Rather he developed disliking for the pursuit of his father's liking. He was a miserable failure in his pre-engineering course.”

“The father, who was in his eyes an old skunk again took him to

task but it had no effect on him. Fed up with science subjects, he opted for an arts course in a college. After graduation, he started doing post-graduation in History and got through it with a very good score. In the very first go he got through the Indian Administrative Service Examination. Now he is a district magistrate. But alas! his father is no more to see him on this dignified post. So, Mohinder, do not impose your excessive liking on your sons. Try to make them serious in whatever pursuit they like. Hankering after the medical and engineering course by paying even excessive donations and capitation fee has not only produced inefficient doctors and engineers but has also marred the real interest in them for obtaining education of their choice. Your sons can become officers in other fields too. One of them seems to have the capacity to become a distinguished player. Diktats to boys from parents have many a time proved a drudgery that has ruined their career beyond redress. Their failure or low score in pre-admission test has made them psychological wrecks. Let them carve a niche for themselves in their life. Things are not always shaped; sometimes they take a shape themselves. That too, in an excellent way!”

Sitting in his arm-chair, Mohinder was seriously pondering over the statement of Harmesh.

(This story was used by The Tribune, Chandigarh, dated 8 September, 1991.. Its translated version had also appeared in VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad.)

## **Any Other Vintage?**

It was Sunday. Jeetan was free from her school and her dad from his job. She felt like diving deep into the past and digging something old in India before their immigration into Australia 25 years ago.

“Daddy, tell something about Punjab, what type of schools you had? How much homework did you get from your teachers? What learning methods did your teachers use? Did your parents ever overload you with daily chores? Were you using bread and jam for your breakfast? Did you have Macdonalds, KFC’s, Hungary Jacks and Red Roosters? What types of toys you had when you were a child? Did you do swimming as a youngster or child? How did you learn bi-cycle riding? How old were you when you learnt riding on a bi-cycle? Did you ever enjoy any excursions in your school? Did your parents ever bash you?” Jeetan showered a volley of questions. Her dad remained silent and contemplative for a while or so and then he spoke, “Jeetan dear, you cannot imagine our childhood and boyhood in Punjab by leading your comfortable and easy going life here in Sydney. Your childhood and my childhood are poles apart. Many vintages of my childhood will entertain as well as boggle your mind. Your topic is really interesting.”

“Dad, explain something. Do not waste time in intro. I just want to know how much change life style has undergone during the last seventy year.”

“Dear, you are not simply dwelling upon change; you are rather brooding over double types of change. Had you asked me the same

question in Punjab, then its answer would have been different. Now you are putting me this question here in Sydney; its answer has different ramifications and implications.”

“Daddy, you are beating about the bush. Please explain something solid and authentic.”

“Listen now. When I was ready for walking, my mother got a crude wooden support prepared by the village carpenter and gave it to me as a novice for learning him to take my steps. This support had coloured flowers of thread, pearls and bells at both ends, so that a child could be entertained by these trivial things. I would learn moving and taking steps with the help of this support. Sometimes I would fumble and fall down. In the cities the children or babies had better supports but the villagers would not have perhaps access to such devices or perhaps would not afford them.”

“Did you not wear the nappies even?”

“No, not at all. Everything was crude and worn out in the villages. The illiterate mothers would use crude *khadi* cloth for making all such wearings. The water was drawn from the wells with the help of *doles* (small buckets). Do you know what is *dole*, *lajj* and *maun*?”

“The word *dole* I did hear in a Punjabi movie. I have heard the words *lajj* and *maun* for the first time. What are they?”

“*Dole* is tied to a heavy rope and then it is thrown down into the well. There is a wheel on two rods on the *maun* (edge) of the well. The *dole* goes down moving upon the wheel and it comes back when one draws it. Wheel is a great invention of man. The use of wheel made life of man very easy--be it at the well or with the vehicles like carts and motor cars or anywhere else. In this way, water was drawn and then the bucket was filled with this water which was used for different purposes in the house. When I was seven or eight years old, then the people started using water-pumps. It made life quite easy. When we

were fourteen or fifteen years old, then the water pumps had electric motors fitted on them. We would just switch it on and it would fill the water tank which were also built upon our houses by that time. The people had taps in their bathrooms and kitchens. Then geysers came and we had provision of warm water through them.”

“Didn’t you have double taps of cold and warm water there?”

“No, not everywhere. One had to have it done individually, otherwise, only cold water will erupt. In Australia, we have two taps every where--one for cold water and the second for warm water---not the same in India in those times. I saw it for the first time when I landed in Australia in 2000. It was an apparition for me. I realised as if we were enjoying loftier facilities than those enjoyed by the kings and emperors in the olden times. Many facilities and privileges in this developed country are boons and blessings for us.”

“Dad, carry on, carry on. I really enjoy such miraculous earthlings.”

“*Beta*, I do not know the villages of Punjab in our times were good or bad. However, righteousness, honesty and true love did prevail. Ethics galore!! Barter system was also prevailing at the lowest level. People would even exchange foodstuffs. They would exchange things churned from milk. They would exchange water melons and rock melons. Exchange of jaggary and sugarcane was very much common.”

“Daddy, we were also given a basket of bananas and blueberry here at Woolgoolga by uncle Darshan when we visited him last year. The tradition also prevails here.”

“Oh, yes, same thing was happening in Punjab even at the lowest level. The Punjabis in Woolgoolga still follow the old customs, folkways, norms and mores. There were no readymade popcorns in Punjab. We used to have raw corn parched at the village furnace being run by a lady of backward class (called *Jheuree* in rural parlance).”

“*Jheu.....r....ee?*”



“Yes, it is a caste in the villages of Punjab. The ladies of this caste prepare parched gram and popcorns on the basis of keeping a little bit corn for them in place of charging any money from the customers. We did not have any McDonalds, KFC’s, Hungary Jacks and Red Roosters in the rural Punjab. Maybe such fast food Kentuckies were prevailing in the big cities--I have no idea. In our times, some primary schools were based in Gurdwaras and temples.”

“What? Schools in Gurdwaras?”

“Yes, we used to have our classes in the rooms and corridors of *Gurughar*. They were government schools. We had the day off on *Sangrand* (monthly religious day when the new *desi* month starts) day. The children would take part in the religious ceremony of *Sangrand*. However, some new separate buildings for the schools were also coming up.”

“How did you read and write, daddy?”

“The same way as you do. The only difference is that you have everything new and modern, we had all these things old and vintage. You have beautiful modern bags, beautiful crayons but we had crude ink made from the soot of the frying pan. You have beautiful modern pens but we had crude wooden pen (*kalam*) made by sharpening a typical twig. We had a piece of slate and a flat piece of wood for writing on it as novices. We had bag made of *Khadi* coarse cloth. We had crude course carpet for sitting cross legged on it. There were no benches in the primary schools. Some schools did not even have the provision of toilets. The children would urinate and defecate in the fields. There used to be just one water pump where they would wash and clean themselves,”

“Amazing! No toilets? No restrooms! No washrooms! Going to open fields for toileting? Shame! Shame!! Shee! Shee!!”

“*Beta*, you are living in heaven. These facilities seem bountiful

boon to me.”

“Daddy, something more similar and shocking?”

“The roads of Punjab got metalled in seventies. Before it they were muddy, dusty, dirty and ditchy on which the bullocks, the horses, the donkeys and camels would either drag the man made carts or these animals were used for transportation by riding them.”

“Any other antique of ethos and culture? Anything about farming? Anything about irrigation? Anything about marketing? Anything about child labour? Anything about bonded labour? Any type of exploitation? Anything in the perspective of movements and struggles like the current farmer agitation around New Delhi?”

“You have put forward many queries but what I perceive is that you are after some highly vintagious, outdated and obsolete piece or embodiment of Punjabi rural life about sixty years ago.”

“Yes, dad, you have really captured my imagination?”

“Okay. Now I will elaborate an obsolete appliance of irrigation which was run by the bullocks. It was called *Hult*. It is very difficult to explain its parts in English. Our translators fail here. See its photo here on Google. You will feel more impressed by its picture.”

Jeetan had a lofty look at this appliance. She was fully engrossed in its functioning and I slipped away from the room as I had no other alternative to escape from her mammoth digging into the ancient Punjab.

## Holy Darshan\*

“From Jammu to Katra and then to Vaishno Devi. An adventure in mountaineering as well. A thrilling as well as tiresome journey. But one forgets one's fatigue: the Devi (The goddess) has such divine showerings on the devotee. In minutes one covers the ascending journey of about fourteen kilometers. Such a miracle the Devi bestows upon the devotee,” Giriraj was convincing a young well educated chap of his locality to persuade him to accompany him to the habitat of Devi. The youngman was faltering with the ostentatious airs of communistic ideology about his personality.

“Vikas, you will feel obliterated all about your notions once you have had the holy darshan. You are too immature and modern to be convinced. Spoilt by the modern education. Corrupted by the *kafirs*. This time I shall definitely pack you up with me. My wife and son are also going. We shall have a good company.”

The devotees reached Katra, a town situated at the feet of huge mountains. And then the ascending journey. After hiring the canvas shoes and bamboo sticks they proceeded towards the holy Van Ganga. There were the long and unending rows of beggars on both the sides of the narrow road built of rugged boulders. One exclaimed with gusto ‘Jai Mata dee’ and the other even unacquainted with the former responded with all the more gusto ‘Jai Mata dee’. Some would pronounce, ‘Stones speak : Jai Mata dee’, ‘comers speak : Jai Mata dee’, ‘goers speak : Jai Mata dee’ and such other hundreds of divine outcries dipped and drenched in holy overtones. But Vikas was silent. He hesitated to

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\*Glimpse

respond to these outcries and exuberances--such an impact had his small study of Marx on him. For a last few years he had been fumbling in between whether he should become totally an agnostic or should partially remain a puritan. Many times he found himself gripped in the same old hackneyed puzzle: God does not exist. Men have lingered on to become the modern cultured and civilized being due to mere evolution. Hats off to Darwin. At another moment he would ponder, "Perhaps God is very much existing. The Devis and Devtas are his incarnation. Devis and Devtas do exist but they are being misinterpreted by the *pujaris* (the religious leaders). The autocracy of the *pujaris* at all the religious places!" So Vikas was a puzzle but with a fragile inclinations towards puritanism.

Vikas was feeling embarrassed while facing the devotees who shouted the holy slogans with such a zeal that one coming from the opposite side was almost constrained to respond. Faced in a queer situation as he was, he started responding to the slogans in low tone. Giriraj would say, "Devi has such a colossal force that she has started making you say 'Jai Mata dee'. Ascend a kilometre more. The response will emanate spontaneously from out of your total self. All the dross and refuse in your mind will be washed away by the Devi. She has such a miraculous *shakti*."

At last they reached the holy Bhavan situated at the top of gigantic mountains. It was about 2 a.m. The total walk took six hours. All the rooms in the inn were already booked. Even the corridors were not vacant. The people were sleeping on the roofs of the inns. Giriraj got a few blankets from the cloak room and then searched for a place of rest for the remaining few hours of the night. They spread their blankets in the open on the roof and set themselves for rest. Looking at the star studded sky Vikas said, "My legs are totally jaded.... you know. My life is easy going--a sluggish and lethargic life. Always sitting reclined against a cosy and cushy pillow

on the bed and studying the books on the most modern ideas. Please do not compel me for early get up in the morning. You know, I am a late riser. If one wakes me early, my physique remains uneasy and aching throughout the day. Generally I sleep at midnight and the most soothing time for me are the early hours of morning when I enjoy a few moments of sound sleep forgetting all the fever and fret of life.”

Giriraj agreed to it.

Morning flashed slowly. Giriraj got up early and performed his morning duties as he knew that there was a heavy rush of the devotees and one was to stand quite patiently for a long time in a queue to reach the place of worship. He got three Holy Darshan slips from the authorities and at once adjusted himself in a queue which was very hurriedly expanding into half a kilometre length with two rows formed side by side. The devotees--men, women, young boys and girls with the tints of their carefree and mischievous postures masked under the airs of religiosity, small children--were standing with divine unending and unflinching patience gripping the holy belongings in their hands. Vikas got up quite unwillingly when the penetrating sunrays started disturbing him. Giriraj's wife was a bit early and joined her husband in the queue. Vikas was disappointed to see the heavy rush at all the quarters--at the lavatories, the bathrooms, everywhere. With great difficulty he could manage to simply wash his face, and uneasy and half dead as he was, he went towards the entry gate where two constables were helping one devotee at a time enter after thoroughly checking the holy Darshan Slip in his hands. If he stood in the row, his turn would have taken hours to reach the entry gate. He tried to adjust himself in the row near the gate on the plea that his slip was already with the man gone upstairs. His standing there for intruding into the row could have cropped up a quarrel. Moreover, the constables would not allow him to budge even an inch towards the gate. Such is the special strictness at the gate.

