The Soiled Border

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 Gahalot, 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 homeopathic 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!"
“Where are you going to find perfumed soap in Bhagat’s shop?”

“You can get it in Katihar.”

“The tahsildar’s daughter, Kamli, has perfumed soap... The whole village smells of it when she takes her bath.”

The tahsildar told Pyaru to get some soap from Kamli Didi.

You could certainly tell Pyaru had been a doctor's assistant. And he had shown up just in time, too. Otherwise, who would have made all these preparations?

The hours were slipping by. Soon the doctor would be coming. The tahsildar had sent the ox carts to fetch him, even before sunrise. Agamu, the chowkidar, went along with them.

There was such an aroma rising from the village! It smelled just like a fair. The sweetmakers had been making puris and jalebis in the tahsildar’s barn since daybreak. There was a heaping stack of puris. Since daybreak, all the village children had been milling around it. But the Kayasth and Rajput kids saw to it that none of the other children from the other quarters got close—“Get away! You’ll pollute them!”

Rampirpal Singh himself went and got Kheilavan and brought him along with him to the tahsildar’s. “Look, Tahsildar,” Singh said, “Kheilavan has got gas in his stomach. Even before he ate, he got indigestion. Arey, Brother Kheilavan, what good does it do to pout like a woman?... I want to hear it from you, Tahsildar. Am I not right? You fight, you quarrel—and then you’re friends again. Why should he hold a grudge? I found out about his illness from Baldev; when I went to see him, I saw the exorcist chanting a mantra in his ear... Hey, Baldev, listen! When the doctor comes, have him look after this fellow first. Tell the doctor that he’s in his eighth month...”

Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!...

“Rampirpal, Brother, how can you make fun of me like that in front of the kids?” protested Kheilavan. “All right, now! Let go of my hand. Everyone else is here. What harm would there’ve been if I hadn’t come?”

Singh-ji was a fun-loving man. He had had people laughing since daybreak. He had managed to bring Kheilavan along to the feast, even though he was sulking. Jyotkhiri-ji didn’t come. He said he had a toothache. Singh-ji said, “Who knows? Maybe he’s got a toothache in his stomach! You know, they say that nowadays, doctors make false teeth of stone. Let’s have the doctor make some for Jyotkhiri!” he joked.

“Oh, come on! It isn’t as if a girl’s relatives choose her a husband by wiggling a man’s teeth.”

“Doctor Sahab is coming.”

“Coming? Where?”

“The bullock carts have come as far as the Pachiyar quarter! Agamu the chowkidar is running on ahead of them. Doctor Sahab’s wearing a hat.”

As Agamu arrived, the villagers tried to figure out what it was on his shoulders. Some kind of box? Everyone dropped whatever they were doing and crowded around.

“Make way!” said Agamu. “Doctor Sahab told me to take good care of it. Don’t knock it around. It’s a wireless news!”

Baldev spoke up. “It’s a raydi, a raydi! Now we’ll be able hear the songs from Bombay and Calcutta every day! We’ll get news about Mahatmasji, and the price of jute—it’ll all come out of there. If you bang it, it’ll get irritated and call you an idiot. And in the morning, if you sit by it before you brush your teeth, it’ll say, ‘Haven’t you brushed your teeth yet today?’”

“Outrageous!”

Doctor Sahab!

They all stood with palms brought together in a respectful namaste greeting. The doctor, smiling, likewise made the greeting gesture. Baldev-ji said, “Jai Hind!” Kalicharan, too, following Baldev’s example, was saying “Jai Hind!” these days. Pyaru brought a chair and placed it in the shade of the canopy. He took the hat from the doctor’s hands. The doctor’s face was absolutely red. Scarlet! Doesn’t he even have a moustache? It was all shaved off!

