

**READ, THINK AND ENJOY**

## Marriage is a Private Affair

Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) is Nigeria's best known writer and probably the most distinguished writer of fiction from Africa. His best-known novels include *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966). A poet of repute, he won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1972 for his collection of poems *Beware Soul Brothers*. Deeply rooted to the beliefs and traditions of the Ibo people, Achebe writes with passion about the young people in love who try to break away from social traditions and pressures in his celebrated story 'Marriage is a Private Affair'.



### Marriage is a Private Affair

1. 'Have you written to your dad yet?' asked Nene one afternoon as she sat with Nnaemeka in her room at 16 Kasanga Street, Lagos.
2. 'No. I've been thinking about it. I think it's better to tell him when I get home on leave!'
3. 'But why? Your leave is such a long way off yet – six whole weeks. He should be let into our happiness now.'
4. Nnaemeka was silent for a while, and then began very slowly as if he groped for his words: 'I wish I were sure it would be happiness to him.'
5. 'Of course it must,' replied Nene, a little surprised. 'Why shouldn't it?'
6. 'You have lived in Lagos all your life, and you know very little about people in remote parts of our country.'
7. 'That's what you always say. But I don't believe anybody will be so unlike other people that they will be unhappy when their sons are engaged to marry.'
8. 'Yes. They are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them. In our case it's worse – you are not even an Ibo.'

- 9 'This was said so seriously and so bluntly that Nene could not find speech immediately. In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city it had always seemed to her something of a joke that a person's tribe could determine whom he married.
- 10 At last she said, 'You don't really mean that he will object to your marrying me simply on that account? I had always thought you Ibo were kindly disposed to other people.'
- 11 'So we are. But when it comes to marriage, well, it's not quite so simple. And this,' he added 'is not peculiar to the Ibos. If your father were alive and lived in the heart of Ibo-land he would be exactly like my father.'
- 12 'I don't know. But anyway, as your father is so fond of you, I'm sure he will forgive you soon enough. Come on then, be a good boy and send him a nice lovely letter ...'
- 13 'It would not be wise to break the news to him by writing. A letter will bring it upon him with a shock. I'm quite sure about that.'
- 14 'All right, honey, suit yourself. You know your father.'
- 15 As Nnaemeka walked home that evening he turned over in his mind different ways of overcoming his father's opposition, especially now that he had gone and found a girl for him. He had thought of showing his letter to Nene but decided on second thoughts not to, at least for the moment. He read it again when he got home and couldn't help smiling to himself. He remembered Ugoye quite well, an Amazon of a girl who used to beat up all the boys, himself included, on the way to stream, a complete dunce at school.
- 16 'I have found a girl who will suit you admirably - Ugoye Nweke, the eldest daughter of our neighbour, Jacob Nweke. She has a proper Christina upbringing. When she stopped schooling some years ago, her father (a man of sound judgement) sent her to live in the house of a pastor where she has received all the training a wife could need. Her Sunday School teacher has told me that she reads her Bible very fluently. I hope we shall begin negotiations when you come home in December.'
- 17 On the second evening of his return from Lagos Nnaemeka sat with his father under a Cassia tree. This was the old man's retreat where he went to read his Bible when the parching December sun had set and a fresh, reviving wind blew on the leaves.
- 18 'Father,' began Nnaemeka suddenly, 'I have come to ask for forgiveness.'
- 19 'Forgiveness? For what, my son?' he asked in amazement.
- 20 'It's about the marriage question?'
- 21 'Which marriage question?'
- 22 'I can't - we must - I mean it is impossible for me to marry Nweke's daughter.'