Giriraj standing upstairs in the verandah was imploring the constables that the man standing below was his companion and his slip was with him and that he should hence be allowed to enter. But the constables were adamant. The piercing looks of the devotees were all the more intimidating for Vikas. When unsuccessful, he went back to the place of his bed with strange ideas swarming into his mind, "What is the use of coming to such places when there is no easy chance for the darshan.....? Can't a devotee show reverence to the Devi by remaining away from the actual place of worship....? Had it not been better for me to stay at Katra and perform my prayers from there.....? Is Devi not pleased this way.....? Is there any need of worshipping mythological deities....? I have enjoyed only two ways: the cool healthy climate saturated with the pristine glory of Nature, and the adventure in mountaineering, though a fatiguing one. An exercise! An excursion! An experience in trekking !.... Rousseau crossed the Alps. His Return to Nature! Occasional visits of such type can help me exercise my sluggish body. I shall be paying such visits in future predominantly for such purposes. Devi, if she really exists, can never disdain a man who performs his prayers from a distance--may be hundreds and thousands of miles. 'Those also serve who stand and wait'. I shall come for darshan in an off season, if necessary. The staunch devotees have a season of their own. I cannot face the crowds....."

Giriraj and his wife took about three hours to return from the holy Bhavan. In the meantime, Vikas had very conveniently and comfortably gone through his morning ablutions which he could not do at the time of his getting up because of heavy rush at the toilets. Seeing Vikas sitting in a brooding pose, Giriraj remarked, "Vikas, you will have to overhaul yourself before coming to such holy places. A total change in your mental make-up!! Devi never allows a heathen like you enter her house."

Vikas was helpless to say anything.

## The Married Bachelor

The parents of Rick were fed up with him. While in Punjab neither he made any progress in his studies, nor did he do any work or job whole heartedly. In spite of the best efforts of his parents he could not pass even twelve standard. He had already bidden bye to the farming work. If ever the father tried to involve him in the farming work, Rick would retaliate with negative argumentation. Finding him least interested in agriculture chores the father bought a car for him so that he could work as a taxi driver. After a couple of months Rick started abusing the taxi profession too. One day he frankly and out-rightly said to his father, “I cannot do this twenty four hour job : day time you are here and at midnight you are in Delhi, scuffles with other drivers, danger of accident always hovering over the head! Day before yesterday, you know the car broke down near Karnal and the whole night was wasted for having it fixed. Hell with the frequent toll barriers! Down with the so called officials waylaying the vehicles just for fleecing them over trifles. A couple of days before three youngsters intruded into the car! The danger of highjacking the car and then looting me continued hovering over my mind till they reached the destination. I do not want to do taxi job anymore. There is a workshop called "*Chhara* (Bachelor) Mechanical Works' in front of Taxi Stand. Talk to the owner to take me as an apprentice. After training of one or two years we'll start our mechanical workshop.”

“Which *Chhara*?” asked the father.

“Kewal Singh from Bara Pind.”

“Is he still unmarried up to the mature age he has?”

“Dad, he did marry. He has two children too.”

“Then why do the people call him *Chhara* (Bachelor)?”

“Actually his wife had eloped with someone else. Jokingly the taxi drivers started calling him *Chhara*. Now all people call his shop *Chhara's* shop.”

In this way Rick gave up the taxi profession and started working with *Chhara*. However, this new profession also became boring for him within six months. Many of his fellow beings from his village and from the nearby villages were going abroad by hook or by crook. The travel agents were enticing everyone in the area for settlement in the countries like Australia, Canada, Greece and Italy. Rick did not want to lag behind to join the rat-race. He stood no chance of getting any foreign settled girl for marriage as he had no education worthy of consideration for such a case. However, there did exist another alternative. For the last two or three years the people of Punjab had invented a novel method of having their children settled in countries like Australia. This method was contract marriage. The matrimonial columns of regional newspapers spoke volumes of such cases. These columns would read like this. “Wanted a girl who has passed IELTS for a boy who is ready to give her 1.5 millions of rupees. The paper marriage will last till the boy becomes permanent resident of Australia.”

Apart from these matrimonial ads, the agents of marriage bureaus were busy day in and day out for settling scores with the parents of prospective boys and girls.

“Daddy, the whole of Punjab is going abroad. You are thrusting me into bullshit jobs here. Everyday we see the leaflets of marriage bureau called “*Rishte hee Rishte*” in the newspapers. The money you want to invest in some business here for me, please give this amount to the parents of the girl who has passed IELTS and send me to Australia with



her as husband on contract basis. Life long relief for me and for you too! The girls are passing the test with gusto and the boys as their fake husbands are boarding the planes everyday. Only last week a dozen of boys of nearby villages have boarded the flights to Australia.”

“My dear Rick, it is really strange and unbecoming that a virgin girl takes a strange boy to Australia on the basis of concocted and fake marriage. So strange that the girl lives in Adelaide and the boy works somewhere in Sydney or Woolgoolga. Doesn't the Immigration Department swoop on them for confirming whether they are living as a married couple or not? Rick, this is not a game of days and months. It will have to last for a few years i.e till the girl becomes permanent after completing her studies and passing the IELTS once again getting requisite score. How do they pass through this ordeal in the new and strange pastures? It is a blood curdling experience and nightmarish drama of years, not only of days and months. In some cases, the boy is hardly educated and the girl is a graduate. If they are nabbed, both will be deported. Money given in millions will go waste. Rick, you will certainly put me into untold of trouble and trauma.”

“No, not at all, Dad. You feel tense and troubled over nothing. All my mates who have gone, none has come back. They say, Australia is such a safe hiding place that one can easily settle down there. Daddy, every foreign country is better than the hell here in Punjab. People are not losing chance even to rush to countries like Germany, Greece and Italy. Australia, they say, is far better. Dad, it is a very vast country brimming over with plentys and bounties, The population is too sparse, just 22 million people. India has more than one billion. See the yawning contrast. Area of Australia is more than double. A country full of orchards of oranges, bananas and blueberries very congenial heaven even for going underground. My case will be totally legal. I do not compel you to send me as an illegal immigrant. Another bounty is the

currency! Dollar worth fifty five rupees !! One thousand dollar a week is very easy earning! I am so much hardworking and painstaking that I will go to the extent of making \$ 1500 per week. More than six thousand dollars per month!! Dad, let us go to marriage bureau tomorrow. Nobody knows what time the law will change. Make hay while the sun shines. The countries change laws very quickly. Australia is too volatile in such matters.”

The following day both the father and the son were at the threshold of the marriage bureau.

“How are you Sardar ji? How can I help you?” The manager of the bureau betrayed glint on his face.

“Meet my son, Rick. He is insisting on going to Australia. Would you please guide us?”

“What is his education? What is he doing?”

“He could not pass 12th class. For some time he was driving taxi. Then he left taxi and started working with a mechanic. Now he is mad after Australia. We are confused over his plans. We have come to know that some contract marriages consummated by you have been very much successful. What do you suggest, please?”

“This is the list of contract marriages which we managed to materialize during the last six months. You can contact any of these cases for your satisfaction. In the beginning the ‘couple’ does face some hardships in the new pastures. Slowly and steadily both the boy and the girl settle down permanently. In some cases our agent accompanied and escorted the 'couple' into Australia and came back after safely ushering them into the system,” the manager was quite emphatic while talking about his skill as a master usherer.

“Do the boy and the girl not live under one roof in these cases? Does the immigration department of Australia not keep vigilant eye on such cases? Everything seems very strange to me. How much money

is involved in the whole venture?”

“Everything depends on trust and self-control. They have to sacrifice for each other. The girl starts studying and the boy finds job somewhere. After stipulated duration of time the girl becomes permanent resident. The boy as a spouse also becomes permanent automatically. Then they seek divorce from each other in the papers. They go in for real marriage then. The whole venture will involve 1.5 million of rupees for you. Lion’s share goes to parents of the girl. We also get our commission out of it. The air ticket is not involved in it. If you are ready, then I can show you very nice cases. We can talk to them.”

“Can’t we pay the amount in two installments? Half now and half when Rick reaches Australia?”

“No, it is not possible. Pay the whole sum in one go. Once money is paid, everything else is our responsibility. No tension at all!”

Both the father and son come back from the bureau. They again discussed the whole case threadbare by gurgitating over it time and again.

“Daddy, I rang my friend, Mohan Singh of Mitthapur yesterday. He told me that he was doing the job of harvesting onions in the city of Griffiths. Many boys live under one roof. The girls who married them on contract basis have already sought admission for the courses in the universities or colleges. He told me that it was a struggle of only couple of years. Gradually all of them will become permanent residents. Then they will come to Punjab for choosing top notch matches for marriages. It is a matter of only three or four years. Daddy, do not flee from spending rupees. This is a paltry sum for such a bountiful deal. I tell you one more point about the social system of those countries. I think you will feel stunned at it.”

“What is that?”

“That is de facto marriage”

“What is it?”

“It means the boy and the girl can live together even without marriage.”

“Does'nt it seem bullshit to you? It means that culture has brutally slaughtered its social values. The people who indulge in such type of social practices are really worse than animals. It is a shame that the idiots like you are being tempted by such bullshit practices. I am really surprised that you are appreciating such bad practices of that alien culture. Hell with that country of bastards!”

“You do not know that de facto marriage has its advantage too.”

“Advantage?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“It is the height of stupidity and nonsense; I think you have become mad. Your wisdom has failed you like anything. Hell with this tomfoolery!”

“The de facto partners get better social benefits from the government as compared to real husband and wife.”

“Leave these stupid ideas; you are not going to lead a life like that. Maybe that high sounding de facto marriage has its own loopholes. Talk only about yourself. If you fail to get PR, my dear son?”

“Dad, do not take stress. Everything is legal. The parents of the girl will take their share. The bureau will take its commission. Rest everything is my responsibility. I will least talk to the girl. I will keep myself involved in work by staying away most of the time. If somebody swoops on her, she will give the statement that her husband could not get any job in the local area and he had to go to some other place for doing job. Dad, my case is not illegal at all. You know, there happened a very strange case in Punjab a couple of years ago. It was in the newspapers too. The whole situation turned topsy-turvy. If you all call Australian de facto marriage a stupidity, what will you call it?”

“What was that, Rick?”

“Some candidates were nominated for PCS positions. A boy of Jalandhar district from a poor family was also one of them. The parents of rich girls rushed in to grab those boys for marriage. A very rich family of Kapurthala was able to entice this boy of Jalandhar. The marriage was performed with great pomp and show. The couple spent two months of their married life very happily. Meanwhile, the government of the state changed. The new government which came to power declared all such nominations cancelled immediately after assuming the office. The parents of the bride were so much stressed that they called their daughter back from her in-laws house and declared the duly performed marriage as cancelled. They stated that they did not want to give their daughter to a boy who had become pauper overnight because of sudden political upheaval. Shit social values we are so vaingloriously proud of! Everywhere money makes the mare go!! Do not flinch. Daddy, muster courage! Everything will be all right!”

In the morning the father and the son withdrew 1.5 millions rupees from the bank. They were perhaps the first prompt customers to knock at the doors of the marriage bureau.

## The Cousins

He has already made an arrangement for a night stay in the City Beautiful. They reach that place. On their way they have been in high spirits. But at the very arrival, to their utter dismay, a big lock hanging at the door is grinning at them. The gaiety turns into gloom. They are in a fix to know what to do. The police have already raided some hotels in the city. At the same time, he does not want to face the expenses of these posh hotels. They have already fallen a prey to the complex that they are not looking like a couple. This is not, however, a complex but partially a reality. She has rural bearings, though he is keeping urban get-up. Moreover, she has come just for one night after getting permission from her parents on a pretence. They think over the situation for a while. Then she suggests to him that she has got an old acquaintance in the city, who is a Muslim divorcee and is living with her children in a small government quarter, but this woman is too much strict in these affairs. Moreover, the accommodation is too small. Even then she suggests that they should go to the house of this woman and what is to follow will be seen in accordance with the circumstances. So, they dare. On their way she tells him that he should pose as a superintendent of police as she has one of her distant cousins, who is holding this designation. The Muslim woman has simply heard of this police official from her in her former casual meetings with her but she has not so far met him. This police official is posted at Delhi and is having a *Kothi* in the City Beautiful. He reluctantly agrees to the plan but has a fear in his mind that the woman will naturally ask many things about the

family of this police official. But he has no knowledge of it. Helpless as he is, he gives consent to what she proposes.

As they are standing in front of the house, he is feeling sensation in the lower part of his legs. But he composes himself. The saving grace is that he has a well-built tall and sturdy physique and is, of course, looking like an S. P.

