THE SOILED BORDER
(Maila Anchal)
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PART ONE

ONE

The news spread like lightning through the village—soldiers had arrested deaf Chethru and taken the bucket from Lobinal's well.

Although there had been no trouble in the village with the army during the People's Movement of 1942, and the wave of the Movement hadn't reached the village, news of events in the rest of the district had indeed come to the village as rumors... In Moglai Station, a white soldier had abducted a grain merchant's daughter; as a result, fighting had broken out between the Sikhs and the white soldiers, and shots were fired. Surrounding the village with military show, the soldiers had set it on fire. They hadn't spared even a child. Musahara's father-in-law had seen with his own eyes corpses lying there for months like fish roasted on a fire. Even the crows wouldn't eat them. A military guard had been posted, Musahara's father-in-law's nephew was a cook for Forbes Sahab. Would he lie?

And now, four years later, this village was going to have its turn. Mother Kali have mercy! Baba Larsingh have mercy!

Baldev of the Gujor quarter was to blame for it all.

Biranchi Das mustered his courage. He stepped out of the courtyard, peered around, then ran towards the Malik quarter. The tahsildar, Vishwanath Prasad, was upset when he heard the news.
"Where did Lobin get a bucket in the first place?" he asked. "Surely it must have been stolen. These bastards steal everything and give the village a bad name!"

The news from the Malik quarter reached the Rajput quarter—the soldiers had seized Vishwanath Prasad of the Kayasth quarter and Biranchi Das of the Tatma quarter and taken them away. Thakur Ramkrpal Singh said, "This time the joke's on the tahsildar. Surely he's gotten fat off the taxes he collected for the zamindar. Now let's see what the prison air does for his figure!"

As soon as the people of the Yadav quarter heard the news, they seized Baldev. "Don't let him get away! Tie him up with rope. I told you that one of these days he'd have the whole village in chains."

Tahsildar Vishwanath Prasad took a seer of ghee, five seers of Basmati rice, and a gelded goat, and timidly set out to bribe the military officers. He took Biranchi with him. "Look," he said to Biranchi, "add it all up. Here's fifty rupees worth of stuff. Collect this much money from Lobin's quarter and from yours within one week. This is your fault that..."

The soldiers were in the garden of the old bungalow. As Vishwanath Prasad approached, he took his cap off of his pocket and put it on. Facing the Kali temple, he bowed to the goddess, "Mother Kali, have mercy!"

When he reached the garden, Tahsildar Vishwanath Prasad saw two ox carts. The oxen were eating grass, and the soldiers were sitting on a blanket spread out on the ground. What?... they're just sitting around having a snack! And even deaf Chethru is sitting right there on the blanket munching away!

"Salam, sir!"

Biranchi set the load down from his head, bowed, and saluted, "Salam, Officer!"... Even the goat bleated.

"Arey, what's this? Who are you?" a fat sahab asked.

"Your Honor, this is the tahsildar of Minapur Circle, Parbonga Staie."

"Oh, so you're the tahsildar! Just the man we wanted to see. We're from the District Board. The order has come from the top that a malaria center is to be built right here where the garden is. Martin Sahab gave this land to the District Board a long time ago."

The tahsildar saluted one more time and sat down. Biranchi remained standing with his palms placed together.

When Ramkrpal Singh of the Rajput quarter arrived, he noticed that the land on the western end of the garden was already being surveyed. Some men were already stretching out a surveying chain there. One sahab with a military cap was chatting and laughing with the tahsildar.

Finally, the people of the Yadav quarter arrived, making a commotion and dragging Baldev, his hands and waist bound with rope. They were all holding tightly onto the rope. The government had offered a reward to anyone catching runaway freedom fighters—one thousand, two thousand, may be even five thousand rupees!

But as soon as he saw them, the government officer became furious. "What's going on? Why have you tied him up and brought him here? What has he done?"

"Your Honor, this is the freedom fighter. Baldev Gop. He's spent two years in jail. He's not from this village—he's from Channapatti. He's visiting his mother's sister. He wears khadi and says 'Jai Hind.'"

"So why did you tie him up?"

"Hey, Baldev!" The officer's clerk recognized Baldev. "Arey, it's Baldev! Why, sir, he's a volunteer at the Ramkrisha Congress Ashram. He's a fine man!"

When Baldev was released from the hands of the Yadavs, he saluted the officer and clerk in turn, "Jai Hind!"