- 23 'Impossible? Why?' asked his father.  
24 'I don't love her.'  
25 'Nobody said you did. Why should you?' he asked.  
26 'Marriage today is different ...'  
27 'Look here my son,' interrupted his father, 'nothing is different. What one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background.'  
28 Nnaemeka saw there was no hope along the present line of argument.  
29 'Moreover,' he said, 'I am engaged to marry another girl who has all of Ugoye's good qualities, and who ...'  
30 His father did not believe his ears. 'What did you say?' he asked slowly and disconcertingly.  
31 'She is a good Christian,' his son went on, 'and a teacher in a Girls' School in Lagos.'  
32 'Teacher, did you say? If you consider that a qualification for a good wife I should like to point out to you, Nnaemeka, that no Christian woman should teach. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that women should keep silence.' He rose slowly from his seat and paced forwards and backwards. This was his pet subject, and he condemned vehemently those leaders who encouraged women to teach in their schools. After he had spent his emotion on a long homily he at last came back to his son's engagement, in a seemingly milder tone.  
33 'Whose daughter is she, anyway?'  
34 'She is Nene Atang.'  
35 'What!' All the mildness was gone again. 'Did you say Nene Atang, what does that mean?'  
36 'Nene Atang from Calabar. She is the only girl I can marry.' This was a very rash reply and Nnaemeka expected the storm to burst. But it did not. His father merely walked away into his room. This was most unexpected and perplexed Nnaemeka. His father's silence was infinitely more menacing than a flood of threatening speech. That night the old man did not eat.  
37 When he sent for Nnaemeka a day later he applied all possible ways of dissuasion. But the young man's heart was hardened, and his father eventually gave him up as lost.  
38 'I owe it to you, my son, as a duty to show you what is right and what is wrong. Whoever put this idea into your head might as well have cut your throat. It is Satan's work.' He waved his son away.  
39 'You will change your mind, Father, when you know Nene.'  
40 'I shall never see her,' was the reply. From that night the father scarcely spoke to his son. He did not, however, cease hoping that he would realise how serious was the danger he was heading for. Day and night he put him in his prayers.

41 Nnaemeka, for his own part, was very deeply affected by his father's grief. But he kept hoping that it would pass away. If it had occurred to him that never in the history of his people had a man married a woman who spoke a different tongue, he might have been less optimistic. 'It has never been heard,' was the verdict of an old man speaking a few weeks later. In that short sentence he spoke for all of his people. This man had come with others to commiserate with Okeke when news went round about his son's behaviour. By that time the son had gone back to Lagos.

42 'It has never been heard,' said the old again with a sad shake of his head.

43 'What did Our Lord say?' asked another gentleman.

44 'Sons shall rise against their Fathers; it is there in the Holy Book.'

45 'It is the beginning of the end,' said another

46 The discussion thus tending to become theological, Madubogwu, a highly practical man, brought it down once more to the ordinary level.

47 'Have you thought of consulting a native doctor about your son?' he asked Nnaemeka's father.

48 'He isn't sick,' was the reply.

49 'What is he then? The boy's mind is diseased and only a good herbalist can bring him back to his right senses. The medicine he requires is Amalile, the same that women apply with success to recapture their husbands' straying affection.'

50 Madubogwu is right,' said another gentleman. 'This thing calls for medicine.'

51 'I shall not call in a native doctor,' Nnaemeka's father was known to be obstinately ahead of his more superstitious neighbours in these matters. 'I will not be another Mrs Ochuba. If my son wants to kill himself let him do it with his own hands. It is not for me to help him.'

52 'But it was her fault,' said Madubogwu. 'She ought to have gone to an honest herbalist. She was a clever woman, nevertheless.'

53 'She was a wicked a murderess,' said Jonathan who rarely argued with his neighbours because, he often said, 'they were incapable of reasoning. The medicine was prepared for her husband, it was his name they called in its preparation and I am sure it would have been perfectly beneficial to him. It was wicked to put it into the herbalist's food, and say you were trying it out.'

54 Six months later, Nnaemeka was showing his young wife a short letter from his father:

55 'It amazes me that you should be so unfeeling as to send me your wedding picture. I would have sent it back. But on further thought I decided just to cut off your wife and send it back to you because I have nothing to do with her. How I wish that I had nothing to do with you either.'