Hameeda opens the door at their knock. She is pleased to meet the guest who addresses her Didi. The guest introduces him to the hostess as her cousin, the superintendent of police. Hameeda is overjoyed to greet him into her house---a man about whom she has already casually heard. With the freaks of inferiority complex, she nods them to sit comfortably on her low standard furniture. It is but natural for her to feel a bit small to face the situation which has an S.P. as its hero. But in her heart of hearts, she is happy as she considers herself lucky to have such a high official in her house. He is quite reserve and suave in his expressions lest he should cut a sorry figure. He convinces Hameeda that she should not think the way she is thinking as he has seen all types of ups and downs in his life. He tries to sit straight and vigilant like a policeman. His tone has the tint of strict discipline typical of the behaviour of a police man. Hameeda goes to her small poverty bearing kitchen for preparing tea for the happy guests. By the time she is busy in the kitchen, the cousins talk with their eyes, though at times they talk in hissing breaths. They are happy that the beginning is quite favourable. But they are at their wits' end to think how their problem of privacy will be solved. Hameeda has three children with the eldest one at the age of ten. There is no other separate room in the house, though the temporarily covered place adjacent to the kitchen can serve as a sleeping place for the hostess and her children. But the awful problem is that of biting cold in the month of December. Moreover, everything is to depend on the whims of the housewife. The guests are

praying in their heart of hearts: May the room we are sitting in be our bed room! But the hostess may ask the girl to sleep near her and he may, hence, be left alone. She may have to talk to the girl on a variety of topics regarding their families. She is living alone and is feeling extremely bored, and the welcome arrival of the guests would, of course, break the monotone of her routine life.

Hameeda lays the table with tea and snacks. He is sitting on the cot. She and the hostess are sitting on the worn-out chairs.

“Brother, you take the chair. Sitting on the cot does not befit your status”, says Hameeda in a polite fraternal voice.

“It is all right, sister. Sitting in chair throughout the days has fatigued me. I want to relax and the cot is very much soothing. Moreover, we are coming after covering a long journey from Delhi--the journey that has totally eaten into my nerves”, he is quite cautious in his expressions.

“So, Sangeeta, you have at last shown me your cousin. My good friend, Sangeeta”, Hameeda is looking affectionately towards the girl.

“It is not me, *Didi*, who has shown you my officer cousin but it is he himself who betrayed the airs of meeting you”, Sangeeta is happy that her trick is holding the ground.

“My good brother, Rameshwar !”

“Thank you, sister. Now I shall be meeting you quite often. I may get transferred to city in a few months. I shall feel happy if I prove any help to you.”

“A police officer of a rank like that of yours is really a God-sent blessing. Acclaim for your sociable behaviour that you have happily come to my small hovel! Rameshwar Bhai, how is your *Kothi* in this city? What is the number? Is it in a ten marla or one kanal ?”

He poses a bit dumb-founded to answer these questions. But he acts in such a way as he is engrossed in some thought and has not fully



listened to these questions. In the meantime, Sangeeta immediately catches the words.

“The *kothi* covers a one kanal plot, *Didi*; the number is 507; at present an office is housed in our *kothi*; we are drawing fifteen hundred per month. When *Bhaji* gets transferred here, he will get a portion of it vacated for his personal use”, Sangeeta tactfully rises to the precarious situation.

“Rameshwar, you must be living in a government quarter at Delhi. The accommodation will be spacious and gracious, of course. How many rooms are there in that set?”

“Fo.....ur”, Rameshwar answers with a pause in between the syllables as if he has pronounced the figure after counting the rooms in the set.

Hameeda collects the crockery and goes into the kitchen. Sangeeta picks up the blanket and then sits on the other side of the rugged double bed. She covers her body up to the waist and pretends as if feeling too much cold. Hameeda asks Rameshwar to be easy after taking off his tight-fitting dress. Rameshwar does so and then lies on the bed. Sangeeta then spreads half the blanket on Rameshwar and the hostess is happy to see the cousins relaxing in gay moods. It is already evening and the time for dinner is drawing near. The hostess is to make arrangement for the dinner after buying vegetables from the market. She asks Sangeeta to accompany her to the market but the latter shows reluctance by posing that she is feeling tired due to the fatigue of the journey.

There is a strange sort of animation in the blanket. The cousins are relaxing under it with their hands gripped into each other's. Rameshwar poses to be more tired than the girl as the latter is to attend to two situations. Sometimes she has to attend to a third situation also, that is of children. Children show their innocent freaks and frivolities to their

new comer auntie and she is also well responding to them. They put innocent but disturbing queries to her. Hameeda then goes to the market by herself and Sangeeta feels quite free in her absence. But the children do not go away from the main room of the house, despite various temptations shown to them by their auntie. Rather they come nearer and nearer. Rameshwar is enjoying the lewd joy under the quilt which Hameeda, while leaving for the market, has given to them to avoid cold. Though a part of the work is going on well, the possibility of a favourable and successful end seems unfeasible.

Hameeda returns from the market with vegetables in her hands and then gets ready for preparing food. Rameshwar and Sangeeta then pose to wake completely and they are now thinking of going to the market to bring fruits for the children as they did not bring anything when they first came to the house. The hostess asks them to return early as the food is going to get ready very hurriedly. Light darkness has already blanketed the atmosphere outside and the cousins move towards the market thinking about the impending separation at night, which is hanging heavy on their minds. It is only luck that can help them. They cannot make predictions for even a moment ahead. With about three kilograms of weight in their hands they again enter the house. Hameeda has almost done with the dinner preparations and is already waiting for her sister and brother. But on her way from the market to the house she has been told that an important Muslim saint is coming to their locality to recite *ayats* from the Holy Book. She, being a staunch religious woman, has never missed such congregations. She shall go to attend this function after taking dinner. The *shamianas* are already being installed in an open ground a few feet away from her house. She goads Sangeeta for the company; Rameshwar is highly pained at the hard-luck. Hameeda convinces them that the saint is an important *darvesh* of India, and to miss his *didar* will be like missing

the *didar* of God in human incarnation. But Sangeeta would play every possible pretence to avoid going with her.

“I have done everything simple. There is nothing special in food like that of police officers. I have also prepared meat as the pot was too short for its boiling. I do not have the pressure cooker, *Bhai sahib*”, Hameeda is consoling herself with these types of self-absorptions while serving the dinner.

“Not like that, sister. I like simple meals. Moreover, I feel happy to be in the company of cordial sisters like you. So, kind of you for the trouble.” Rameshwar is feeling somewhat satisfied that nothing unwanted has come out of his lips in the queer situation he has been placed in.

“Sangeeta, I have forgot the name of his ‘that’,” Hameeda has the wife of Rameshwar in her mind as Sangeeta has talked to her about his wife in her former meetings with her.

“You think of Savita?” Sangeeta again succeeds in holding the situation in credible trim by answering the small but awful question before Rameshwar speaks any word.

“When will you bring her here?”

“When I pay my next visit to your city; say, in the month of February”, Rameshwar responds quickly as the question has no intricacy about it.

“Children must be going to school, *Bhai Sahib*? I think you have.....” Hameeda pauses to remember the number of children the S. P. is having.

“He has two children, Didi; one Raju and the other Rinku. They are reading in Mount Abu Public School at Delhi,” Sangeeta pronounces the number of children by guessing the mind of her hostess.

After taking the meals Rameshwar again goes to the bed under the pretext of feeling sleepy. Hameeda is coaxing Sangeeta to accompany

her to the congregation but the latter is trying to concoct a credible pretence for avoiding this company. Sangeeta convinces her by her old proposition that she is feeling dead tired and wants to take rest. Then the benign hostess agrees to go by herself. She puts the utensils in the kitchen and changes her dress. She also gets her two small children ready to go with her but drops the idea of taking the eldest one. She asks the eldest child who is a daughter to cleanse the utensils and put them at their proper places in the kitchen. The small girl nods in the affirmative to what her mother says. She then asks the guests to take rest and tells them that she will return after about three hours.

This way, one danger is averted, though for a short while but the other small danger is there. The small girl will, of course, sleep with her auntie after rinsing the utensils. She is talking to her auntie in her innocent caprices while doing her work in the kitchen and the latter is again in a fix to think what to do with this small danger.

After pondering over the situation for a few minutes Sangeeta asks the small girl if she does not like to see the T. V. The girl jumps at the idea as today is Sunday and it is just the time of a Hindi feature film *Chupke-Chupke*. She leaves the cleansing half done and runs to the house of the neighbours. The joy of cousins knows no bounds. Luck has favoured them, though for a couple of hours. But in the nick of time even the shortest unit found after evading many precarious situations is perhaps the God-sent blessing and can give the satisfaction worth the years. These tremulous moments are perhaps the most enjoyable than the stale life we spend in affinal ties. One's own hunt has a charm of its own; all the more, the forbidden fruit is always sweet. The extreme hunger has its appeasement, within a few moments of extreme intensity. Sangeeta and Rameshwar have got these uncountable few moments. Lips and eyes meet and then everything meets in tight grips. Then follows a lovely assault after assault. The dazzling electric bulb is

winking at the cousins whom it knows more than the human hostess. Goblet after goblet of love-wine filled to its brim is drunk by Rameshwar. The moments pass on rosy wings.

The small girl knocks at the door as it is the interval of the film. Sangeeta collects herself and opens the door. The child immediately goes to her bed as she is feeling sleepy. For a few minutes after lying on the bed the child keeps on talking to her auntie. But her voice becomes dumb after some time as sleep takes her into her lovely grip. The cousins again get the time. These are perhaps the last few minutes for appeasing the remaining hunger as they are almost sure that they will not get the full night. They cannot guess what sleeping arrangements Hameeda will make after returning from the function. So, they try to satisfy themselves to their heart's content within the short time they have luckily got. The old-fashioned clock in the old unwhite-washed almirah has struck eleven. They wrinkle out the shrivelled bed sheet. The whole situation looks quite normal.

A noise is heard outside. It is surely the noise of the devotees who are returning from the congregation. Then there is a knock at the door. Sangeeta gets up and goes towards the door while rubbing her eyes. Hameeda takes it as if Sangeeta has waked from the deep sleep. Just after entering the house the housewife switches on the radio as a plaintive voice of a film song is audible from a radio in a distant house. Rameshwar also pretends to wake because of the disturbance caused by this song. All the three then enjoy the melancholy strain of the song. At the same time Hameeda is thinking of installing her bed. First, she whispers to herself that she should sleep on the bed that is placed near the kitchen. Then the idea of biting cold pierces through her body like a flash of lightening. Sangeeta is watching everything very cautiously. She is in a predicament to suggest anything lest the whole secret should open. The hostess installs a cot just near theirs. The bed that she

spreads on this cot is an almost unused one. It is obvious that this new bed sheet she has taken out of her trunk is meant for her brother who is a police officer. Then she asks Rameshwar to come to that bed so that she and her children can sleep with Sangeeta on the double bed. Rameshwar comes to that new bed sneakily without making any suggestion. The cousins are now sleeping away from each other. Their plans for the whole night have gone futile. But they are happy to think that they are partially successful in their mission. After about half an hour dreams embalm them with their soothing touch. Nobody knows how many times they are meeting each other in their dreams.

Morning sprints hurriedly. The guests are in all the more hurry to bid bye to their hostess who has proved quite 'cordial' for them. They take their breakfast which the hostess has prepared with all the more fraternal love and cordiality. Then they complete all the formalities concerned with bidding bye.

After promising to come again the cousins disappear into the broad gracious roads of the city.

## City-Father

Municipality elections at Wazirpur were over. Now the rat race for the office of president was in full swing. The president was to be elected from amongst the municipal councillors. Thus, all the M.C.'s were busy in aligning themselves into two groups. In one group were those M.C.'s who proclaimed themselves to be the members of the ruling party of the country and in the other group were those who owed allegiance to different political parties--the latter being a bit bigger group.

Two members in the united front--Mr. Batra, an advocate in the courts of the town and Hakim Sahib, an old hypothecary of the town--were considered most eligible for the post of president. All the seven M.C.'s of this group assembled in a rendezvous to make a decision about one candidate for the esteemed chair. Both these eligible candidates belonged to the same '*baradari*' and Mr. Batra, though much aspirant for the chair, did not intend to undermine the position of an old man like Hakim Sahib. Two of these members met Hakim Sahib in an aside and with their best persuasion, they were able to make Hakim Sahib agree to their suggestion that Batra, being an educated man, should be declared the president in the next day's meeting. They also suggested to him that his honour would also not be impaired as Batra would be first made to propose his name and he, in turn, should say that he did not want to hold the position and that Batra should be made the president. It was thus decided that all the other members would corroborate the seasoned and wise proposal of Hakim Sahib. All of them then left for their homes.

