

student from *Kashi* came. He'd written it out with great care. Each letter is like a pearl."

And he could even smell the fragrance of Lachmi's body in the *Bijak*. It was intoxicating. Her fingers had touched each and every page of that book...

No one becomes learned just by reading books,

But he who reads two-and-a-half letters

That make up the word 'love'.

Is truly a *pandit*.

Just the sight of Lachmi purifies the mind! Baldev thought.

NINE

"Doctor Prashant Kumar."

"What's your caste?"

Immediately after asking your name, people here ask, "What caste?" In his whole life, Prashant had had very few people ask about his caste; but here everyone asked him about it.

Sometimes, Prashant would laugh and say, "My caste? Doctor!"

"Doctor? Doctor-caste? Is it Bengali or Bihari?"

"Hindustani," he would answer.

Caste was a vital thing. Even those who ignored caste still belonged to one; that couldn't be avoided by simply answering "Hindu".

"Are you a Brahmin?... What kind of Brahmin? Which lineage? Where are your people from?..." In the city, no one ever asked a person about his caste. Nobody cared what caste people were in the city. But in the village, without caste you couldn't even draw water!

Prashant kept his caste hidden. The truth was, he himself didn't know his caste. Had he known it, perhaps he wouldn't have hesitated to say what it was. And perhaps he wouldn't have dismissed believing in the hierarchical caste and kinship system. He might have even felt pride in identifying himself as a Brahmin.

Prashant used to have to face the same kind of problem on registration day at the Hindu University. He'd stay awake the whole night before, practicing... "Prashant Kumar. Father's name: Anil Kumar Bannerjee. Hindu. Brahmin." All a lie! Poor Dr. Anil Kumar Bannerjee was probably sleeping contentedly with his family in some village in the foothills of Nepal, little dreaming that some so-called son of his by the name of Prashant Kumar was getting enrolled in the Hindu Academy... But Prashant knew well about his so-called father, Dr. Anil Kumar. When the day for filling out the forms for the matriculation exam came, the name "Dr. Anil" went automatically into the blank!

Ever since he was a child, Prashant had repeatedly heard the story of his birth—the housemaid, the gardener, even the neighborhood candy vendor knew the story. People would all-of-a-sudden point a finger at him and say, "Do you see that boy? Upadhyay-ji, that lady doctor from Bengal, found him in the Koshi River. She fed and clothed him, and brought him up." Hundreds of times, Prashant had seen the expressions of surprise—shadowed by a look of pity—on people's faces... People look at an unclaimed corpse with that very same expression.

Prashant was of unknown descent. His mother had put him in an earthen pot and deposited him in the lap of the flood-swollen Mother Koshi. It was just after the famous Upadhyay family of Nepal, having been expelled by the Nepalese government, had established a model *ashram* in Saharsa district. One day, Upadhyay and his wife took a relief boat and went out to help flood victims. Suddenly, Upadhyay noticed a new clay pot, floating near some tamarisk reeds. It roused his wife's curiosity: "Say, look! I wonder what's in that pot?" As the boat reached the thicket, its motion rocked the pot, and an awesome snake stuck its head out and began to hiss. The snake slowly slithered into the water; then they heard the sound of a newborn baby crying, as if its mother had just stopped comforting it... That was it—the story of his birth. Everyone had his own particular way of telling it.

Living at Upadhyay's *ashram* was an ill-fated young woman, Snehmaya. Her husband, Dr. Anil Kumar Bannerjee, had left her and married a Nepalese woman. Snehmaya had filled the *ashram* with cages, and would spend her days showering her affection upon the baby deer, rabbits, peacocks, and monkeys she kept in them.

When Mr. and Mrs. Upadhyay put the sleeping baby in her lap, she shrieked, overcome with joy, "Prashant! . . . My Prashant!" From that time on, Prashant became Snehmaya's only son.

After some time, the Nepalese government annulled the expulsion order and welcomed the Upadhyays back to Nepal—beasts, fowl and all. Snehmaya and Prashant were established members of the family by then, and when Upadhyay set up his Adarsh Academy at Viratnagar, in the foothills of Nepal, Snehmaya was appointed a teacher of sewing and tailoring.

Were it not for the guiding light of the diligent Upadhyays, Prashant, raised by the loving hands of Snehmaya, would never have enlarged his world beyond the delight of sitar music and Tagore's songs of spring. But Upadhyay's eldest son was a Bihari Academy graduate. His middle son was studying at a famous English school in Dehra Dun. And his daughter, Mamta, had been educated at *Shantiniketan*.

During holidays, when they'd all get together, the sister who was studying at *Shantiniketan* would learn how to use the spinning wheel, the Academy graduate would set Tagore's poetry to the melodies of devotional songs of the *ashram*, and the English-school student would give discourses on obscure subjects, such as the psychological aspects of military-drill commands in Hindi: "The word 'saudhan' in Hindi simply doesn't have the force of the English word 'attention'! Just hearing that word is like hearing a dozen boot heels clicked together." It was in this sort of atmosphere that young Prashant's personality developed.

After receiving his I.C.S. certificate from the Hindu University, Prashant entered Patna Medical College. It was his mother's wish to see him become a doctor; but she never did see that happen. On one of her numerous trips to Benares, she got lost forever in the city's lanes. Once, a money order from Lahore came for Prashant, and with it, a note congratulating him on his success. It was from a Mrs. Snehmaya Chopra. . . One mother no sooner gave birth to him than she laid him in the lap of the river Koshi. Another abandoned him to the sea of humanity.