Baldev politely asked, “You didn’t have any trouble on the way, did you?... Everything’s ready, so come and eat... This is Vishwanath Prasad; he’s tahsildar of Parbanga. And this is Rampirpal Singh, the Sepoy—or, Rajput leader. That’s Kheilavan Singh Yadav, head of the Yadav. And this is Kalicharan, a very fine gentleman... And all these here are school children... Gentlemen, come here and introduce yourselves to the Doctor Sahab!... Today the village is giving a feast for everybody in celebration of the completion of the hospital.”
Doctor Sahab again brought his palms together and namaste to everyone. But he said, "I won't have anything to eat right now. Let everyone go ahead and eat."

That PyarU sure knew what he was talking about! Just look! The first thing Doctor Babu did was wash his hands with soap! Maharth Sahab, Kathurin Lachmi Dasin, Ram Das, and two devotees arrived from the ashram. Preceding their ox cart came a sadhu, blowing a bugle—Dhau-tu-tu-tu-tuulu... Dhau-tu-tu-tuulu! At the sound of the bugle, all the dogs in the village started barking in unison. Even the little newborn puppies, who had just learned how, were barking their heads off.

Before anything else, they offered puris to the goddess Kali at the temple. After that, two puris were tossed in the direction of the jungle, for the gods and demons who live there. Then, the sadhus and Brahmins were fed. Baldev repeatedly urged the doctor to eat, but he wouldn't listen. Pyaru was right; doctors don't eat the puris and jalebis made by village sweetmakers. Pyaru was busy at the kerosene stove, cooking some rice for the doctor. They should all hurry up and get the eating and drinking over with so that they could hear songs from the wireless news. What? There won't be any songs today?... That's right, Brother. It's a matter of reception. You'll never get anything this early. The trains and mills at Kathar are still making such a racket: the news could never get through!

"Amen! Amen!"

"Everybody sit in separate rows, according to your quarter. Put an extra plate next to yours for the women in the house. There's plenty for everybody..."

The Yadavs all started teasing the old cowherder Raudi. Randi Gop went from village to village, selling yogurt. He walked, talked, and did everything just like a woman. And if his uppercloth slipped from his shoulder, he'd get embarrassed and adjust it, like a young girl. He'd get flustered when he had to talk to men. But women never even bothered to cover their heads when they were around him. And he would always go to the bazaar and shop with the women... Now they were all ganging up, teasing him—"We'll send your serving to the women's quarters. See...Lalchan has already served your platter."

"Get lost, you bums! Making fun of an old man like me, Aren't you ashamed? Now, would you ever make fun of your grandmothers like that? The kids in this village are becoming rotten. It's all Singh's fault. If the old folks are degenerate, what can you expect from the young? Mark my words..."

Mahanth Sahab never ate in the evenings. He approached the doctor. "Sadhur ho! Doctor Sahab, how much is your salary? Two hundred rupees?... Hmmm. And of course you must get other things on the side. That's the income that counts. It's good that you've come... That Gandhi-ji is really a saint... Doctor Sahab, you know, five years ago, my eyes got infected one time, and they were red for almost two months. I went to Purnea and paid fifty rupees to see the civil surgeon. He treated me for days, but it didn't do any good. Now that you've come, it will be like having a doctor in the family!..."

Lachmi Dasin kept staring at the doctor... How handsome he is! How could the poor man feel at home, out here in the village. No matter what kind of work you did, a job was still only a job. He must be homesick. He probably misses his wife and children... But in a few days he'll start to feel at home. Then he'll send for his family. Suddenly, she asked the doctor, "Who else is there in your family?"

"Huh?" The doctor stammered. "I'm sorry, uh, I don't have anyone. My mother and father died when I was a child."

Lachmi realized it was hardly an appropriate question. She wondered why in the world she had asked such a question... No family!

"Lachmi! Call Ram Das," Mahanth Sahab said. "Well then, Doctor Babu, let me leave you now. Go and eat, and then get some rest. Come to the ashram some time. In the words of Satgur, 'The sight and feel of good company whisks the cobwebs from the mind.'"

Lachmi placed her palms together and bid him namaste.