Night fell. Hakim Sahib was sleeping on his cushy bed. 'I am the oldest one among these lads. These sons of bitch want me to propose the name of that bloody advocate, a novice in this field! How can myself be eliminated? I have always cherished to become the city-father once in my life. How can I lose this golden chance. My name will be written in the history of the city politics for ever. Only an ass of a man can lose such a God given chance. Shouldn't I take revenge against my rivals once in my life before my death? I have already completed seventy years of my life and God never gave me such a chance in my whole life. I want some persons of the city to lay prostrate before me. Shit! these pigs want me to propose the name of that boy,' such types of ideas were running into the mind of Hakim Sahib.

The day dawned and the time of the general meeting approached. Mr. Batra was beside himself with joy by thinking that he would become the city-father in the ensuing moments, that too by having his name proposed by the oldest M.C.

All the M.C.'s of this group occupied their respective seats in the office of the Municipal Committee. In accordance with the lobbying in the previous day meeting Batra proposed the name of Hakim Sahib. But to the utter bewilderment of all the members, Hakim Sahib did not even raise his head, not to speak of any response from him. In the split second, a *chamcha* of Hakim Sahib who was keenly listening to what was going on inside, raised the slogan: 'Hakim Sahib, zindabad' and the crowd awaiting outside also raised the similar slogans. That was Batra's sadest day in his life. He had never thought even in a flash that Hakim Sahib would at the last decisive moment back out of his promise. Thus, Hakim Sahib became the president of the committee.

From that day onward Hakim Sahib started thinking of the welfare of the people of the town. He made so many plans for upliftment of the city. His residence was situated in the Ram Nagar area of the town.



The lane adjacent to his house had been the scene of water inlets and puddles for many years. The water would fill up in them in the rainy season and the people had much difficulty in wading through the mire in the lane. These ditches also stood hurdles for the vehicles. He employed some labour of the Harijan Basti to re-metal that lane on firm footing. He least bothered for the gibes of the people who had the feeling that Hakim Sahib should not have started the welfare work from his own lane.

A few days later, he took a round of the town in the company of his *chamchas*. When he reached the Harijan Basti, some of the down troddens came in his way and put forward their demands. "Hakim Sahib, our Basti is the most backward area of the city. There are no water taps in our area, though the whole city has been enjoying this facilities for about two years. Please do something for the installation of the taps in our area."

In response Hakim Sahib quipped, "Such big schemes cannot be implemented in a day. I know that you cast your votes in favour of our opposite party. We cannot think over your demand at this stage. You must know that I gained this post not with the help of your filthy votes, but with the help of my sterling notes. So, have complacency. We do not have the time and funds to look for the demands of every Tom, Dick and Harry". Saying this the city-father took the turn and made for the home.

But as ill luck would have it, Hakim Sahib could not bedeck this esteemed post for a long time, after about one month he had a massive heart attack--an ailment he had been suffering from for some years--and instantaneously died. Most of the M.C.'s in their heart of hearts, rejoiced over the death of the city-father.

The same problem of electing the president again doomed large on the committee. The rival group, by making hay while the sun was shining, was able to get one M.C. defected from the group of Hakim

Sahib and now that group had gained the majority. Almost all the members of that group aspired to become the president. None of them did any lobbying and everybody was thinking that the things should happen extempore at the last moment.

Next day, these M.C.'s as per the notification, reached the office of the committee to select or elect the president. For about half an hour there remained a pandemonium in the meeting and they were unable to reach any decision. Then four members came out of the meeting and met each other first in two's and then in common. These members at last decided to give powers to Lala Mitha Mall---oldest one among them--to select the man in accordance with the dictates of his conscience. All of them then went back into the room and requested Lalaji for the decision.

Lalaji stood up and said: "It means, you have your full faith in me. You have declared, whomsoever I shall name, shall be acceptable to all of you."

All the members of the group answered in unison, "Yes, Lalaji".

"I shall lift my turban from my head and shall put it on the head whom I consider most worthy of the chair. Agreed"?

"Yes, Lalaji, we fully endorse your view", all of them again spoke in chorus.

"Then, get ready, I am just going to do the action."

The eyes of all the M.C.'s were rivetted on the face of Lalaji. Lalaji lifted his turban from his head and with his loud 'eh!' brought it near the head of one M.C., then that of the second one, then that of the third one, then that of the fourth one, then that of the fifth one, then that of the sixth one and then with his tall emphatic 'e-eh!' he put his turban back on his own head.

A *chamcha* of Lalaji at once raised the slogan 'Lalaji, Zindabad!' The loud laughter of the people was piercing through the walls of the office.

## Ruchie's Horse

In those days I was living in Kamla Nagar at Agra. Almost once in a fortnight I used to get time out of my busy office schedule and family engagements to visit the area of the Taj and Itmad-ud-Daula because these areas are spacious enough to feast my jaded eyes which always remained stuck to the hackneyed stuff in the files of the office. One day when I was sauntering in the outer space in front of the Taj, I saw a foreigner purchasing a stick of sugarcane from a nearby vendor. I was standing near the vendor because I also wanted to drink a tumbler of sugarcane juice. The foreigner paid forty paise for one cane as per the demand of vendor. After that he went towards a tree that has maund erected around its trunk and sat on it. He started sucking the sugarcane. To my surprise, he was keeping the peels of the cane in his safe custody. His unfamiliar way of sucking the stick also pleased me very much. Within about fifteen minutes he completed his sucking and started arranging the remains of cane in an artistic way. I went on watching him doing this. Within about ten minutes he made a very beautiful decoration piece out of those remains and sold it to some asthete for rupees two. I was really wonder-struck at the skill of that foreigner. Then I thought of talking to him as my interest in him had much increased by that time.

“Excuse me, sir, may I enjoy your nice company for some time?”  
I asked him.

“Oh, sure”, his response was quite pleasing.

“What is your good name, sir?”

“Nruo Nru”, he responded with a smiling face.

“You are from which country?”

“I am a Japanese, brother”, his English accent was not so good but it was, however, quite intelligible.

“I was really impressed by your skill of making a decoration piece out of a mere garbage.”

“Brother, we Japanese never waste anything. We know that very beautiful things can be made out of what you people call trash. We have been trained this way? Our culture is such as teaches us this type of things. Of course, I have been highly impressed by the wonders of your Nek Chand.”

“Perhaps that is why you have made such a great progress in your country. Your country dominates the world in some fields. Is’nt it?” I wanted to have a peep into the inner recesses of his mind.

“Yes, you are perhaps right. Sometimes mere money cannot do many things. Knack also counts much. Things with small dimensions are as important as those with big dimensions. We in our society are taught the value of knack, not merely the value of money. You must have heard of Ikabena. We are known for such like things.”

As the personality of Mr. Nru influenced me very much, I invited him to dinner at my residence. He immediately accepted my invitation.

At 6 p.m. he was at my residence. My five year old daughter, Ruchie, was pleased to meet her new uncle. But her eyes were concentrated on his get up which carried many new things for children like her. We started exchanging our views about both the countries. When we were fully engrossed in the discussion, Ruchie came to us weeping, “Daddy, Rinku has torn my horse.”

She threw the worn out plastic toy away and started moaning and demanding a new one. I tried to pacify her by saying that we could purchase a new toy for her only in the morning as at that hour all the

shops of toys were closed. But she was adamant to have one at that very moment. I asked her to throw the torn toy out and got ready to go to the market as, I thought, some shops might be still open at that late hour. When I was about to cross my threshold, Nruai called me back. He called Ruchie to his side and whispered something in her ear. This magic whisper diverted her attention from her mad pursuit and there appeared expressions of glee on her face. He then requested me to bring the thrown away toy from the heap of garbage. I immediately acceded to his request and brought the toy back to him. He also asked me to bring half kg. of sand mixed cement, if possible. I could immediately bring the cement from my neighbour who was constructing a new house in those days. Mr. Nruai started fixing the cement within that horse which had developed some punctures on its neck and belly. He also had some paints in his small hand bag.

In the morning perhaps a more beautiful horse was awaiting my still sleeping niminy-piminy Ruchie, the like of which she might not have seen in all the markets of Agra.

## Unsuitably Suitable Match

The preparations were already over from both the sides. The marriage party had reached near the village. The festivities were quite manifest. The low standard gramophone recordings had their full play. The playing of the band party vibrated in the air. It was all a hectic activity--the things a traditional marriage always carries with it. The village wiseacres had already assembled on the common pedestal to receive the marriage party.

In a few minutes the marriage party had reached the outskirts of the village and their revelling moods were almost visible to the people standing at their doors. The women were peeping through the windows--a curiosity common with the fair sex. The partymen were packed in a few cars and were led by a traditional band party. Their happy faces were quite visible through the window-panes. The bridegroom was wearing the traditional coverings on his face. The women were curious to see the get-up of the groom. Their faces were swaying this way or that way. The opinions were being made and conveyed. The young girls had finely chiselled their image about the groom.

The procession of the cars stopped at a signal given by an 'outstanding man'. The guests started coming out of the cars. Now they were moving in the shape of procession. The greetings from both the sides were exchanged. The guests were led towards the place of their habitation. The arrangements at all the quarters were highly praiseworthy. The hired men for all types of service were working their way and the guests were to be served in the best possible manner. The

marriage party had fully settled at the abode.

Suddenly there was a sort of commotion. Somebody was saying:

“The bridegroom is physically deformed.”

“How did you judge it?” was the question from the other side.

“Felt when he was getting down the car”, was the answer.

“How did you see when I haven’t?” was the question.

“When he got down the car, I really felt as if his legs were defective. So it seemed. But immediately afterwards he acquired his usual gait. What I saw is that he was being embraced by a man. When he was in the grip of hugging, he lost his balance and the defect was clearly discernible. Moreover, such things are not uncommon. I have seen them happening on some occasions in my life. A similar incident in modern Pakistan before partition. The marriage party had to cut a sorry figure and it had to return as it came. You know my age; I am not a child. There is definitely something black at the bottom.....”

Both the persons gradually felt sure about the defect. The hint reached the other people in the village. The women folk raised it to the skies. There was suspicion all around. The rumour had almost taken the shape of reality. The marriage party was stunned. They had brought a healthy and physically fit man. What more surprising thing could there be? The incident took such a shape that the women felt totally sure about the defect. They would not agree with you, despite your hard-boiled assurances. The thing was in the air. The parents of the girl felt unhappy and confused over the incident. 'What should be done?' was the question all around.

At last an old woman with extremely suspicious nature suggested for the immediate enquiry of the matter. This woman had also seen some cases like it. Once a polio victim was detected by her. Now she was all the more confident. All the festivities were stopped. The groom was desired to face a commission of women headed by that old

woman. The meeting was arranged in a lonely room. The groom, totally helpless, was standing before these fairest of the fair. He could not go back to the village without bride because it had become a mark of respect for him. He was persuaded for taking off his outer garments. He did this in a flash. Now he was standing in his simple underwears. The arms and legs were quite bare. He was wanted to move a few paces and fling his arms and legs all the ways. He obeyed all this. No deformity was easily visible. But these women had become so much sure about the defect that they did not feel satisfied even with all the exercises of the groom. They thought that the man was concealing something--such a doubt they had developed about the man.

The matter remained unsettled. The air was packed with an atmosphere of doubt. This doubt was to go with the coming life of the girl. Perhaps the doubt might have arisen due to the fact that sometimes a man remains sitting for a long time at a particularly fixed spot--a contracted place due to the crowd atmosphere all around--and when he gets up from this set place, his few limbs may go numb for the time being. This is what happens with almost all of us when we get up after covering a long distance in a bus or in some other vehicle. Nobody thought of this thing. Whenever there is a minute suspicion, it goes on soaring--such is the psychology of we human beings.

Despite all the efforts on the part of the groom, the doubt was not dispelled. The parents of the girl stopped the total affair there and then. They made up their mind not to marry their girl to that man.

There was helplessness all around. The village *Panchayat* tried to settle the matter but of no avail. The guest party was dumb-founded. They could not return without the bride. They could sacrifice everything at the cost of their respect. What could be done? Everything was to be done there and then from the groom side. The views of the marriage party men were taken and discussed. After all types of consideration



one of the *Panchayat* members suggested for the substitute--if some other girl of the village could be accepted as bride.

An old and seasoned man of the village thought of all this. The whole village flashed before his mind. Can't a substitute look odd? Who could be the substitute? Who could allow such a substitute? The human beings are not the inanimate things--the commonplace objects. A riddle! A predicament! A ridiculous and ludicrous situation!! At last an idea came into the mind of that man. He suggested that idea to the *Panchayat* members. All agreed. They went to the house of an old man.

The old man turned his head and was surprised to see them. They asked him about his health. He was facing the severe fits of cough and was gasping for breath.

