

**THE  
SOILED  
BORDER**  
(Maila Anchal)

# THE SOILED BORDER

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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 Lobinlal'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 Moglahi 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 *Guar* 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 *Kayash* quarter and Biranchi Das of the *Tarma* quarter and taken them away. *Thakur* Ramkirpal 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 out 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!

"*Salaam*, sir!"

Biranchi set the load down from his head, bowed, and saluted, "*Salaam*, 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, Parbunga State."

"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 Ramkirpal 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, Baktev Gop. He's spent two years in jail. He's not from this village—he's from Channanpatti. 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 Ramkrishna 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."

Ramkirpal 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, Ramkirpal Singh, son of Garibanevaj Singh. Caste: *Rajput*. Birthplace: Gadhbundel 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 *Yaday* 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, *Tahsildar 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 Jittan *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 *jarber* trees. "Where's the mansion?"

The bridegroom'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 today* 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 *today*, 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 Culcutta. 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 Bhairo'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!"