

"Why don't you come by tomorrow morning, Uncle Jyotkhi? It's been a long time since you've come. Sakaldip is even studying *Sanskrit* in high school. You should come and see how well he is doing."

The *panchayat* meeting started in the afternoon and went on until evening. It had been a long time since the village people had all sat in the *panchayat*. Now, after a long time, there was unity again.

The feast would be tomorrow. By morning, the grounds in front of the hospital would have to be cleaned and enclosed with a fence. A tent would have to be put up and decorated. Confec-tioners would come early in the morning. Since the days were get-ting shorter, it would be evening before the preliminary rituals were finished. The Vice Chairman *Babu* had told Baldev that four ox carts would be going to bring the doctor from the station. Tomor-row at daybreak everyone would meet at the hospital and the work would be divided. It wasn't child's play to supervise such a large feast!

Everyone in turn reverently bowed to *Mahanth Sahab* and left. *Mahanth Sahab* stopped Baldev-ji. "Baldev *Babu*, stay for a while. There won't be any time tomorrow. It would be good to go over the accounts now, once more. Just sit here for a moment and read the *Bijak*. I am going to 'go to the field.'* Ramdas, where are you? Fill the jug with water."

The *Bijak* reveals the wealth which is hidden.

The word reveals the essence of life

Which is rarely understood by anyone.

Lachmi lit the lantern and set it in front of him. The letters became clear: "Sages, the whole world is mad..." A special kind of fragrance emanated from Lachmi's body. Lachmi had sat right next to Baldev in the *panchayat* meeting. To Baldev, it seemed like the smell of the *Durga* temple at the Ramnagar Fair—a lovely fragrance! A sacred smell... Usually women's bodies gave off a smell of turmeric, garlic, onion, and sweat!

*To answer the call of nature

That night, Baldev couldn't sleep.

He had returned late from the *ashram*, and heard that brother Khelavan wasn't feeling well and was sleeping outside in the court-yard. If a man sleeps in the courtyard, you can be sure he's sick with a fever, a cold, a headache, or something. But a man like Baldev—without a wife—why would he sleep in the courtyard? A man sleeps in a courtyard only to get his wife's pampering.

Baldev had found out from Khelavan's wife at dinnertime that Khelavan had stomach gas. While she had been rubbing Khelavan's stomach with a bitter smelling oil, it had made gurgling noises.

Khelavan's wife was upset about something, too. She didn't sit down and talk with him as she often did. Usually, she'd sit by the stove, smoking the *hookah*, and Baldev would tell her tales about his experiences in jail. Today, Baldev would have told her the gossip of the *panchayat*. But since the old woman showed no interest in conversation, he went off to bed.

... He couldn't fall asleep. The blanket he'd gotten from the jail was pricking him terribly. And his *Khadi dhoti*, when it got dirty, didn't seem to keep out the cold... Baldev couldn't take his mind off Lachmi. She had said when he had come to the *ashram*, "Here, Baldev-ji, have some of today's *prasad*..." *Prasad*! And the fragrance of Lachmi's body!

That night Baldev thought of his mother, too. The villagers used to call him "orphan-boy." His mother would get really mad when she'd hear about that. "You don't become an orphan just because your father dies. You're only fatherless. You're not an orphan unless your mother dies, too. My Baldev is just fatherless, not an orphan." Now, too, it seemed he could feel her gently rub-bing his back.

After his mother's death, Baldev had grazed Ajodhi Bhagat's buffaloes for a long time. At the mere thought of Ajodhi, Baldev felt a chill run down his spine. What a demon that old man was! And the old woman was even more vile. She used to go around yapping like a vixen all the time. After a long day grazing the

buffaloes, Baldev used to have to massage Bhagat's body till his fingers ached. He'd get so tired his eyelids would droop; but one sign of drowsiness, and SMACK! The old man's slaps really stung. Baldev had taken beatings ever since he was small—slaps, whippings, canings—but it seemed like the impact of that bony, dried-out hand hurt more!