"So you came to know about my deteriorating health. I am happy that you have come to console", said the old man in his trembling voice.

"Don't get worried, Dulo. You will recover soon. Now get up and talk to us on a specific purpose", said the leader.

"Talk to you? A purpose? You big people have come to me for consultation!" The old man was stunned to the utmost.

"You know, Dulo, there is a marriage in the village today. The people say that the groom is physically deformed. But he does not seem to be. Has been thoroughly checked but the doubt remains", resumed the same man.

"What you say! A strange thing! Such inquiries should have been made at the outset. What a fun!" The old man's eyes remained open and the mouth gaped at the disclosure.

"Now you leave all this. Listen to us. You can avail of the opportunity. The matter is settled. They want bride--may be this or that. Your daughter can be a good substitute."

"What a thing! What a wisdom! A poor man's daughter will be

accepted by the rich people ! They will throw her out after some time ! The women folk ! My poor daughter! My dear daughter ! My wife left these three to be a hell for me! *Hare Ram!* How can it be feasible?" The old man's surprise was at its highest.

"You better know your position, Dulo. The marriage of a girl is not an easy thing these days. Marriage has become a business. In *Bania* community the boy is made an object of auction and whosoever bids higher is the winner. You know the matches you searched for; they all flopped due to your poverty. If your one daughter is married this time, she can think of the other two. Do think of every thing....." The leader was sure to solve the situation.

The poor old man was after sometime fully convinced by the people. The expenses had already been faced by the other family. The marriage party had already been treated. The replacement was accepted. The new bride was also good looking, if not beautiful. The settlement was not intimidating to the groom's parents.

The new bride was washing the dirty aprons when the old father called her to his side and said:

"Dear daughter, you have already borne much of the drudgery of this den-like house. Now the time has come for your departure. These people have settled your marriage."

The girl was taken aback. She said:

"What you say, *bapu?* My marriage! How it is! Your wits have gone wool gathering?"

"This is truth, my dear. You know the marriage in the village. The women have rumoured that the groom is physically deformed. But these people have checked him thoroughly. Do not go after the mentality of women. They are always like this. A substitute is to be arranged--that you are."

"Me! Me! Substitute! How can I be? Drop it all, *bapu.*"

“No, drop! The matter is settled. Be the bride of a rich groom.”

The girl’s eyes were wet with tears. They were fixed at the father who was saying:

“Now dear, you leave this dirty piece of cloth and change your dress. Your departure has come. Oh! it has come so unexpectedly. How unlucky I have always been! My poverty and old age! Get ready. Go to your house. Your new house, your good house, your new parents!”

The tears were trickling down the cheeks of the old man.

On the following day the old man was basking in the sun while lying on the wooden cot in his yard.

The house was sad and quiet as usual. The eyes of the old man were empty and gave the expression as if he were seeing far beyond the eye can see. The chain of his thoughts was snapped by the loud conversation in the street--a conversation that was unintelligible to him due to the distance. As the voice came nearer, he heard someone saying which meant like this:

“This man sold his daughter yesterday for five thousand!”

## Tea Party

A few persons are sitting in the premises of an educational institution and are discussing every topic ranging from the trivial to the conspicuous. Their grip of every topic is such a strange one that sometimes a very weighty thing becomes very light when expressed through their so-called intellectual lips and similarly at another time, a very light, mean and easily ignorable thing remains under discussion for such a long time and so much is their interest roused by it that even a laymen, if he overhears the conversation, can easily doubt the integrity of these educated and refined people. They have a vast range but their knowledge is too superficial about most of these things. Most of them try to make a mess of the strange thing under discussion and the only result is the hotch potch leading to no sound and healthy conclusion. Two persons with almost equal political tinge bet with each other regarding the election of a political leader. One says that if the leader wins the election, he will offer a tea party to all the other members. The other says that if he does not win, he will throw a heavy party to all of them. Then the discussion assumes the form of the weightage and credibility of the newspapers; one says that the one paper gives the exact news and the other opposes this idea and supports the paper of the political party he is the member of. Then the voting is exercised over this small issue and the group that loses this open voting is supposed to give a tea party to the winners. Politics enters into everything, and the people with excessive political tinge never keep clear intentions and most of them are mere poseurs.

From these political issues the discussion falls into the purview of personal things. Every smallest thing is to end with the conjuring up of the idea of a tea party. One loses one's pen and the other finds it and if the owner is to get back his pen, he should give a tea party to all the other members; another has purchased a new suit of clothes and he is compelled by all those present to give them a tea party for the new pinch. Still another generally comes late to the institution by two or three minutes and today he has reached in time, so he is also supposed to give a party to all the others; if he does not consent, he becomes the subject of jeers and gibes. This tea party has been made so cheap a thing by these members that even the small and minor things like the trimming of one's beard, the purchase of the new shoe-laces and wearing of the new spectacles, though due to poor vision, are attached to it.

Prof. Roy happens to be one of these members. He remains reserve and hardly shares this light chat. He has also been goaded many a time by these members for the same thing. Three years ago he got his arrears worth five thousands of rupees from the institution. It was considered a heavy windfall by these men and the total attention was focused on him for persuading him for a heavy tea party. Some suggested that the party should include not only tea but the *Rasgullas*, *Gulab Jamuns* and *Burfi* should also be included in the menu. One of these members went to such an extent that it would be better if the party be converted into a cocktail party. Everybody was speaking in his own way and his mouth was watered. Some stated that the party should be held in the institution and the other with a rather more saucy tongue said that the venue of the party should be shifted to some restaurant in the city. Prof. Roy was sitting silent and observing everything. All others thought that the silence of Prof. Roy expressed his endorsement and he would certainly throw a heavy party. Some felt

that Prof. Roy was thinking over the menu of the party. After some time he broke his silence and said in clear cut words that he had nothing to say about the party. The reason of the incident was questioned by almost all of them and it led them nowhere. Everybody felt surprised at this all.

This saucy conversation about the party continued day in and day out and someone was almost entrapped after every two or three days. After about one year Prof. Roy's marriage became the subject of the same discussion. The marriage was considered a turning point in his life and the demand for the party was regarded quite reasonable by all of them. But the concerned man paid least attention to the demand and ignored the situation by this or that excuse. Then there came a male baby in the house of Roy. This type of incident is taken in such a way by the common people that mirth and merry-making is considered somewhat voluntary and the occasion needs no persuasion. The members now thought that it was really a worthy time to demand the party. Though most of them remained silent, one or two did not hesitate to repeat the same thing from the same man. Roy again gave a nodding response for the time being but later on he did not materialise what they demanded.

The condition of this man became so pitiable among these members that he became the butt of ridicule from every corner. The people started calling him a niggardly person and many ugly adjectives were attached to his name. Nobody hesitated to throw a remark at him every now and then. If one called him the promise-breaker, the other imposed on him the label of a cheap man. Things continued in the same fashion and Prof. Roy remained dumb most of the time.

One day, all these men were sitting in an easy mood. All of a sudden they received an invitation message. It was an invitation on behalf of Mr. Roy and was countersigned by the head of the institution.

The message read:

“As Prof. Roy has achieved the Doctorate degree from the Manchester University for his research in the field of English poetry, he will host a tea party to all the members of the institution. Both the teaching and non-teaching members are invited to the same.”

The people read the message and were surprised at the achievement of the man who had so long been the victim of their mockery. It was all totally unexpected from a so-called miserly man. The people suspected what it all was and some of them did not believe it at all. Roy was an unbelievable man in the eyes of these people. Some wondered at his thinking.

At the exact time the members entered the hall. The saucy plates were waiting for their watered mouths. The *Rasgullas* and *Gulab Jamuns* were winking at them. All were eating and chatting and patting Prof. Roy. Tea was being poured by the servants and the invitees were taking one cup after the other--so great was their thirst for tea. Most of them were concerned simply with tea and not with the spirit behind the tea. Many talked on some topics that had no appropriateness to the occasion.

After they had enjoyed the party, the head of the institution spoke a few words thanking Mr. Roy and emphasising the need for intellect in an institution. He addressed that the men like Prof. Roy were very rare and that he had really worked a wonder. After the head, Mr. Roy also spoke a few words:

“I am really grateful to the head for his compliments and I think that I have been just elevated by him. I have often seen my colleagues imposing certain undue charges on me. Everybody knows that tea party had been demanded from me time and again on different occasions. Friends, many things happen everyday in our life. When I got the arrears a few years back, I was desired to give a tea party for the

windfall but I ignored the demand as my mind did not permit it. You see, parties are not demanded but they are given. As we cannot demand respect, similarly, when a party is demanded, it loses half of its weight. Moreover, money is not everything in our life. Money, you know, creates many troubles in human ties and hence it is not a completely positive thing for me, nor does it mean everything for me. So I ignored the demand as my intentions and feelings were tortured. Then the party for my marriage became the topic of discussion among my colleagues. Thousands of people get married everyday on this globe. It is an ordinary thing and it cannot carry the weight of a party. You see, marriage is not a rare thing and it needs to be ignored for these rare occasions. Then there was the birth of a male child and the same thing was repeated by my friends. Millions of children take birth everyday. We do not have adequate facilities for the prosperity of these blooms. The life of most of the children is so stark and gloomy that if they have survived, it is something of a miracle. The poverty-inequality syndrome under which they are born weighs heavily upon them from the day they are conceived. Millions of children suffer from malnutrition and are victims of diarrhoea and vitamin deficiency resulting in blindness followed by physical and mental retardation, feeble-mindedness and other abnormalities. My friends who indulge in blind merry making over the birth of a child must remain thoughtful about the future of millions of semi bloomed blossoms and they should also recall in this connection how Lenin, the maker of modern Russia, is reported to have ordered when the young Soviet Republic faced acute food scarcity: 'Feed the Red Army, the pregnant mother and the pre-school child'.

I want to enlighten my friends a bit more that there is no adequate arrangement for the mental development of our children. Do not only think of the child that has come into your house. Also think seriously about the environments as a few privileged children cannot avoid the



influence of many unprivileged ones. Unless healthy atmosphere is created by our master minds, there is no use of being happy over the birth of a child. Capitalism hangs heavy on us. Millions of poor people are turning poorer day by day and their counterparts--the human sharks--are eating into the very vitals of their strength. The sad plight of education--well equipped arrangement for the children of the rich in the model schools and the sorry state of affairs for the poor children in the village *pathshalas*--does not make me happy over the birth of a child and I did not consider it an occasion worthy of giving a party. You know, the party is always considered by the sincere feelings behind it. If our intention is not clear, I think, then, we are the dullards, though we may be posing many more things. We send gifts and greetings on many occasions to our near ones but most of us send them merely as a sort of fashion and have no sincerity behind them. I have been ignoring the request--not request but demand--of my colleagues for these solid reasons, though I had to face many taunts and embarrassing situations. I think, today with the recommendation of my original piece of work I have given birth to a new thing that can be helpful to many of my friends and countrymen. The work for which I have been endowed with such a degree does deserve the grandeur of a party and I did not give you the chance to request me for the same. Thank You."

## The Thief

My brother was living in a plush accommodation at a town near Delhi. This accommodation had been specially built for the army and air force officers. At the entrance a posse of policemen used to stand as a guard day and night. This locality was also surrounded by a high wall. There was a little chance of any thief crossing this wall and sneaking into the residential quarters.

It so happened that my brother would lose some amount of money and the articles of the house quite of and on. He and his wife tried their level best to trace the reason for the theft but all in vain. These thefts continued for many days. One day his wife came mid day from her office on furlough. The kids were already away to school. When she opened the door, she was surprised to see a man inside the house. She raised a hue and cry and the policemen at the gate immediately rushed towards the house and nabbed the thief. Who was the thief? This thief was none else but the tutor who used to do the tuition work for their kids. One day he had seen the key of the back door in the lock itself. While leaving the house after tuition work, he took hold of one key of the pair. The family members thought that the key was lost somewhere in the house. They started using the second key of the same make. The tutor got a duplicate key cut from the original key. Then he dropped the original key intentionally in the house when he was giving tuition to the kids. When the family members saw that key lying somewhere in the house, they were happy to find the 'lost key'.

They had now no doubt regarding the keys as both the keys were in their possession.

There was no need of getting rid of the pair of the keys and buying a new lock and keys. Otherwise if one key of the pair is lost, the second is of no use as the thief may use the second one at any time.

When interrogated by the police, the tutor thief told that he used to come from his house in the same locality during day time and open the back door with the key in his possession and commit the alleged thefts. The owners could not make out for many days who the thief was. I was surprised to know the novel and innovative way of committing the theft by that tutor.

