

"Where's the staff I got from that *sadhu*?"
 "Go get your arrows!"

"Arey, what's happened? Why is a mob..."

But who could answer? Who had time! The whole village was in utter confusion. Hargauri's mother was calling Shiv Shankar Singh into the courtyard. "Old Raudi of the *Guar* quarter came and told me!" she shouted. "Everyone in the *Guar* quarter is outraged that Hargauri beat Baldev with his shoe. Kukru's son, Kalicharan, has sworn by the goddess *Kali* that he'll drink Hargauri's blood!... Come into the courtyard, father of Gauri!"

"Oh!" Baldev ran. "Don't you people get upset!" he shouted. "I'll take care of it. They're confused. I'll have a talk with them."

"Say it once with feeling... *Mahavir-ji... jai!*"
 "*Jai! Jai... Jai!*"

As soon as they saw Baldev, the group of *Yadavs* joyfully let out a victorious cheer. "Say it one time with feeling... Mahatma Gandhi... *jai... jai, jai... Hey, quiet! Quiet! Shut up, and listen to what Baldev-ji is trying to say!*"

"My dear brothers," Baldev said, "all this agitation is no good. Look before you leap! Just think about it. Is this the sensible thing to do?... You were going to commit violence! For this, I will have to go on a hunger strike. Violence is not the way of Mother India, nor of Gandhi-ji..."

That Baldev sure is smart. Agitation, hunger strike, and...and what else? Violence! Who understood it? Not everybody could understand the language of wisdom.

"What's a hunger strike?"

"Anger stroke?"

Kaliya explained—Baldev-ji was going to fast.

Baldev-ji called Kaliya and said, "Kalicharan, you're a fine, young man. But you should temper passion with reason. I'm flattered by this, but I am still going to fast."

"Really, if Baldev hadn't come just in the nick of time, Kali-charan would have turned things inside out!... Arey, that Hargauriya! Yesterday he was just a boy! He's hardly learned his A-B-C's and now he thinks he's some kind of Lord *Sahab!*"

"Him? Study? He's got a beard and a moustache, and he's

two classes below my Sakaldip. He's a total failure! He flunked again this year! His father went to bribe the teacher. The teacher got mad and told him, 'Get out, or I'll flunk you, too!'"

"Arey, he's no student! But I hear he learned enough sweet nothings to pass with flying colors at the Lalbagh Fair!"
 "Sweet nothings?"

No one could beat Dulariya in making up stories. "You don't know what sweet nothings are?... Ha ha... ha ha!... hee... hee! Sweet nothings!"

—Dhaaka dhinnaa, dhaaka dhinnaa!

"C'mon, let's go. I hear the drums from the wrestling arena."

FOUR

"*Satguru ho! Satguru ho!*"

Mahanth Sahab always arose at the auspicious hour before dawn. "Hey, Ramdas! Get up!" he called out. "Go wake Lachmi!... *Satguru ho!* He never gets up without somebody waking him!... Ramdas! Hey, Ramdas-ji!"

Ramdas got up, rubbing his eyes, and came outside. He looked for the morning star, and then searched for the *Ramdandi* constellation... There's still plenty of night left, he thought. *Mahanth Sahab* has gotten up awfully early today. This February weather is so cold it would chill even a tiger... "Sir, it's still night yet."

"So what if it's still night? It won't hurt to get up before dawn just one day! Don't go back to sleep. Put some wood on the fire. Then go wake Lachmi... *Satguru Sahab* has sent me a dream!"

Lachmi got up and came to where *Mahanth Sahab* was sitting. She greeted him with palms joined and then headed for the well, rubbing her eyes.

...The *Mahanth* thought to himself: Every pore in Lachmi's body is steeped in good will, good thought, and good conduct. It's the Lord's grace. But that Ramdas! God only knows when he will improve! If he hasn't improved even after living with *sadhus* since

childhood, he'll never straighten out! . . . The fool knows nothing about devotion, just how to fill his stomach! His only two virtues are that he serves well, and he is unequalled in playing the tambourine. . . "Hey, Ramdas! . . . Did you fall asleep again? . . . Fill the jug with water."