The officer laughed and said, "They're going to open a malaria center in your village. A famous doctor is coming. The District Board will have to put up the building, but you people will have to help with the rest of the work."

The tahsildar, who had prepared the zamindar's records and maps, said, "Sir, the land is one and one-tenth of an acre."

Ramkrpal Singh hadn't even had a chance to salute the officer yet. Now Vishwanath Prasad had scored another point! For the first time in his life, a Singh-ji felt ashamed of his illiteracy. Education was truly important. But at least the Lord had given him a healthy body—and birth into a high caste, which had enabled him to meet and mix with officials and lawyers. As soon as he got a
chance, he saluted and said loudly. "Jai ho, Officer! Your Honor, you have taken the trouble to come all this way for the sake of the people, and I haven’t had a chance to be of service to you. As Gosai Tulsidas has said in the Ramayana: ‘He is fortunate who is given a glimpse of the Lord.’... Your Honor, I am your humble servant, Ramkrishna Singh, son of Gobindanand Singh. Caste: Rajput; Birthplace: Gadhundel in Rajputana; Current home: Maryganj."

"Singh-ji, I don’t want you to serve me. If you want to serve, the malaria center is opening up. All of you should help with it. That would be the best service you could offer," the officer said, smiling.

Meanwhile, one by one, the people from the Yadav quarter were quietly slipping away, unnoticed. They were afraid that the officer might take them to court for tying up Baldev.

As the sahab was leaving he said, "Within seven days, carpenters will be coming from the District Board. You people make arrangements for bamboo, grass, rope, and anything else they need. I can count on you, Tahsiladar Sahab; and Baldev Prasad, of course, since you are a servant of the country; and Singh-ji, you too. All of you join in and help."

They all placed their palms together and bowed their heads in agreement. The officer left with his group. The goat bleated.

Baldev walked behind the cart as far as the village limits. When he returned, he told everybody, "The Bengali officer of the District Board was Praphulla Bannerjee. His clerk is Jitan Babu. He used to be a clerk in the Congress Party office!"

TWO

To this day there are many villages and towns in Purnea District whose names bear the stamp of the indigo sahabs. The ruins of their bungalows standing in the deserted jungles and meadows remind travelers of the long-forgotten tales of the indigo era. Often a young man returning home with his bride will tell the driver, "Slow the cart down here, so the bride can see the sahab’s mansion... There's McKay sahab’s mansion... and there's the indigo pond."

Pushing the curtain aside and shyly drawing back her veil, the bride peeks out and sees a pile of bricks and rubble in the middle of a thick forest of jharbar trees. "Where’s the mansion?"

The bridgroom’s face fills with pride. "You see, the sahab’s mansion was right near our village. Memsahab lived there!"

The ox carts of pilgrims returning from the Ganges halt there for a while. The young women and children get out and cautiously approach the ruins, while the old women search the jungle for medicinal roots and herbs.

Maryganj is such a village. To reach it, you go east from Rautahat Station for about fourteen miles, then cross the old Koshi River. For a long stretch along the banks of the Old Koshi there is a forest of palm and date trees. The people of this region call it the ‘Nawab’s toddy grove.’ It’s hard to say which nawab planted it, but from April until June, the locals—from sweet-sellers to shepherds—live it up like nawabs. After drinking three anna worth of toddy, a fellow can imagine himself a big nawab, bordering around a chauffeured motorcar: "Stop the motorcar, you bastard!"

Beyond the palm forest, the plains stretch for thousands of acres from the foothills of Nepal to the banks of the Ganges, a vast, barren border region. Even wild grass doesn’t grow there. Just scattered sand dunes and an occasional ber bush. After crossing two miles of this plain, you can see a dark forest towards the east. Right there is the Maryganj bungalow.

About thirty-five years ago, on the day when W.G. Martin laid the foundation for his bungalow, he had a drummer announce in the nearby villages that from that day the name of the village would be Maryganj. At the time, Martin Sahab’s new bride, Mary, was living in calcutta. They say that once a farmer accidentally uttered the old name of the village. That was it. Where could he go? Martin Sahab whipped him fifty times, counting every stroke. Now no one remembers the old name of village, or else some vague dread arises when recalling it. Who knows!

Martin Sahab first changed the name of the village, had the District Board build a road from Rautahat station to Maryganj, and had a post office opened; then he went to Calcutta to fetch his new bride. If Bhaireo’s mother, the oldest woman in the village, were still living today, she’d tell you, "Oh! Memsahab was like an angel—like an angel in Indra’s court!"