When my brother told me this story, I was also reminded of a thief who had come into my contact a couple of years back. This thief was a person who had committed a murder in the late sixties. The story of this murder goes like this. It was the time of a summer noon and this man came to his house from the fields much earlier than his usual wont and lay on the bed in the back room. His widow mother had no idea of his presence in the house.

The paramour of his mother came stealthily and started exchanging intimacies and pleasantries with her. The son in the back room saw and listened to everything secretly. He rather concealed himself more smartly. After some time the paramour took hold of his bi-cycle and started pedalling hurriedly back to his village. The boy in the back room also crossed the wall and embarked upon chasing the paramour on a similar vehicle by keeping some distance. When the paramour had gone about four kilometers away from the village, the pursuer pounced upon him and shot him dead by firing a few rounds from the improvised pistol which he used to keep with him. After committing the murder he went underground. He remained so for about six months. During this time he gave slip to the police many a time either by jumping into the Satluj river and swimming it across or by diving deep into a well all of a sudden or by some other methods in which he was very adept. When the police started harassing his wife back home, he surrendered to the police.

The law took its course and he was sentenced to life imprisonment

by the high court of the state. Then he lodged appeal to the supreme court which forfeited his imprisonment and ordered his acquittal. By that time this man had become a financial wreck. Moreover his mother had also disowned him. As he was discarded by his mother, he and his wife along with their small male child left their village penniless. After covering the distance of a few miles in a public bus, they reached Ropar that is a town a few miles away from the place where Bhakhra dam had started coming up at that time. As they were extremely hungry, the man stole some cauliflower from the nearby field and they appeased their hunger with it. The lady and the child remained sitting near the embankment of the river for some time and the man went into the town. It was already midnight. As the man was familiar with the area since the time he was underground, he mounted the wall of a shop and broke into it from the roof. He took hold of Rs 300/- which were there in the till of the shop. With this amount in hand he and his family members reached the dam site in the morning. There he met the officials who were supervising the construction work. He was appearing such an embodiment of compassion that the officials in no time took pity on him and gave temporary job to him. When he had done job for a few months, he was able to save some money. One day he sent a money order of Rs 350/- to the same shop keeper at Ropar with the following message:

“A few months ago I had committed a theft of Rs 300/- in your shop. I did so because I was in the dire need of money. I am a man of principles. Now I am okay. Your money helped me stand on my feet. I have no words to express my indebtedness and gratitude to you. Now as I am able to save some amount of money. I am sending your amount plus interest.”

After listening to the stories of each other, both my brother and I could do nothing but to imagine the deftness and novelty with which both the thieves had articulated their ventures. Imagine the difference between the mentality of the first thief and that of the second one!

## The Spy

It was summer noon with the blazing sun. He alighted at the Batala bus stand. He was totally new to this place and the bus stand presented no better look than some other semi-urban typical bus stands of Punjab....dust flowing, passengers hawking unculturally and the roadways ranksmen reciprocating roughly. He hawked at a rickshaw-puller and the rickshaw was there before him in a minute. He told him the address of his destination and rickshaw-puller started pulling him towards that area. Within fifteen minutes he was standing in front of the house of his search.

He coaxed the button of the door bell and heard passing ring inside the residence housed in a big beautiful building. The door opened. A grey haired well built gentleman was standing at the threshold with interrogative expressions on his face. The stranger at the door bade him a polite wish and handed a letter of recommendations to him. The host read it with the mixed expressions of apprehension and surprise.

After reading the letter there came a change in the expressions of the gentleman. He greeted the guest into the house with cordial and hospitable expressions. Within moment they entered a well-furnished room which had five almirahs packed with books to their full capacity. It was the office of his lawyer mentor, Mohinder M. Kanwar. His gentle, suave and sympathetic mentor helped him sit comfortably and accelerated the speed of the air-cooler. It added to the pleasant coolness of the room and he felt heavenly ease and comfort after covering the journey in the scorching heat of June. The lawyer called

the servant from upstairs and the servant was there in the room with the airs of obedient affectations to carry out the orders of the boss. The order was placed for cold coffee. In the mean time, he initiated for breaking the ice with his guest;

“So, gentleman, you have come from ...?”

“From Hoshiarpur, sir”

“You actually hail from Hoshiarpur or you have done your post graduation from Hoshiarpur?”

“Sir, I belong to a village near Hoshiarpur. I have done my Master's degree from the University Department Chandigarh.”

“How do you then know Kanwar?”

“Sir, Principal Kanwar is quite close to my teacher, Prof. Pathak. My teacher helped me get this letter of recommendation from him. Sir, no doubt I had done my graduation from Hoshiarpur but Kanwar Sahib was not the principal at that time. He took the charge afterwards, Sir.”

“I see. Tomorrow you will appear for interview?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I have contacts with some of the lecturers of the college. So we shall meet them in the evening. I hope they will certainly help you.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“The head of the department is an American gentleman. It is, however, difficult to contact him. Even then, I shall try my best”.

“So kind of you, Sir”.

The servant brought coffee. They began sipping it.

“I forgot to ask your name, gentleman”, resumed the lawyer.

“Sir, Rajinder Aneja”.

“Your parents?”

“Sir, my father is a small shopkeeper at my village. He faced untold of hardships to afford the expenses of my studies. The family is almost uneducated, Sir.”

“Mr. Aneja, when you have such a poor background, then why did not you join the Hoshiarpur college for your Masters’s degree? Why did you go to Chandigarh--an expensive city?”

“Sir, I had got scholarship at the graduation level. Moreover, my teacher advised me to join the university. He guided me that the university career helps one improve one's personality.”

“I see.”

They had such type of informatory conversation for about one hour. Aneja knew that Mohinder Mohan was a reputed lawyer of the area and he must not be having much time to talk to a newly acquainted man like him. Moreover, he did not think that he should disturb him for a long time. So he thought of parting company with him with prospect of meeting him again in the evening. He begged leave of him for few hours on the pretext of seeing the college side. The advocate agreed to it, though he showed some hesitation because of the heat charged afternoon.

After coming out of the house Mr. Aneja was again a prey to the penetrating rays of the sun. He walked a few steps. Then he caught sight of a rickshaw puller within the range of his hawk. The rickshaw man was perspiring from head to feet but the glint of a couple of rupees compelled him to drag his rickshaw towards his fare. Aneja sat in the rickshaw and thought of collecting some information about the area from the rickshaw puller.

“*Bhai Sahib*, you are from U.P.?” he asked the rickshaw puller.

“No. Sahib, I am Punjabi.”

“Your district?”

“Sahib, I worked as a rickshaw puller at Amritsar for many years. Then I came to Batala because I got involved in a litigation there. No doubt, *Sahib*, I was acquitted by the court but my fellow rickshaw-pullers nursed hatred for me because of my implication in the case.

Such are people, *Sahib*.”

“Mr. how many miles is Pakistani border from here?” he asked the rickshaw puller.

“*Sahib*, it is hardly twenty five miles.”

Then he asked him to stop his rickshaw for a while because he wanted to drink water from the nearby hand-pump. He got down and proceeded for water. The rickshaw man also followed him. He handled the pump and Mr. Aneja drank water with his hands. The rickshaw puller also followed the suit. The sweat had wetted Mr. Aneja’s clothes from here and there and he was looking like a bit perplexed man. The rickshaw man was looking at him for the order for restarting the vehicle. At his fare’s order he again started pulling the vehicle. “Is there some good hotel in Batala for the night stay?”

“*Sahib*, the hotels here are not that good. The rooms are mere dens. But one has to stay. And they are, of course, better than nothing.”

“What films are running in the theatre here?”

“*Sahib*, I do not have much interest in films. I do not know about them.”

Meanwhile, the destination of the fare was reached. The rickshaw-puller went his way after dropping him near the college. He was simply to kill few hours to avoid disturbance to his lawyer mentor. He entered a small hotel and ordered some cold drinks. An Urdu News Daily was already lying there on the table. He started simply seeing the pictures on the paper as he was stranger to the script. But suddenly he was disturbed by two police constables.

“*Babu*, you are wanted at police station”, one of them blurted out.

“Why?” he stammered.

“This we can’t tell you. The station house officer wants to have a talk with you.”

He was non-plussed. He had committed no crime but he was



wanted at the police station! He could not understand the situation. The constables did not want to talk to him in detail. He apprehensively requested them that he might be allowed to have the drinks that he had ordered for. They, however, agreed. The waiter brought him the drinks and he had them after formally expressing a gesture of offering it to the constables. The drinks had no taste for him; the sweet had become sour in a moment; the police station was flashing before his mind. He suspected that he had been wrongly implicated in some case. But the Indian police listens the man only after cruelly flogging him. He had no doubt that he would be fully taken to task by the police for no fault of his. He made an entreaty to the constables for detecting the matter.

“My good friends, at least you must tell me the reason for my conviction?”

“We say, we shall listen no questions. The queries will be entertained by our boss”, said one of the constables in a bit harsher tone.

“Please, please, I implore you. There must be some clue after all.”

The policeman, however, showed some change in their mood at his entreaty. They became a bit mild in their further interrogation.

“*Babu*, what talks you had with the rickshaw-puller?” said one of the constables in a detective tone.

He started reminiscing the conversation. He had all talks in a sub-conscious mood and could not recollect them easily. But still the memory was partially revived.

“Sir I enquired from him about the hotels.....and..... theatres in the town.”

“Didn’t you ask anything more?”

“No, sir ! I have forgot the other things.”

“Didn’t you enquire about the Pakistani border?” said the constable with a triumphant look in his eyes.

“Yes, yes, sir, I did enquire. I have seen the area for the first time.

So I thought of collecting the knowledge about it.”

“Knowledge! We know it you are a sharper, *babu*.”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Where have you come from?”

“From Hoshiarpur, sir.”

“What for?”

“Sir I shall appear for interview at the Christian College tomorrow.”

“For which post?”

“For lecturership, sir.”

“We know nothing about lectur....ship?”

The people had started assembling in the hotel with the full belief that a Pakistani spy had been nabbed by the police. They looked towards the victim with extremely suspicious eyes. They were sure that a hefty Musalman had been gripped. They were recommending the harshest punishment. Some of them passed bitter fanatic remarks. The victim found himself in a tight fitted grip. The constables again started the cross examination.

“What is your name?”

“Rajinder Aneja.”

“You are a Pakistani spy. We are cent percent sure”, said the constable while looking at the Urdu daily lying before the victim on the table.

“No sir, I am not that sort of man. The rickshaw puller only suspected it, sir, as I have been seen in this town for the first time.”

“What is your father?”

“He is shopkeeper at my village. You know sir, I am unemployed. If you want to drag an innocent man into the lockup, it is no bad. I need livelihood. You will definitely provide me food, though of a low quality. But food is food sir, Do as you wish.”

“Stand up and follow us to the police station”, said the constable

in a police man like tone.

The people giggled at the fate of the victim whereas the latter was stunned at the irony of the situation. His thinking had been curtailed by the aggregation of the people and nothing occurred to him. While being interrogated by the police an idea suddenly came into his mind. He rummaged his pockets and the telephone number of the lawyer braced his hands. He requested the policemen that he should be allowed to telephone a local man before his departure to the police station. They asked him the name of the person he wanted to telephone and saw the telephone number winking at them. He told them the man was advocate Mohinder Mohan Kanwar. When they read the number carefully, they felt bewildered. Within a moment they were nowhere seen in the hotel. Crowd of the people dispersed with their faces hung downward. He heaved a sigh of relief. He reached the house of his mentor lawyer and told him the whole story. The advocate's surprise knew no bounds. He asked his guest whether he could identify the rickshaw puller. The guest nodded in the affirmative. He was sent into the bazaar on motorcycle along with the son of the host to make a search of the rickshaw puller. But the rickshaw puller had already got a safe side somewhere. The lawyer told his guest that it was quite possible that the rickshaw puller had been appointed by the police for the particular purpose of playing the role of a detective.

It was July 1975, almost a month after the declaration of political emergency in India.

## **The Unfinished Tale**

It was a Sunday morning. The bright sunshine on a winter day was appearing flimsy to my eyes which had woken up from deep slumber of the preceding night. For a few days I had been brooding over an idea to dress it up in the costume of words but my pen would stagger the moment I got ready to do the job. It was an idea regarding the courtship of my hero and heroine, a relation which, I wanted, should remain a courtship and not turn into a conjugal relationship.

Again that day I picked up my pen and paper and got ready to paint the precarious plight of my hero and heroine. My mind wanted to paint a picture of their rendezvous in a lonely hilly area but the suitable words for this description were escaping my mind. I braced the nerves of my mind and my pen was about to get animated when my wife spoke from the kitchen, "Hello! cooking gas is available today. They say it will be finished after a couple of hours. Take the card and get the quota. Please, hurry up, otherwise....." My pen lost all its energy. My concentration faded away on rough wings. I threw my pen and pad away and went into the kitchen to attend to the most urgent call of my wife. In a few minutes I was driving towards the gas station with the cylinder on the pillion of my scooter. After depositing the cylinder there I came back to my small flat with mixed feelings of joy and despair. Her happiness was, indeed, ineffable.