Satguru Sahab, awaken! Your servant has come to behold you!

Satguru Sahab, awaken! . . .

. . . Dima dimika dimika, dima dimika dimika!

The morning sun has come; the horrible darkness

Of the world has fled, seeing the sun.

And *Maya* trembles as the all-knowing eyes of the Lord open.

Satguru Sahab, awaken!

In the chill February dawn, a morning devotional song came from the *ashram* and hovered in void. The old *mahanth* was singing the first verse. The words came out slurred from his toothless mouth. His body was worn out from asthma, and he had no strength. . . . But Lachmi took care of everything. Five years ago, Lachmi's eyes would have been heavy with sleep during the morning hymn. When *Mahanth Sahab* sang the second line—*bhara bhaya bhava bharam* (although dawn has come, the world is still a dark illusion)—she could hardly stop laughing. . . . "*bhara bhaya bhava bharam*! . . . But not now. Her words were sweet, her voice was sweet, and she sang with her heart in it. Her melodious tune did not harmonize with the heavy off-key *raga* of the *Mahanth Sahab*. Even so, there was never discord in the pure stream of music. *Mahanth Sahab's* heavy *raga* gave support to Lachmi's delicate tune. It was like one *shehrai* accompanying another—du, du, du. . . !

The rhythm of Ramdas' tambourine rippled through the silent air. The soft jingling of the small bells of the tambourine! As if someone's tame deer was dancing and prancing—dima dimika! jhunuka jhunuka!

After the morning hymn, verses from the *Bijak* were sung—
'*Ramura jhim jhim jantar bajeer karacharnana bihuna nache; Ramuro jhim jhim. . .*' (Ramura plays the drum; Bihuna dances to the

tune)

And then there was the *satsang*! Every day *satsang* was performed at this time. All the other *sadhus* and *sanyasis*, guests and visitors, clerks and cooks of the *ashram* woke up as soon as they heard the morning hymn. Whether you were present for morning hymns and the reading of the *Bijak* or not, it was impossible to skip the *satsang*. At this time, the cook of the *ashram* took attendance. Whoever was absent wouldn't get his ration of food. In the *satsang Mahanath Sahab* instructed the *sadhus* and disciples and answered their questions. He dispelled the darkness of ignorance with his words:

. . . He who truly serves the *guru*

Follows the path of truth.

He who follows the words of his *guru*

Is the true disciple and servant. . .

Then the hymn of the seven *chakras*:

The first *chakra*, Adhar, lies in the rectum.

The second *chakra*, Ashisthan, lies in the genitals.

The third *chakra*, Manipuram, lies in the navel. . .

As soon as the *satsang* was over, the cook took count: "The three devotees from Raniganj have been here for the past seven days. I asked them to leave, but they said they have the *guru's* permission to stay. One of the devotees from Bela *ashram* has a fever, but there's no tapioca in store to give him."

Kotharin Lachmi Dasin hated all this bickering every day at this time—it destroyed the purity of mind achieved through *satsang*. But what could be done? If the rules of the *ashram* were relaxed even a little, the *sadhus* and *sanyasis* would drain it dry in less than a month. The rule is that visiting *sadhus* can only stay for four days. But. . . "Those people from Raniganj should have thought about that themselves. It isn't as if the Lord of Wealth has his treasury here. . . ."

"Lachmi," Mahanath *Sahab* said. "Let them stay for the day. *Bhandari*, prepare a snack and dinner for everyone here today. Now everyone have a seat. The *Satguru* has sent me a dream today."

Again, small pieces of dry wood were put on the sacred fire,

and all the disciples sat in a semi-circle around it. Lachmi sat next to *Mahanth Sahab*... Everyone looked expectantly at the *mahanth*.

"At midnight, in a dream, the *Satguru* came to my room. I quickly stood up to greet him. He blessed me and said, 'Sevadas, you are blind. But the light of your inner eye is extraordinary. I came disguised and yet you recognized me. Your inner eye glows with divine light. Yet the work of God is going on in your village and you don't even know about it. Gandhi is my devotee. By opening a hospital in this village, he is doing God's work. Give a feast for the whole village.' And saying this, he vanished. My sleep was broken, and my mind became restless with separation from the *Satguru*. 'How can the fire of separation be extinguished? In the dark jungle of worldly life, I can't see the way.' But at last, after dwelling upon the *Satguru's* words of advice, I put my mind at rest."