... But Rupamati—her heart was as soft as wax. How such a kind daughter could come from such cruel parents was totally beyond Baldev. That old couple never slept a wink at night. They'd wake him up in the middle of the night to send him out to graze the buffaloes—when there were still owls in the *pipal* tree hooting ominously. And the old man, in a similar tone would holler, "Hey Orphan, it's morning! Let out the buffaloes!"

Rupamati never used to call him orphan. She even gave him a little nickname—Bali. There were four *seers* of milk in the morning, and three in the evening, but the old lady never even gave him a taste. However, every day, Rupamati would skim some cream off the boiled milk and hide it under his rice. In the end, thieves ran off with all the money the old couple had saved.

The last time he'd gone home, he had seen Rupamati. She had come back for a visit after living a long time with her in-laws. She had three children—and the oldest daughter was just like Rupamati she laughed just like her.

... Baldev thought of Maye-ji, Ramkisan Babu's wife. The first thing that came to his mind was the general assembly in Channanpatti. Ramkisan Babu, his wife, Chaudhari-ji, and Tewari-ji were all there. . . . Ramkisan Babu had such striking features! Such big eyes! . . . When he spoke in public, it was like a tiger roaring. He used to be a defense attorney, and they say when it came time for him to plead a case, he'd shake down the plaster from the ceiling of the old courthouse. A judge would have to be extremely daring to give a verdict against him!

But when he had heard Mahatma-ji's message, he gave it all up overnight. He and his wife began to traverse the countryside together. Maye-ji's feet would get blisters and drip with blood. Cock's-comb red! How could anyone resist, seeing Maye-ji's suffering, hearing Ramkisan's speeches and Tewari's songs? Baldev was defenseless against that evocative strain. It was as if someone was

tugging at him.

The waters of the Ganges and Jamuna
Are flowing from her eyes.
Mother India is weeping
For the shattered hopes of India.

Maye-ji's feet were cracked and blistered, and Mother India was weeping. . . . Baldev had gone straight up to Ramkisan and said, "Write my name on the list of freedom fighters!" Ramkisan had written three names that day: Baldev, Bavan Das, and Chunni Gosai. Chaudhari had taken them along to the district Congress office. Maye-ji had also gone along. No one had ever seen Maye-ji angry. There was always laughter in her voice when she spoke. . . .

Once Baldev fell ill upon returning from a trip into the countryside. His body was burning up, he had a splitting headache, and he'd fallen completely unconscious. When he opened his eyes in the night, he felt very lightheaded.

"How are you, Baldev?" he heard someone ask.

"Who is it? Bavan?" He lifted his head, and saw that Maye-ji was seated on a chair nearby.

"How are you, Baldev? Why did you go into the countryside if you were so sick? . . . Go to sleep. . . ." Putting her hand on Baldev's forehead, Maye-ji said, "Your fever has come down." At the touch of her hand, he dropped off to sleep.

Much later, Bavan Das told him, "As soon as Maye-ji heard you were ill, she took me with her and we went to the office to see you. She took your temperature, and when she saw what a fever you had, she began to shout, 'Bring some water! Get me a fan!' She kept putting damp cloths on your forehead all night. . . . 'What kind of God is it,' she said, 'who calls only the good men to His side!'"

... And a mere two or three years later, Ramkisan Babu had departed this earth after only one day of fever. Oh, God! That day, who could bear to look at Maye-ji! . . . Ganga and Jamuna flowing from her eyes. . . . Mother India, crying over India's shattered hopes. . . . Truly, everyone's hopes were shattered.

On the day of his memorial, they named the district office "Ramkisan Ashram". The next day, Maye-ji went to *Kashi*. As she was about to leave, when everyone began to touch her feet in a

respectful farewell, *Maye-ji* completely broke down and wept just like a village woman! *Maye-ji* used to always call *Bavan Das* "*Thakur*". "Oh, my *Thakur!*" she had said, catching *Bavan* as he bent to touch her feet. "Keep faith in *Mahatma-ji*. He'll see that everything goes well. Don't ever forsake his ways!"... *Baldev* wondered what ever became of *Maye-ji*.