Again I turned my pace towards my study. I settled at the chair and tried to capture the same old plight of my hero and heroine. This time my protagonists were running away from me. My mind and pen were

running after them to catch them. A faint picture was, after some time, formed in my mind. The picture was, however, by and by brightening but the total brightness was escaping even the most cautious part of my brain. "I must finish the tale today", these words were assaulting my mind time again. At last I jotted down some words, the inappropriate words. Then I erased them.

"Dear, don't you know I am washing the clothes. A heap of clothes had got piled up during the last two weeks. Won't you help me in handling the water-pump? Don't you have any concern for my delicate skin?"

My idea again fled away from me. My pen and pad were again gazing blank at me. I left my chair and went to help my wife. We remained busy in that chore for about two hours. She was happy that I never flinched from lending a helping hand to her even for a moment. In the meanwhile, the rear lawn of our house was presenting the look of a laundry.

Now I thought that I would definitely get some time to finish my tale. So I resumed my work. After thinking thoroughly for half an hour, I wrote few sentences. I read these sentences time and again to verify the lucidity of my thought. But my mind and pen again ceased to work. I scratched my mind hardest but of no avail. "I have to finish the tale under all circumstances": these words were again severely warning me. I was glued to my chair and my pen to my pad.

A knock at the door. My wife was happy to receive her brother. I too stood and participated in their delight. My brother-in-law told me that he came in a marriage entourage in my area and thought it fit to pay us a visit simultaneously. I sat with him in my drawing room and we had a long chat about our relatives. After having a cup of tea we went into the bazaar where he made some minor shopping. He was to join that marriage party in the evening at the time of its departure. We

spent some time in a wayside coffee house. At last the time of his departure approached. My wife and I saw him off at the nearby bus stand. She was overjoyed to hear from her parents. She went into the kitchen and I to my study.

I again handled my pen like a sword. I dwelt upon the idea, recapitulated it and contemplated over its authenticity and credibility but the elegant expressions were escaping my mind. It had never happened so in my previous creations which were quite small in number. I went on gazing at the front wall for some time. The portrait of Sohini-Mahiwal on the mental-piece excited me for some time: it inspired me too. Exuberance and efflorescence captivated me. My intent gaze was interrupted by the yapping of my wife, "Hello, meals are ready. They are getting cold. I have cooked special food for today. Your favourite dishes!"

In a few minutes I was sitting at the dining table with her. She was extremely happy to feed me the most savory meals. But I was unnoticeably silent.

After feeding me she again made herself busy in the household chores and I again made a plunge for my study. Now I thought that I had a pretty one hour at my disposal to finish my tale. I thought more and wrote less. The creations of Chekhov, Maupassant, Manto and Mohan Rakesh flashed before my mind. How could they picturise the situations? I must mastermind my tale like them. I must paint the psychology of my protagonists in a most lucid way; have'nt I done so in some of my previous tales? Why can't I do it now? I was obsessed with this idea. At the same time, my mind was failing to drive me into the intensity of thought required for my present creation.

In the meantime, my Mrs. again called me: "Dear, we are getting late for the TV programmes. Don't you know that there is a film on the TV today? After seeing the film you should go to sleep immediately as

you are to reach your office half an hour before the scheduled time as per the dictates of your boss. Sunday comes once in a week and that too is wasted in dreary pursuits. I keep on waiting for this day and you waste it away by getting lost in your papers. Have I lost all charms for you within a few months of our married life?" I thought it futile to plead with her. I was reminded of Prince Andrey's condemnation of marriage in 'War and Peace': "Marry when you are old and good for nothing". Strained relationship between Tolstoy and Sophia haunted me. Conrad's lonely lacerated life within marriage suddenly crossed my mind. Nora's comment about her writer husband, James Joyce 'look at him now, leeching on the bed, and scribbling away' tormented me.....

Within hour after my wife's sermon, leaving the movie half seen, I lay snuggled into her voluptuous body and the mother sleep was singing lullaby by my side.

These days my study is quite topsy-turvy and my children tell their mates that their papa was once a good story teller.

Alas for the unrealized dream !

## **The Arranged Marriage**

Dr. Kamal had a liberal attitude towards life. When he selected his own life partner while studying for his M.B.B.S. degree, his parents had not disapproved. Now he had two daughters of his own--Rubini and Charu--and he was quite liberal with them until.....

When Rubini was doing medicine, she too had an affair with a class fellow. When Kamal got to know of it, he sent a proposal for marriage to the boy's parents. But they made many demands and the boy was also not willing to marry. He only wanted to have some fun. He tried to blackmail the girl because he had her letters with him.

When Kamal came to know about these letters, he requested the boy to return them but the boy refused. An offer of a considerable amount of money as compensation was also made to get the letters back. After a lot of persuasion the boy did agree to return the letters.

This incident, however, did manage to affect a marvelous change in Kamal's mind. He started disliking love marriages and became extremely conservative in his attitude. He would often advise his near and dear ones that the concept of love marriage was merely a matter of imagination because it generally failed when translated into reality.

He married Rubini off to a boy who was found with great effort at a very short notice. The marriage, was however, very successful and Rubini was contented. The younger daughter, Charu, was doing her Ph.D. in English. She was a sensible girl but disliked becoming a goat at the altar of an arranged marriage, thanks to the views of her orthodox father.



Charu never disclosed her thoughts to her father. She knew her parents were looking out for a boy for her.

“Charu, what type of match do you prefer?” One day the father tried to get to know his daughter’s views on the subject of marriage.

“You can find any boy of your liking, Daddy,” Charu had replied.

“I have seen many boys for you but no one has appealed to me. There is just one boy who can prove suitable. Do you remember Dr Chaudhary’s son? He visited our house once or twice with his parents. He is doing M.B.A. these days.”

I feel, “Daddy, why don't you give a matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper? You will get the opportunity to choose from many prospective ‘suitable boys’ in this way. Why depend on one match only? You know, my friend Simi's parents had adopted the same method. She is happy with her husband. An advertisement is the best way to find a good boy.”

The father was convinced with Charu's proposal. Both of them drafted the advertisement and sent it to the newspaper soon they received a number of responses to their advertisement. Charu helped her father in selecting and rejecting the proposals.

At last they selected four letters and replied to them, asking for their detailed particulars. Both of them felt very involved in the entire procedure, especially Kamal.

“Daddy, we have received responses from all the four boys. One of them is the same boy who was rejected by Simi’s parents. He is a drunkard, so what if he happens to be an engineer. Do you like excessive drinking?” Charu was quite vocal while expressing such views.

“No, *beta*, I disapprove of this match. How can I see you leading hellish life with a drunkard? What about the other three boys? One is settled in the U.S.A. and has a flourishing business there. The other

boy is the son of a big businessman. The boy is doing engineering in a college in Karnataka. He has taken admission after paying a massive amount as a capitation fee. The third one is a scholar in the department of Mathematics in your university.”

“I dislike boys settled abroad. Generally they try and dominate the girls whom they sponsor for immigration. I do not want the drudgery of this kind of marriage,” said Charu as she continued speaking, “Moreover, you are aware of the divorce rate in the U.S.A. Have you forgotten the fate of Anju, the daughter of your friend, Mritunjay Kumar Luthra? As far as the boy doing engineering in Karnataka, I am not for him. Generally the boys who go to do these courses can’t seek admission here because of their low percentage. How can we select a boy with low mental calibre? But you can contact the scholar if you so like.”

The father was convinced with her suggestions. When a final meeting was arranged, both the father and the daughter were impressed with the boy’s credentials. The marriage was solemnized shortly.

Charu and her husband had their honeymoon in the university holiday home at a hill station. They had a gala time and felt ecstatic.

The girl felt like talking time and again about how she had dodged and deceived her conservative father by asking her lover--now her husband--to respond to the matrimonial advertisement !

(This story was used by The Tribune, Chandigarh, dated March 21, 1993. Its translated version had also appeared in VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad.)

## The Only Ring

Mohinder's parents were illiterate. They had exhausted all their sources in providing education to their two sons, and marrying off their one daughter who could not study beyond Matriculation because of adverse circumstances. The last remnants of their sources were used up in getting postgraduate degree for Mohinder who took three years to procure a job in a Bank. Then he saved some money for his marriage. He would not like any unsuitable match traced for him by his parents who had no links with well-connected families. When the parents and relatives were unable to find match for him, Mohinder gave a matrimonial advertisement in the leading newspaper of the region. Out of two dozen letters of enquiry, he thought it fit to correspond with a particular family from Ambala district which preferred simple marriage without dowry, and was also compatible with his rural background. After the preliminary enquiries on both sides, the marriage was fixed. A month before the marriage, Mohinder was invited by his prospective in-laws to Chandigarh for some face-to-face shopping.

Mohinder reached Chandigarh at the stipulated moment of time. He went alone. His fiancée and would-be father-in-law were waiting for him. They purchased one woollen suit, one gold ring and one pair of Liberty shoes for Mohinder and six *saris*, five suits, one gold set, two gold bangles and two pairs of *sandals* for Manju, Mohinder's would-be wife.

Mohinder was non-plussed to see the plethora of shopping on the part of his in-laws as it was discussed earlier that the ceremony would

be simple. He had not carried much amount of money with him to emulate the shopping of his in-laws. He offered to purchase only one fine *suhana* suit for Manju and told them that he had already made the rest of shopping from Ambala.

The marriage party of Mohinder comprised only ten members. He hired only three taxis for the purpose.

Despite the repeated proposals for simple marriage from both the sides, the dowry and *wari* were displayed. Apart from the shopping made at Chandigarh, Manju's parents gave refrigerator, a sofa-set, a double bed and so many other valuable articles. Mohinder's *wari* comprised a gold chain, two gold bangles, one set of ear rings, four *saris* and three suits for Manju.

Manju felt exalted to see the *wari*. But Mohinder was sadly happy and happily sad. Five days after the marriage, the couple went to Shimla for honeymooning. They spent ten days there, loving, enjoying snowfall, merrymaking and sight-seeing. Mohinder had booked accommodation in the holiday home of his bank there. Manju felt exhilarated to wear all the jewellery and pose for photographs at the Mall.

"Manju, may I share one thing with you?" one day Mohinder said a bit reluctantly.

"Is there anything you have not shared with me so far? So strange!" Manju felt a bit scared.

"First assure me that you will not mind anything."

"I shall not mind at all. Tell, tell me". Manju's curiosity was beyond her control.

"Manju, darling. The bangles I bought for you in *wari* are not mine. I had borrowed them from my sister-in-law. She is demanding them back. Please part with them."

Mohinder, you have given me so much love. You should have told

me earlier about it. Return the bangles to your sister-in-law. In her heart of hearts though Manju felt a great emotional shock, she immediately gave the bangles to Mohinder. The separation of bangles from her, however, weighed heavily on her mind for a few days. Two months rolled by. It appeared to them as if they had been together for ever. Both of them had bountifully mingled into each other. Mohinder was fabulously doting on her.

One day they were lying snuggled into each other till late in the morning. Mohinder was in a contemplative mood.

“What the hell are you thinking, darling? Have I lost all charms for you so early?”

Manju was looking at the artistic piece of Taj Mahal lying on the mantel-piece.

“What are you saying dear? Lost charms for you? Can this ever happen? No. Never, never say such a thing again, You are my Juliet! You are my life!”

“Then, what were you thinking, Mohinder? Your mind was somewhere else. You seem incommoded.”

“Manju, I have one more secret to reveal to you. That gold chain I brought for you in marriage, I borrowed it from my sister. She is demanding it. But I am making this or that excuse to her. Won't you mind .....?”

“What a scheme and manoeuvring! Now you have become one with me so much amorously that I have no alternative but to accede to whatever you reveal or propose. You men! Take the chain and return it to your sister.”

A few days after returning from holidaying, one day, Manju was sitting alone stitching a silk suit for herself as Mohinder was away to the bank.

“Men! Strange creatures!.....First they tactfully entrap women!

When there is no way out for women, they make queer revelations....I had thirteen *tolas* of gold....thirteen minus four is equal to nine *tolas*....how shall I make up the deficiency? Had there been a mediator in the marriage, the things would perhaps have been different. No....no. Even mediators also many times do not know the crux of the matter.....” This reverie of Manju was interrupted by Mohinder when he came home during the lunch break.

However, they embraced each other. Made plenty of love and fondlings.

Now it was the fourth month since their marriage. One night Mohinder was showing signs of insomnia. Manju asked him in the morning, “Your eyes are red. Did you not have a sound sleep last night? Do you still have something that weighs upon your mind?”