The Brahmins went to Baldev with their question: "It seems the doctor's assistant is a Dusadh. So, what caste is the doctor? Will he eat food cooked by a Dusadh?"

But Baldev only said, "Say it with feeling... Jai Mahatma Gandhi!"
The feast was over. Nothing had run out. Everyone had had their fill, and there was enough for anyone who had missed out to get their serving the next day.

Baldev, along with Agamu the chowkidar and Biranchi, would sleep that night in the hospital. After all, it was the first night!

EIGHT

Lachmi, too, was all alone in the world. "... ‘I don’t have anyone’... Why am I so soft-hearted?” Lachmi thought. "Why did my heart melt when I saw the Doctor? It isn’t a good sign at all... Satguru, give me strength!"

Except for the Lord Satguru, she had no one to call her own. Lachmi didn’t remember her mother—just their hut, next to Pasraba Ashram. At dawn, Papa would put her up on his shoulders and they would go to the ashram. The mahant there, Ramgosai, used to be so fond of her. "So you’ve come, little Lachmi! Here, have some candy. Do you want some tea?" The cook would give her tea and a chura snack in a bowl. Her father would sit and get the ganja ready for the mahant. One pippal, another, and a third. The mahant’s eyes would get red from the ganja. Sometimes her father would begin to tremble. Then the cook would bring curds for them. "Eat some, Ramcharan. It will clear your head, brother."

Mahant Sahab used to think highly of her father. He hardly had to do anything—just sit by the Mahant Sahab’s sacred fire all day, prepare ganja, light the pipe... They used to eat right in the ashram.

When the cholera epidemic hit the village, Mahant Sahab told her father, "Ramcharan, stay right here in the ashram!" In those days, the pipe never had a chance to cool off. But one day, the mahant’s prayer book caught fire. Somehow or other, a spark from the pipe fell on it. The mahant tearfully said, "Ramcharan, the Master has expressed his anger. We will have to pay for this. It must be an evil omen..."

The very next day, one of the sadhus in the ashram began to vomit and had diarrhoea. On the third day, when sadhu left his body, the Mahant Sahab fell ill. Lachmi’s father served the mahant loyally. Just before he died, the mahant said, "Ramcharan, just let me smoke one last pipe, my son.” Papa-ji was getting a spark to prepare the pipe when he, too, was seized by a fit of vomiting—right into the sacred fire! The mahant left his body in the evening, and Papa-ji followed in the morning. The cook viewed her father’s body from a distance, warning, "One must not go close to a dead man"...

"Lachmi! Oh, Lachmi!"

"Coming!" Lachmi got up, irritated... She remembered the day this mahant had laid his hand on the Bijak and made a vow of renunciation; and now here he was calling for her again. "Satguru ho! When will You call for me?” she murmured. "Call this poor dasin to Your side."

"Lachmi!"

"Mahant Sahab, calm yourself. Meditate upon the Lord. Illusion..."

"Everything is illusion, Lachmi. Just come close to me, one time."

A blind man’s grasp has the strength of a crocodile. You could try with all your might, and you couldn’t pry that fist open at all... Was it a hand, or an iron pincer? The stench of that toothless mouth!!!... And drivell! "Mahant Sahab! Mahant Sahab, listen!"

Ram Das was over by the fire. "Mahant Sahab! Are you, Ram Das? Ram Das! Come here, quick! Something’s wrong with Mahant Sahab!"

The Lord Satguru had called the mahant to His side.

The next morning, all the villagers gathered together... The Mahant Sahab was a true saint! Willing his own time of death like that. He treated the whole village, young and old, to a feast last night, and then he just cast away his earthly form. It’s not just anyone who can die such a death. He was a wise, great man.

Ram Das told everyone, "After he returned from the feast, and took up his meditation, his body began to glow. I was about to get the mosquito net, but he stopped me with a gesture. As I sat by the sacred fire and gazed at him, the glow from his body got brighter, like a child glowing with vitality. The light was so radiant..."