

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 Purnea 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

yourself, become united, and offer your help in the work of God. For you know that a human life is wasted if it is not put to work for God. That is all. Placing my hands together, I entreat you, gentlemen. Give up this quarreling and come together. *Satguru Sahab* will bless the village. Now it's up to you."

Lachmi sat down. Her face and cheeks were flushed, and drops of sweat were glistening on her brow. The *panchayat* remained silent as if it were still under a magic spell. Baldev's eagerness to speak had subsided. He didn't know any poetic couplets. Nor had he read the *Shastras* and *Puranas*. In jail, Chaudhari-ji had been teaching him to read. He had come to the third section, where "Once upon a time a donkey grew miserable from carrying a heavy load of salt," when Chaudhari-ji was released on bail. From that day, his education stopped. But... he'd give a speech, anyway. He glanced in Lachmi's direction, and stood up as if intoxicated. "Dear brothers!"

"Say it once with feeling... 'Jai Mahatma Gandhi!'" The youths of the *Yadav* quarter cheered with shouts of 'Jai! Jai!'

"Dear brothers! All of what *Kothari* Lachmi said is true. But I am most at fault. It is because of me that there is fighting and quarreling in the village. I am the servant of everyone. I am no scholar. I haven't read the *Shastras* and *Puranas*. I am a poor man, a simple man. But by the grace of Mahatma-ji, by the grace of Mother India, the spirit was born in my heart and I have become a servant of the people. I'm sure you know Jayamangal *Babu*, who has become a minister though he can't even write his name. He's of very low caste, a poor man, too, and simple. But the spirit of service was in his heart and Mahatma-ji chose him to be a minister. As Mahatma-ji says, 'Those who have compassion for others are called the people of God.' During the Independence Movement, when the white soldiers caught us, they would beat us unconscious. When we asked for water, they would urinate in our mouths..."

As soon as Baldev began his speech, whispering started up again in the *panchayat*. The *Rajputs* began talking even louder than before. But this fascinating tidbit of Baldev's speech made some impact. The moment they heard about urination in the mouth, the *panchayat* fell silent again. Baldev quickly lifted his shirt, walked

around exposing his back, and continued his speech. "If you don't believe me, just see for yourselves!"

"My god! His back is striped like a tiger!... What heroism!" "Look, you people!" a youth from the *Yadav* quarter spoke up. "Whenever we say 'Jai Gandhi-ji', you people act as if somebody dumped chili powder in your ears. Now just look!"

"Arey, brother! Only through the grace of Mahatma-ji could one endure such suffering. When molasses endure suffering, it gets the name 'sugar!'"

"...But, dear brothers," Baldev went on, "I never stopped upholding the name of Mother India and of Mahatma-ji. The military soldiers pierced my nails with needles. Even then, I never let out a single peep! Finally they got tired of that and threw me in jail. You know what the freedom fighters think of jail, don't you? 'Don't think of it as going to jail, ol' buddy, think of it as going to a wedding!' But once in jail, the English government harassed us in all kinds of ways! They put bugs in the rice and gave us leaves and grass for vegetables. So we went on a hunger strike. Dear brothers, we fasted for five days, even without water! After that, the Collector, Superintendent of Police, and judge all came, and they fulfilled our demands. They gave us milk-sweets to eat. We told them, 'Feed the milk-sweets to your children! Give us decent rice!' So, dear brothers, because I've taken an oath of service, I can't give it up!... We don't care if the police beat us blind!"

"If you people don't allow me to serve in your village, I will go to Channanpatti. There's an *ashram* there, and in every house people are spinning and weaving. Men and women are learning to read. At least once a year, Mahatma-ji, Jawaharlal, Rajendra *Babu*, and other big leaders come to visit. Chaudhari-ji often writes to me, 'Baldev, come back to your own village.' I tell him, 'Chaudhari-ji, you are my *guru*. I can't go against your word. But our village has already progressed. I would rather serve in a village that has not!..."