“Manju, I have one, only one, excuse me, the last one secret to reveal to you. Please do not mind it.”

“Is it some pre-marital love affair? Oh, my God. It must be something drastic and devastating. It must be apocalyptic. I am undone! I am undone!!” Manju was almost on the verge of sobbing.

“No, no, no, dear. You are talking and taking it other way. Can you ever imagine such rubbish from me?”

“Then, what is that secret?”

“Manju, that imported suitcase in which I brought *wari* for you belongs to a colleague of mine in the bank. Your lavish spending on shopping had dazzled me, and I did not want to lag behind. Now the colleague has been demanding his suitcase for the last one month but I have been putting off all along.”

“Wah ! Wah !! My dear pauper husband, should I think that all the remaining items bought for me at the time of marriage also belong to other people. Do you have anything that really belongs to you? Tell me frankly and unhesitatingly today. I have now reached such a pass that

I can part with all material things. I cannot part with one thing. Your Love! Your supreme love has captivated me!! Now I adore you as my Adonis!!”

“My Manju, this is really the last secret, by you! By your Love!! By Cupid! If I had told you everything on the first night after marriage, there would have been an irreparable rift. I let my love embower and engulf you. You know, every husband and wife has some reservations in his or her mind before marriage. If, under the throes of emotions, they disclose every secret on the very first night after marriage, their marriage will be on rocks in a split second. Let fondlings and dotings beget fondlings and dotings for a couple of months. Love has such a magical spell that all material treasures are enslaved by it. I was able to purchase a solitary item of jewellery for you, a gold ring. All the remaining items in the house, of course, belong to me. When I saw you making heavy shopping at Chandigarh, I thought that the idea of simple marriage proposed by your father was merely a hoax. I also started making preparations for the show in my own way. You know, my sources were limited. I do not mind that much seriously to part with those articles. The plentiful love I got from you has captivated my heart.”

The mellow and melodious Manju was intently looking at the hallowed countenance of her magnetic and magnanimous Mohinder.

(The translated version of this story was used by VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad under the title. ‘The Marriage Gift’.)

## **The Voracious Reader**

### **(A Causerie)**

David met me in the parking area of the workers club. He was looking for a parking space. As the parking space was almost full, I helped him park his car close to my car in the corner. He introduced him to me. In this way, the ice was broken and he ventured into exchanging his views with me while walking towards the entrance of the club.

“David, I see you quite often in the club. By the way where do you live?”

“Not far away, mate. I live in Jill street.”

“Are you still working?”

“No, no. I am not working now. I got retirement at the age of 59.”

“What job were you doing?”

“I retired as a manager from the Railways.”

“You took the retirement very early. I have seen many people in the railway working up to the age of 70 or even more. Was it Sydney Trains or Countrylink?”

“It was Countrylink, my friend. I joined railway at the age of 18. In this way, I worked 41 years. That was enough. Moreover, I had earned enough money. Then I thought of getting retirement.”

“People say: money is never enough but you opine you had enough money.”

“Contentment is a relative term, my friend. Some people are contented with less and some are discontented even with too much.”



Meanwhile, we reached the entrance of the club. He went his way and I went mine.

Though I had good knowledge about the area of Jill street, even then I recapitulated the standard of the houses in that street. All houses in this street are simple with no extraordinary artistry and furnishing about them.

While sitting in the club I had a reverie: 'The Punjabis are not contented even with three or four million dollar houses...David is contented with an ordinary house in an ordinary suburb even after 41 years...job in a vast organization like Railways...The Punjabis are competing and vying with one another over the property and perks but the Aussie guys have their tastes and enjoyments somewhere else...The Punjabis never take retirement unless they feel compelled to do so...The Aussies do have degree of contentment...The Punjabis will have a magnificent house in Punjab and a similar one in Sydney....Some will possess many houses here in Australia...Even then they will feel discontented and disgruntled....The Aussies will plan their perks and property in such a way that they will keep on enjoying them over a long duration of time....Six hundred dollars a week is not enough money for the Punjabis...This much of money is good money for many Aussies.

When I was brooding over such differences of mental make-up of the people, David again said 'Hello' to me while passing by me towards the counter. He had a schooner of beer in his hand and was bit intoxicated.

“You told me that you have read heaps of English poetry. Really?” he asked me by way of resuming his previous acquaintance with me.

“Yes, David, I had done Master's degree in English literature in my country.”

“Have you read Alexander Pope?”

“Yes, I have read some of his poems like ‘The Rape of the Lock’

and the 'Dunciad'."

"Have you read his small poem about contentment?"

"Do you mean 'Solitude'?"

"Oh, yes. It is a small poem. I do remember its text and content."

"What is the content, mate?"

"One should have limited wants. One should be satisfied and satiated with minimum property. Peace of mind is a bigger boon than the possession of prodigious properties." Now listen, David:

Happy the man, whose wish and care

A few paternal acres bound,

Content to breathe his native air,

"In his own ground."

This is the first stanza.

"Well done, my friend."

"May I recite one more?"

"Oh, yes, if you remember".

Sound sleep by night; study and ease,

Together mixed; sweet recreation;

And innocence, which most does please,

"With meditation."

"Excellent, my friend. You have performed very well."

"David, you had a long career with trains. You must have some knowledge about the poetry of trains?"

"Oh, Yes, I do have. I had read Emily Dickinson. In her poem 'Railway Train' she presents the railway train in the metaphor of a mythical horse. May I recite a stanza by singing?"

"Oh yes, why not?"

I like to see it lap the miles,

And lick the valleys up,

And stop to feed itself at tanks;

And then, prodigious, step.

“You are really great, David. You relish poetry in spite of your chequered career in unpoetical environs. Let us now go home.”

“No, I am not going yet. I will stay here one hour more.”

“Okay, then.”

“Thanks !”

## Save Me, My Sons

Buta Singh at 40 was still a bachelor. He was a poor man and farmed a few acres. Marriage for a poor man of his tribe was not easy because the bride had to be purchased. The year was 1947 and one day Buta Singh saw a young girl being dragged by a man. He came forward to rescue her. There was a fierce scuffle but the girl, Zaniba, hardly 17, was saved. Buta Singh sheltered the girl in his house and nursed her in such an affectionate way that she agreed to marry him. They married secretly and were happy. She gave birth to a son who was named Zaid Mohammad, a name chosen by Buta Singh.

After some time the Women's Welfare Society was informed that Zaniba was living with Buta Singh. Zaniba's case was brought to their notice by a nephew of Buta Singh who had an eye on the latter's property. Society members with a police escort came and forcibly took away Zaniba and put her in a transit camp. They finally sent her to Pakistan to join her relatives.

Buta Singh felt utterly forlorn. When he came to know that Zaniba had been transported to Pakistan he baptized himself as Rehmat Ali and smuggled himself into Pakistan. He went from camp to camp and at last in Lyallpur he got a clue that Zaniba had been sent to Multan. He went there and after a few day's search, he was able to trace Zaniba who was living with her relatives.

The girl declared he was her husband but her relatives were shocked especially when she said, "He is actually a Sikh and he has now become a Muslim to meet me." The relatives pounced on him.

Buta Singh and Zaniba managed to escape. In the guise of Sikhs they came back to India and settled at a place far away from Buta Singh's original home. Buta Singh got work as a labourer at Bhakra Dam. He was allotted a small quarter and he and Zaniba were content.

She gave birth to another son and named him Sucha Singh. When Zaid Mohammed and Sucha Singh were old enough they started working along with their father who felt greatly relieved to have their help. Thirty-six years later both the sons had their own families. Buta Singh had grown too old to work.

One day a Hindu fellow labourer taunted Sucha Singh: "We Hindus are superior. We rule the country. All the Prime Ministers have been Hindus. You belong to a minority community. Spit on you." This angered Zaid who assaulted the Hindu and wounded him seriously. Buta Singh was pained when he came to know of the incident. He was reminded of partition days. His sons stood before him with downcast eyes. The haggard old man wept.

His eyes were silently pronouncing: "My sons, you have not seen, nor do I ever wish that you should see, what happened in 1947. The narrow outlook and the policy of secessionism created Pakistan. Some people are now again bent upon repeating the same error. My friends you don't realize that a minor pejorative remark can trigger off a horrible confrontation between the two communities. You should understand that we all are the sons of the same God, all 'isms' being the variations of the same idea. I am on my death bed. Save me my sons."

Then the old man had a fierce fit of coughing. His condition was worsening. He was really gasping for breath.

(This story was used by The Tribune, Chandigarh, dated April 15, 1984 under the title 'Never Again Please'. Its translated version had also appeared in VIPULA, a Telugu Monthly of Hyderabad.)

## Destination Wedding

Vikas is a videographer. When he goes out on a bigger project, then he hires some assistants. These assistants have some other full time job but they make extra money after having been hired by Vikas. This way they gain more and more efficiency and expertise too. Last month Vikas hired three assistants and went to Pune in India for covering a destination wedding. One was Greek, the others were Sri Lankan and Lebanese. All four had their stay in a five star hotel in Pune. After covering marriage they had to stay in India a few days more too.

Reaching the hotel one day the Greek, Alex and Lebanese, Antony had a programme. They called a taxi. They asked taxi driver to take them to a good bazaar of Pune. The driver took them to a shop. They made some shopping and came back to the hotel in the same taxi. When they were back in their suite, a waiter was seeking information from Vikas about their menu for dinner. In the presence of this waiter Vikas felt prompted to know their shopping.

“Antony, what did you buy today? What is your experience of shopping in India? How did you like it?” Vikas asked him in lingua franca that was English.

“Vikas, the things are very cheap here. I bought this deodorant for \$ 10 and this perfume for \$ 20. People say the perfumes of India are very high quality perfumes.”

“Sir, these things are very cheap here. The deodorant costs Rs. 150 and perfume Rs. 500”, the waiter took no time to express his views.

“Then why did the shopkeeper charge such a high price”, Vikas

asked the waiter.

“Sir, the shopkeepers have the gimmickry of analysing the customers. If the customer looks rich and has come from a rich country, then the shopkeepers charge double rate from him. They know that the customer has the currency of his own country in his mind. Rs. 500 means Australian \$ 10. \$ 10 is a paltry sum for a tourist. Its equivalent 500 in India is comparatively big amount.”

“Do you mean they should keep on fleecing the tourists in India?”

“When somebody pays intentionally then it is not fleecing at all, sir. The spendthrift nature of tourists is a boon for us natives. Many tourists buy many things from here. Do you know the profit made thus also has two shareholders?”

“What do you mean?”

“The taxi driver who guides a tourist to a shop also has a share in the profit. These taxi and auto drivers have deep knowledge about the tourists staying in these five star hotels. A commodity that has actual Rs. 200 cost is sold at Rs. 1000. 10 or 15% of this 1000 goes to these taxi and auto drivers. These dealings keep on going very nicely in unison. There is no dearth of tourists in the cities like Mumbai, Pune and New Delhi. The costs do not make much difference to them but the Indians make good money out of it. The shops where these tourists are driven to keep very smart sales persons both boys and girls who speak very fluent English. These sales persons behave very nicely with these tourists. The tourists feel quite at home in the company of these sales persons. The magic of this wonderful customer service is the crux of the matter”, saying these words the waiter went out of the room. Then Vikas and his three mates continued exchanging their views.

“The waiter did not hide anything, bros. He explained every secret without any hesitation”, Antony said.

“Friends, I recall a customer in Sydney. I used to drive taxi at that time. I had a permanent customer. His name was David”, Alex told him.

“What is extraordinary about your customer?” Vikas asked in light mood.

“Any peculiarity of your customer?”

Sri Lankan Ashwick was curious to know.

“David used to tell me that he was going to Bangkok every year in the vacations. He had his girl friend there”.

“What a surprise! He had girl friend so far away”, Vikas was more curious to know the details.

“Friends, having girl friend in a country like Thailand is very much advantageous. The Australian dollar when it is spent in countries like Thailand becomes so lofty that one never feels deficient even by spending money like kings. The earning of one month in Australia multiplies so much in Thailand that one never feels short of money at all. Things seem very cheap. Lodging seems very cheap. Food looks very cheap. Same is the case with transportation, cinema, massaging and many more things.....”

“It means the tourists of rich countries in India and Thailand can spend lavishly and live like kings for a short time.”

“Bro, you are correct. We know that we aspire to settle in developed countries due to this rich currency syndrome”.

“Shoudn't we go back by Thai Airlines? If the breaking is bit expensive, then what? We should break our journey for two days at Bangkok and do some shopping there. Every thing galore, cheap and nice!!”

After listening to this view of Antony they made up their mind to go back to Sydney via Thai Airlines.