- 56 When Nene read through this letter and looked at the mutilated picture her eyes filled with tears, and she began to sob.
- 57 'Don't cry, my darling,' said her husband. 'He is essentially goon-natured and will one day look more kindly on our marriage.' But years passed and that one day did not come.
- 58 For eight years, Okeke would have nothing to do with his son, Nnaemeka. Only three times (when Nnaemeka asked to come home and spend his leave ) did he write to him.
- 59 'I can't have you in my house,' he replied on one occasion. 'It can be of no interest to me where or how you spend your leave or your life, for that matter.'
- 60 The prejudice against Nnaemeka's marriage was not confined to his little village. In Lagos, especially among his people who worked there, it showed itself in a different way. Their women, when they met at their village meeting, were not hostile to Nene. Rather they paid her such excessive deference as to make her feel she was not one of them. But as time went on, Nene gradually broke through some of this prejudice and even began to make friends among them. Slowly and grudgingly they began to admit that she kept her home much better than most of them.
- 61 The story eventually got to the little village on the heart of the Ibo country that Nnaemeka and his young wife were a most happy couple. But his father was one of the few people in the village who knew nothing about this. He always displayed so much temper whenever his son's name was mentioned that everyone avoided it in his presence. By a tremendous effort of will he had succeeded in pushing his son to the back of his mind. The strain had nearly killed him but he had persevered and won.
- 62 Then one day he received a letter from Nene and in spite of himself he began to glance through it perfunctorily until all of a sudden the expression on his face changed and he began to read more carefully:
- 63 .... Our two sons, from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather, have insisted on being taken to him. I find it impossible to tell them that you will not see them. I implore you to allow Nnaemeka to bring them home for a short time during his leave next month. I shall remain here in Lagos.
- 64 The old man at once felt the resolution he had built up over so many years falling in. He was telling himself that he must not give in. He tried to steel his heart against all emotional appeals. It was a re-enactment of that other struggle. He leaned against a window and looked out. The sky was overcast with heavy black clouds and a high wind began to blow filling the air with dust and dry leaves. It was one of those rare occasions when even Nature takes a hand in a human fight. Very soon it began to rain, the first rain in the year. It came down in large sharp drops and was accompanied by



the lightning and thunder which mark a change of season. Okeke was trying hard not to think of his two grandsons. But he knew he was now fighting a losing battle. He tried to hum a favourite hymn but the pattering of large raindrops on the roof broke up the tune. His mind immediately returned to the children. How could he shut his door against them? By a curious mental process he imagined them standing, sad and forsaken, under the harsh angry weather - shut out from his house.

- 65 That night he hardly slept, from remorse – and a vague fear that he might die without making it up to them.

### Let's Think and Do

1. 'They are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them.' Nnaemeka tells Nene. Have you met someone who had to face family resistance or criticism because of his love marriage? How did that person deal with the situation?
2. How difficult is it to decide to marry someone from a different background? What are the consequences? How can one deal with the situation?
3. 'I can't – we must – I mean it is impossible for me to marry Nweke's daughter.'  
*'Impossible? Why?' asked his father.*  
*'I don't love her.'*  
*'Nobody said you did. Why should you?' he asked.*  
*'Marriage today is different....'*  
*'Look here, my son,' interrupted his father, 'nothing is different. What one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background.'...*  
 Who do you agree with – Nnaemeka or his father? Do you think that the difference of opinion between Nnaemeka and his father has anything to do with the generation gap?
4. Find instances of the conflict between modernism and tradition in the story.
5. What made Nnaemeka's father change his attitude to his daughter-in-law?
6. What, in your opinion, is the role of marriage in our society?
7. Organise debate on the following topics:
  - a) Love marriages Vs arranged marriages.
  - b) Should women be prohibited from working outside?