News of *Mahanth Sahab's* dream quickly spread through the village. Meanwhile, Baldev and Hargauri's encounter and the sudden assault by the *Yadav* forces had given new life to village factionalism. In Jyotkhi's opinion, "Those *Yadavs* are always flashing their weapons around. It's a matter of shame for the *Rajputs* that this goes on, unchecked. Those people should be brought to criminal court and fined." But Singh-ji was afraid of police stations and courts. 'Cursing and swearing every word that you say, and you have to give bribes every step of the way.' It was just showing weakness to take recourse to the law and courts. When the time came, they would get their revenge... If this thing was just with the *Yadavs*, it would be no big deal. But the *Kayasths* were involved in it. Even a dead *Kayasth* can fetch a price. But then, it was Hargauri who started it all. Saying "get out!" to someone and making a move to strike him in your own house was hardly a decent thing to do.

Recently, they had started beating the drum in the *Yadav* quarter earlier in the afternoon—dhaaka dhinnaa, dhaaka dhinnaa! Shobhan the drummer had gotten a new loincloth and a new undershirt. The *Yadav* boys tied their cows and water buffaloes under the banyan tree near the *Kali* temple and started practicing wrestling early. On the day that Baldev fasted there was a *kirtan*

at Khelavan's house. After the independence song that Baldev had taught them—"Blessed Gandhi Maharaj, such is the way he spins his wheel"—Baldev broke his fast by drinking fresh buffalo milk. He announced, "Now if there is any more violence, I will fast again, this time for two days!" Labasan's son, Sunara, sang the independence *kirtans* beautifully. And just wait till the next time Baldev-ji fasted again. He was learning new ones...

Lately, in the *Sepoy* quarter, the owls hooted even in the daytime. The *tahsildar* was saying, "The *Rajputs* were scared stiff. They were just bowled over! That Kalicharan's a bold fellow!"

All the hospital buildings were ready. Only the clay plastering was left. Birsa Manjhi said that the women from the *Santhal* quarter would come and do the plastering that day. Of course the *Santhal* women would do the plastering! Their plastering was even better than cement! The Doctor *Babu* was coming next Saturday. Baldev-ji had brought all the materials for him from the District Board. The vice chairman of the Board had had him sign for the materials. The vice chairman—*bhains* chairman—must certainly be a *Yadav*. *Bhains* means "buffalo." Could such a name belong to any other caste? *Bhains*-Chairman *Babu*! You should see the *tahsildar's* place!—chairs, benches, medicines in huge crates, bottles, kettles, *lotas*. There's going to be a water tap installed, like the one at Rautahat Fair.

Mahanth Sahab's feast would also be on Saturday—a feast of *puris* and *jelibis*. He would be feeding everyone in the village—men and women, young and old, rich and poor. He had had a vision.

Kisun of the *Yadav* quarter said, "The blind *mahanth* is doing penance for his sins. A *sadhu* who keeps a woman is no *sadhu*—a *sadhu* on the outside, but inside, an imposter! What's that you say? 'She's not his mistress, she's a *dasin*?' Don't give me that! I've worked in the *ashram* for five years. Who knows more than I do about what goes on there? And whether anyone else sees or not, God sees all. When the *mahanth* brought Lachmi to the *ashram*, she was completely innocent and naive! She used to wear only one piece of clothing. On the one hand, you have a child like that, and on the other a fifty-year-old vulture! Lachmi used to cry every night. How she'd cry! Even a stone would melt upon hearing it. I couldn't sleep. I would get up, untie the water buffaloes

and take them out to graze. Every morning, when Lachmi came to get milk, her eyes would be swollen like *kadam* flowers. It you asked why she'd been crying at night, she'd just stare at you, silently, like a calf whose mother had died! . . . And that Ram Das is just as low! That bastard will go blind too! Wait and see. . . One time the *Mahanth* went to Purnea for four days. I thought Lachmi would be able to sleep peacefully at least four nights. But, so help me! It was like falling from the mouth of a tiger into the mouth of a lion! After that, Lachmi became so sick she almost died. 'Your sins will find you out!' Ram Das started having epileptic fits after that, and *Mahanth* Sevdas became as blind as *Surdas*! He was completely ruined! . . . I'm still missing three years' wages from him and he's giving a feast! Well, I don't regard such people as *sadhuis*!"