It was when he was working as a resident-intern, after receiving his M.D., that the nation-wide movement of 1942 broke out. In Nepal, the English government arrested all the Upadhyay sons, knowing that the family not only sheltered outlawed Hindustani

leaders, but also was active in the underground movement. The middle son, who worked for the Bihari Socialist Party, had already been imprisoned. Prashant was an Upadhyay, too, so he too could not escape imprisonment. In jail, he got the opportunity to be in close contact with leaders and members of a whole array of political parties, and he was popular with all of them.

One day in 1946, when the Congress Party government was in the process of being formed, Prashant presented himself at the Health Minister's bungalow. He wanted to live in some village in Purnea district, where he could do research on black fever and malaria. He was asking the government for assistance.

"But the government has offered to send you abroad, with a scholarship," the minister protested.

"Yes, sir; but I don't want to go abroad." Prashant spread out a map of Purnea and Saharsa districts. "I'd like to live somewhere in the area of this map. See, this is the area in Saharsa where the Koshi wreaks havoc every year. And here, on the eastern border of Purnea, malaria and black-fever bring a flood of deaths each year."

The minister knew Prashant very well; it was hard to reason with him on such topics. "But it's a question of . . ."

"It's not a question of anything! Please, send me to a malaria center," Prashant implored.

"A malaria center! But you're already an M.B.B.S. and malaria centers are run by doctors who have only L.M.P. degrees!"

"Until I complete my research, I'm nothing. What good is my degree?"

The minister, carefully sifting through the files, old and new, and consulting the Board Chairman from Purnea district, learned about a piece of land once donated by a Mr. Martin. Some twenty years ago, the Chairman had been a lawyer in Purnea district and remembered seeing "Mad Martin."

In the end, after much advice and consultation with the central government, a press release came out, saying that a malaria center would soon open in a village called Maryganj in Purnea district. . . "The center will undertake malaria and black fever research in all aspects—preventive, curative, and economic."

Upon hearing how Prashant's plea had been handled, the administration, faculty, and students of the medical college had various reactions.

"He's a fool!" said the famous surgeon, Dr. Patwardhan.

Doctor Nayak, head of the Ear, Nose and Throat Department, warned, "Later, his eyes will be opened!"

In the opinion of the head of the Department of Medicine, "Rash behavior is also a dangerous disease—if you know what I mean."

But the principal was delighted. "I expected this of you," he said. "I wish you all the success in the world. If you ever need any help, you must write to me!" This kindness brought a lump to Prashant's throat.

The Madras Medical Gazette published an editorial commending Prashant. And on the day he was to go to Purnea, with only five minutes left for boarding the steamer, he noticed a young woman hurriedly descending the stairs. Who was it? Mamta! Yes, indeed, it was Mamta!

Her opening words as she arrived were, "Well, you've finally gone mad! And you never even told me about this idea! What nerve! Oh, Prashant, you've become famous! . . . I just got in from Benares, and Chunni handed me your letter as soon as I reached home!" She took a garland of *bel* leaves and flowers out of her handkerchief and touched it to Prashant's head. "This is *prasad* from *Baba Vishwanath*. May he bless you," she said. "Write me as soon as you arrive."

TEN

The doctor was writing a letter:

"Dear Mamta,

"You said to write as soon as I arrived. Well, I'm finally writing after having been here for a week. Your "*Baba Vishwanath*" sent his aide even before I got here. His name is Pyaru, and he's a real angel! So you've got no reason to worry about me. In seven

days, he's already chided me twice—'You say you're a doctor, but you don't act as though you know what an awful effect not eating regularly has on the body.' From this, you can tell what Pyaru is like.

"This is another world! You might say it's thoroughly rustic. Once a week, the village *chowkidar* has to take a report to the police station in town. He's the one who takes and brings back the village mail.

"I've already started work. A crowd of patients starts to gather by seven o'clock every morning. Now I'm doing a general survey, taking blood samples and examining people. Pyaru says even the crows around here have malaria!

"... Every ditch and pond here is covered with lotus leaves. They say that when the lotuses are in bloom, even the puddles are covered with all kinds and sizes of lotuses. . . . But you could hardly call these people 'lotus eaters'! I've been testing water samples from the ditches. . . . I suspect that the land here is wet all year round.

"The villagers seem to be quite simple, if you take that to mean illiterate, ignorant, and superstitious—very simple, I'd say! As for worldly wisdom, they'll cheat people like you and me five times a day. And the amazing thing is that even after getting cheated, you're so charmed by their simplicity that you let them get away with it! Of course, I've only been here seven days. . . . It may be that later on these first impressions will turn out to be completely wrong. This little region midway between Bengal and Maithila is really lovely. The women are generally beautiful, and pretty healthy! . . ."

"Doctor *Sahabi*!"

"Who's there?"

"Vishwanath Prasad."

"Come on in. What is it?"

"Doctor *Sahab*, could you come with me to my house? My daughter has fainted."

"Fainted! How old is she? Is this the first time it's happened?"

"Sir, it's happened two or three times before. Her age? . . . Oh I suppose about sixteen or seventeen. Please, hurry."

"Let's go."