Warm teardrops slid from *Baldev's* eyes and rolled down his arm. *Mother*, *Rupamati*, *Maye-ji*... and *Lachmi*. Like *Maye-ji*, *Lachmi* also knew how to give speeches. In his mind's eye, *Baldev* saw *Lachmi* giving a speech...

... There was a vast assembly. Everywhere he looked, there was nothing but people. They were breaking down the bamboo barriers, advancing toward the platform. On the platform, *Lachmi* was seated at *Baldev's* side. The soles of her feet were blistered and torn. Red drops of blood were dripping onto the white sheet that covered the platform. . . *Lachmi* was giving a speech. . . Who's that? *Hargauri*? *Hargauri* was moving forward to throw a garland around *Lachmi's* neck. *Lachmi* didn't let him put it on her; instead, she gave it to *Baldev* to wear—a garland of marigolds! From the flowers came the fragrance of *Lachmi's* body! . . . The crowd was advancing toward the platform. *Hargauri* was moving forward, catching hold of *Lachmi*. . . *Baldev* was shouting, but no sound was coming out. The crowd was in an uproar. Mustering all his strength, *Baldev* screamed, "*Hargauri Babu!*" . . .

"*Jai Mahatma Gandhi!*"

"*Jai!*"

Baldev hastily got up and went outside, rubbing his eyes. It was morning. *Kalicharan* had gathered all the youths in the village into a cheering, triumphant procession. Bravo *Kalicharan!* He's a smart fellow—smart, and brave, too! When did he organize this program? It must have been last night! . . . At this rate, *Maryganj*, too, will make a name for itself, like *Channanpatti!* And what should he think about his dream?

"*Khelavan* brother, how are you feeling?" *Baldev* asked.

"What time did you come back last night? Where did you get held up—the *Sepoy* quarter? . . . So, the *Kayasths* and *Rajputs* have joined forces. . . I suppose now we've got our independence; Brother *Baldev*—I'm only a simple man, but I think you should keep an eye on *Kalicharan*. There are many sides to the man. But you'll

find out soon enough. I won't be held responsible for any trouble he stirs up. As leader of the *Yadavs*, I don't want to be blamed later on. Honestly, brother, how much can one trust *Kayasths* and *Rajputs*?"

Khelavan was trying to find someone on whom he could vent his anger when the herdsman came along with the pot for milking his buffaloes. Even today, *Khelavan* still milked his buffaloes with his own hands. He always said, "Having four different pairs of hands at their udders is enough to make buffaloes go dry." He flared up at the herdsman. "Bastard! The buffaloes haven't even had a chance to settle down, and you're raising a fuss about milking them already! I suppose this very moment they're dishing out the *puris* and *jalebis!* You're drooling already! . . . Oh, greetings, Uncle *Jyotkhi*."

Jyotkhi-ji, with his *sacred thread* stretched up over his ear, and his *lota* dangling from his hand, was heading for the river bank. *Khelavan* stopped him: "Come, wait here; I'll have the water brought for you."

"Well, *Khelavan Babu*," said *Jyotkhi*. "It looks as though independence has come to the village. Well, well! I suppose all the young brats are revelling in the streets today. 'Men with a little wealth make a lot of noise—like shallow waters.' It was just like this in *Simmerbani*; that's where my mother's brother lives. Now, I'm talking about something that happened some ten or twelve years ago. We had gone to my uncle's place for the *sacred thread*-tying ceremony of his oldest son. Early in the morning, when we got up, there were all the village brats going around, carrying banners and flags, just like these here, shouting '*Inkilas Zindabad!*' I asked my uncle what was going on. He said all the boys in the village had enlisted in a militia and that '*Inkilas Zindabagh*' meant 'We're a live tiger' . . .