Mahanth Sevdas was considered the most learned *sadhu* in the region—a *pandit* of all the *Shastras* and *Puranas*. People forgot their hunger and thirst when they came to the *ashram*. The *ashram* was regarded as a very sacred place. But when the *mahanth* brought in a *dasin*, people's opinions changed. There had been many quarrels and court battles with the *Mahanth* of Basumatiya *Ashram* over this *dasin*. The *Mahanth* from Basumatiya had said, "Lachmi Dasin's father and I were disciples of the same *guru*. So now that he has died, I have a claim on her." *Mahanth* Sevdas' argument was that the *ashram* in which Lachmi's father served was under the jurisdiction of the Maryganj *ashram*, so he had the right to have Lachmi. In the end, Lachmi became Sevdas' by law. Sevdas' lawyer explained to him that his obligation was to educate the girl and get her married. *Mahanth Sahab* assured the lawyer that Lachmi would live as his daughter. . . . But who knows what goes on in a man's head! No sooner did he bring young Lachmi to the *ashram* than he made her his *dasin*.

Now Lachmi had become a young woman, but *Mahanth* Sevdas had already lost his eyesight long before this. Who knows what it would have done to him if he had been able to see Lachmi as a young woman! These days many people didn't even give Sevdas a respectful greeting. . . . He had strayed from the path of *dharma*. He was like the stork in the folk tale who pretended to be a devotee. He was no ascetic, he was a lecher!

After it was announced that there would be a feast of *puri-*

jalebi and sugared curds, peoples' opinions began to change again. . . . However bad he might be, he was still a *sadhu* after all! Who had ever given such a big feast? The *tahsildar*, on his father's death-commemoration day, had given a big feast to his caste members and relatives, and *dahi-chura* snacks to people of other, lower castes. Singh-ji, on the death-commemoration of his mother-in-law, had fed *puris* and sweets to his caste members and *dahi-chura* snacks to the people of other castes. And they all had seen what kind of dinner was served at Khelavan's place on his mother's death-commemoration the year before. Even so, who had ever given a feast for the whole village—men, women and children? And in these times of sugar shortages! Bhagman Bhagat said that a single sack of sugar sold for a hundred rupees on the black market. And for four *maunds*—two hundred!

Most of the people of the *Tanirima*, *Gahalot*, and *Poliya* quarters had never even tasted *puri* or *jalebi* before. Once when Biranchi went to the courthouse to testify for the state, the *tahsildar* had fed him *puri* and *jalebi*. But somehow a rumor spread in the village that Biranchi had eaten the *tahsildar*'s leftovers. So when a priest of his caste came to give Biranchi the *sacred thread*, he had him hold a full pot of water—on top of five *betel nuts*—on his head for seven hours as punishment. A pot full of water supported by only five *betel nuts*! If the pot moved even a little, or a single drop of water fell, he was beaten with a broom. What could the *Tahsildar Sahab* do? It was a caste matter, so he couldn't say anything about it. Finally, after he paid a five-rupee fine, and gave a pair of *dhotis* to the caste priest, Biranchi was allowed to smoke the *hookah* with his caste members again. . . . He doesn't remember at all what *puris* and *jalebis* taste like!

"Jivan Das!"

"Baldev has come! Greetings, Baldev Babu!"

"Not 'greetings!' *Jai Hind!* Say '*Jai Hind!*' . . . Say, could you count up and tell me how many people there are in this quarter? Include all the men, women and children. What? You don't know how to count? Where's Biranchi?"