"I want to make Maryganj like Channanpatti. I myself will sweep the village and clean the latrines. I've done all kinds of things for the people. Mahatma-ji himself used to clean latrines. Where there is cleanliness, people are clean, too. Their minds are

clean. Look at the *sahabs*. In their country even lawns and compounds are always clean. Look at the lawns of their bungalows—they're as tidy as a stork's nest.

"But if you people don't want me here, I'll go away. If you don't believe me, those of you who can read, here's a letter. Read what's written in it. It's an official, printed invitation. The letter is from two years ago.

"Who's going to read it? Now when we need them, all of the people who know English are at home. Somebody here read it."

Khelavan said to his son Sakaldip, "Go on, read it." But Sakaldip was too shy.

"Hargauri, you read it."

Nevalal, nephew of Ramchandar from the *Paswan* quarter, stood up, took the letter from Baldev's hand, and started to read.

"Read a little louder. Clear your throat! Why are you shaking?"

"To the Honorable Baldev Singh-ji. Sir: This is to inform you that on 8/12/45 there will be a special meeting of the Congress Party in the Purnea *dharma-shala* to set up a temporary committee for the Kasturba Memorial Fund. The former premier of Bihar will also be present. Your presence is required at this important meeting. Yours, Vishwanath Chaudhari."

"Tell also what it means, Nevalal. . . Arey, nah! What's there to explain? Why should he have to explain the meaning of a typed letter?"

Even Chauhari-ji doesn't do anything without asking Baldev-ji's opinion! It's the village's good fortune that a gem like Baldev-ji has come here to live. Now our village, too, will surely progress. . . Listen, Singh-ji is saying something.

"Baldev, if you go away from here, it will be a misfortune for Maryganj. It will be a shameful thing! There is always quarreling and fighting in villages. Two pots in the same place are bound to clash. But it's your task to spread unity in the village and to improve the village. Whoever interferes with such a task is not righteous. You people are the servants of the country. Bringing evil and dishonest people back to the right path is your duty. In the *Ramayana*, Gosai-ji has given attention to the evil and dishonest first. Don't leave our village. The *tahsildar* and I are like younger and older brothers. From childhood we played together,

quarreled and fought, and made up again. Come on, Brother *Tahsildar*. People have been giving our families bad names, saying that the *Kayasths* and *Rajputs* together ate up *Maharani* Champavati's estate. Now we should all join together once more!"

As Singh-ji finished his lengthy speech, he looked towards the people sitting in the *panchayat*.

A great burst of laughter broke out. The *panchayat* was rolling with laughter. . . That Singh-ji was so down-to-earth! There wasn't a bit of cunning in him. He was just a good, simplehearted man.

Singh-ji grabbed the *tahsildar's* hand and made him stand up, and the two embraced.

"Say it once with feeling. . . 'Jai Mahatma Gandhi!'"

"Jai Jai!"

Now the feast would take place. For the past two days they had imagined platters of *puris* and *jalebis* one minute and empty ones the next. . . On the feast day, they would dance and sing *kirtans*. . . What was it that Agamu, the *chowkidar* had said? They must not fly Mahatma-ji's flag and banners? Now he'd get a thrashing. Tell him to go and ask his grandfather the police inspector whose government it was. Lords, officers, and collectors were all afraid of hunger strikes.

There were only two people in the whole *panchayat* on whom the joy of reconciliation had an adverse effect. No one could see how cleverly Singh hadn't even mentioned Khelavan. And just look at the *tahsildar*—he's instantly changed his colors, like a chameleon. The fighting and quarreling was with the *Yadavs*, but the embracing was with the *tahsildar*! Khelavan wasn't born yesterday! He saw through all their tricks. Baldev goes around spreading a blanket of worldly wisdom, but he can't even understand why Singh was embracing the *tahsildar*. The reconciliation should have been with the head of the *Yadav* quarter. So what if he is a freedom fighter! He's still a *Yadav*! I've been putting him up in my house, feeding and serving him with so much respect; but when I need him, I can't count on him.

One look at Khelavan-ji's face, and Jyotkhi understood everything. So, it's finally penetrated his thick skin! "Khelavan *Babu*! Has young Sakaldip's horoscope come from *Kashi* yet? I'd like to take a look at it. So far, not even the *Kashi pandits* have disagreed with my calculations."