"I saw the 'live tiger' again that evening. *Tewari*, from the left wing of the Congress, was getting ready to stage a salt boycott. People were pouring water and slimy clay in huge pans over a big hearth, and stirring it. There was all kinds of singing and flag-waving. When I asked what was going on, they told me they were staging a salt boycott. So I stood there watching the spectacle. Then suddenly there was a big commotion. The police were com-

ing! A man with a military helmet and three or four men in turbans emerged from the school yard. The live tiger showed his bravery—everyone bolted, running every which way, falling all over each other. What happened to all the flags and banners? And where was the 'live tiger' then?

"The police inspector arrested Tewari and carried him off. Then they made a thorough search, house to house, leaving no corner untouched. All the so-called 'live tigers' had slipped away into their lairs.

"When the word got out about the Congress Party taking control, once again there was the growling of militia men in every house. Then . . . again 'Inkilas Zindabagh!' When the police came into view, they all shouted even louder, "Come on, brothers, shout! Now we're in charge! The police inspectors swallowed their rage and stayed back. In the last uprising, the 'live tiger' got worked up into a frenzy and set fire to the distillery and ransacked the brewery.

"The very next day, four truckloads of white soldiers came in, ransacked the village, and burnt it to the ground within an hour. They arrested fifty men, and beat two unconscious. They stabbed one with a bayonet.

"These youngsters were trying to measure up to the English soldiers. It was like a circus pony watching a big stallion drown and then asking if the water's too deep. The English were giving us some slack yet, so everybody was causing a ruckus. If we had our patience, then—as in the folk tale—the whole flock of pigeons would have been wiped out' . . ."

"No, Uncle Jyotkhi! That can't happen now!" Baldev couldn't stand to hear any more. "Those government maneuvers failed in the last uprising. And as for Simmerbani, have you gone there and seen it lately? No? Do you know what you'd see if you did? Just go there, and see for yourself—they've got a hospital, a school, a girl's school, a handloom center, a library. . . What don't they have there? And in every house, the people know the alphabet. You know Shivanand Babu? His son Ramanand was with us in jail. Now he's going to become a lawyer, for sure!"

Khetavan was about to put in a remark when the herdsman called out, "The calf is drinking the buffalo's milk!"

Khelavan went off to milk the buffaloes. And it wasn't as if Baldev had so much spare time to stand around gabbing, either—there was a victory celebration going on in the village!

"Jai Mahatma Gandhi!"

SEVEN

The villagers completely surrounded Pyaru, the doctor's assistant.

"When is Doctor Sahab coming? . . . What's your name? . . . Which caste are you? Not a *Dusadh* I hope; you're a *Gahlor*, right? . . . Don't you have a *sacred thread*? . . ."

Baldev extracted Pyaru from the crowd. "Brothers, haven't you ever seen a human being before? Go on about your business! Isn't anybody going to keep an eye on the sweetmaker-ji?" Baldev always added a respectful "ji" to everyone's name. That's what all the officials did in the Ramkisan *Ashram*—Driver-ji, Contractor-ji, *Harijan-ji*!

After all their questioning, everybody knew that Pyaru had come to work for the doctor. For the past five years, Pyaru had been working for the homopathic doctor in Rautahat Station, but that doctor left the region. Pyaru had heard that a Doctor *Babu* was coming to Maryganj, so he came to work for the new doctor. After a light snack, Pyaru asked Baldev-ji, "Where's the doctor's luggage? We'll have to set up a table and chair, sweep, and scrub the cupboard. We'll need a basin to put near the water keg, and a cake of soap, and a towel. The first thing Doctor *Babu* will do when he comes is wash his hands. . ."

Without a doubt, Pyaru had been a doctor's assistant for a long time. He knew just where to put the table and chair. He placed the water keg on the iron tripod, and on the ring below it he set the aluminum bowl. The keg had a tap. When you turned it, water flowed out. He pulled a towel out of a box and hung it up. It was bristly—like the hairs of a sacrificial goat when they stand on end out of fear.

"Soap. No soap?" Pyaru asked. "Arey, not washing soap for clothes; he needs sweet-smelling soap!"