Baldev was going from house to house taking the census. "This is a terribly complicated job," he thought. "In the *Poliya* quarter alone there are seven score, four. . . .no, four score, seven. There are five score even in the *Tatma* quarter, and two in the

Dusadh quarter. In the *Koyri* quarter there are six score, three. . . Kalicharan is counting the *Yadavs*. God knows, the people from the *Sepoy* quarter might find something wrong with this too, and make a big thing out of it. What next? ! The *Brahmins* have flatly refused to eat in a public feast unless separate arrangements for them are made. But what kind of feast would it be without *Brahmins*? I'll have to talk to the *Mahantji* about it. There's not that many *Brahmins* anyway—only ten houses altogether.

Hearing all this, *Mahant Sahab* exclaimed, "*Satguru ho! Satguru ho!* Make separate arrangements for the *Brahmins*, Baldev *Babu!* What harm is there in it? And if that's not possible, just set them up at the *ashram*."

Just then Lachmi Dasin came and reported, "The people from the *Sepoy* quarter aren't going to eat either. Hibaran Singh's son came and told me that his people won't eat in the same row with cowherds. They should be given flour, *ghee*, and sugar, and they will fix their own dinner separately."

"*Satguru ho!* This is a fine mess! Now the *Yadavs* will say that they won't eat in the same row as the *Dhanuks!*"

"Hibaran Singh's son also said that if Baldev is in charge of the arrangements, the *Mahant Sahab's* supplies will be wiped out." Lachmi added.

"Guru ho! Guru ho!"

"Well, *Mahant Sahab*," Baldev said. "If the people object to my staying around, then I'll gladly. . ."

"Heavens no!" said Lachmi. "What kind of thing is that? *Mahant Sahab*, I warn you, if somebody else is put in charge instead of Baldev-ji, you can be sure that the feast will be completely ruined. I know every person in this village full well."

For the first time, Baldev raised his head and dared to glance in Lachmi's direction. He looked up, and became lost in Lachmi's large eyes. . . Baldev was spellbound!

FIVE

All of the village leaders were gathered at the *ashram* for a *panchayat* meeting. Today Baldev-ji would have another

chance to give a speech. But the village *panchayat* was more like Ramu Modi's shop outside the Punea courthouse. Everyone was clamoring to speak first. The talking got louder and louder, and the real issue was getting drowned out by the commotion. Singh-ji was shouting, "If I had stayed home that day, blood would have flowed like a river!" Kalicharan, who was not one to keep quiet, put in, "Oh yeah? Is it the act of a decent man to insult a good man visiting his home?" The *tahsildar* said, "The hospital is being built for everyone's good. I'm not the only one who will benefit from this. The Overseer *Babu* said to me, '*Tahsildar Sahab*, please help out.' It wasn't my idea to be put in charge. Tell them, brother Khelavan!"

Old Jyotkhi, the astrologer, made a prediction. "Believe it or not, I tell you, one of these days vultures and crows will be hovering over this village! The signs are not good. The village stars are all messed up. There will be bloodshed in this village! Bloodshed! Police inspectors will search every alley. And as for this hospital—you might not know now—but when they put drugs in wells and spread cholera through the village, you'll understand! *Shiva ho!*"

Just when Baldev was about to get up and speak, Lachmi stood up, and placing her palms together in respect, said, "Honorable *panchayat* members!"

It was as if a lantern had been lit. Everyone was silent. Lachmi stood there with the end of her white muslin sari draped around her neck. "Honorable *panchayat* members!"

"Lachmi!" *Mahant Sahab* said, groping in the void with outstretched hands. "Lachmi, you keep quiet."

But Lachmi did not stop. She went on, "Jyotkhi-ji is right. The village stars are not good. When there are quarrels like this over such little things, and when there is no unity among the people, what terrible things won't happen? The leaders of the village are most at fault for this. As *Satguru Sahab* has said, 'Where there is unity, there is heaven'. We are not born as humans every time. What greater sin is there than to look out for ourselves instead of for others? He who creates difficulties for his fellow man is not a human being. You've read the *Shastras* and *Puranas*. You know what the *Puranas* say about those who bring the world to destruction. What I want to say is this: Give up all this bickering among