## The Ice Age Cometh

Jayant V. Narliker

*JAYANT VISHNU NARLIKAR (b. 1938 ), born in Kolhapur and a graduate from Banaras Hindu University in 1957, studied mathematics at Cambridge University. He graduated from there with the highest honours and the Tyson Medal for astronomy. He continued in Cambridge as a research student of Fred Holye. He was awarded Ph. D. in 1963 and Sc. D. degree of Cambridge University in 1976. In 1963 Jayant Narliker became Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and 1966 joined Fred Hoyle's newly established Institute of Theoretical Astronomy at Cambridge. He returned to India in 1972 to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research as Professor of Astrophysics. In 1989 he moved to Pune to set up the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics. Jayant Narliker has established world-wide acclaim for his research in gravitation and cosmology, often siding with the minority view in some of the major debates. He is also well known as a popularizer of science and as a public speaker on scientific topics. In 1996 he was awarded the Kalinga Prize by UNESCO for science popularization. He has several technical and popular books to his credit and also enjoys writing science fiction as a form of relaxation. His major works include *Seven Wonders of the Cosmos* and *An Introduction to Cosmology*. The present story 'The Ice Age Cometh', translated from Marathi by the author himself, warns us against the consequences of global warming.*



### The Ice Age Cometh

- 1 "Daddy! Daddy! Get up, quick! Get up, quick! Look, there is so much snow outside. It's so exciting."
- 2 Rajiv Shah, woken up from his deep morning sleep by this commotion from the kids, couldn't at first make out what it was all about. Why were Kavita and Pramod so excited?



- 3 "Dad, may we go down and play in the snow?" asked Kavita.
- 4 "Snow? Here in Bombay (Mumbai)? How is it possible? Rajiv got up quickly and looked out of the window. He stared in disbelief! Yes, it had snowed. And there was a white carpet stretching between houses. And suddenly he realised how abominably cold it was. The kids had two pullovers on - that was all they could lay hands on. Who in Bombay needs warm clothes anyway? When they had bought these in Ooty last year, little did they imagine that they would find use for them.
- 5 "No! Don't go down," replied Rajiv, shivering with cold. He however relented as he wrapped a shawl tightly around him. "We'll all go to the terrace instead. But, put on your socks and shoes."
- 6 Pramod and Kavita ran ahead while Rajiv found a thicker shawl for himself. How he wished they had a heater; even a coal stove would have been welcome in the bitterly cold room.
- 7 This snowfall had come as a climax to the changing climate of the last week. Normally, the Bombayite complains of a cold wave when the mercury dips to 15°C. Yesterday it had reached 5°C during day time, touching zero at night. This change of weather was totally unexpected. Even the pundits had been flummoxed. Where was this going to lead?
- 8 "Come on, Dad!" called Pramod from the head of the terrace stairs. They enjoyed the luxury of being owners of the apartment block and had the top floor and the terrace to themselves.
- 9 "I am coming. But for God's sake, take care. It may be slippery," Rajiv called back as he lumbered up the steps. How cold it must be the top!
- 10 He overcame his concern as soon as he reached the top, so breathtaking was the view. He thought he was looking at a Christmas card scene of a European town rather than the sweltering heat of Bombay. Even the trees lining the avenues of the Hindi Colony were covered in white. The footpaths and streets were, however, a mess of black and white because of the traffic. The railway lines going past the Dadar station looked deserted.
- 11 "I bet the Central Railways have packed up. They don't need much of an excuse," he muttered to himself. "I wonder what the Westerns are doing!" As if in reply to his thoughts, a local train went chugging past on the track towards Mahim.
- 12 Rajiv's thoughts went back to the bet that he had made five years ago. It had sounded such a safe bet then. "Would it snow in Bombay? Vasant had asked.
- 13 He had replied, "Never."
- 14 And Vasant had argued confidently, "It will happen within ten years,"
- 15 And now it had happened - within five years.

- 16 It was at a party hosted by the Indian Ambassador in Washington that he had met Vasant (Professor Vasant Chitnis, that is, who had come on a lecture tour of the United States). The Ambassador had invited some leading scientists from Washington D.C. Maryland and Virginia besides a few journalists. Rajiv was there in the latter category.
- 17 Amidst the usual round of gossip, both scientific and political, Vasant sat quietly by himself. He was never one for parties and small talk. But ...
- 18 "A message was just now received on the teleprinter. Vesuvius has erupted again," a correspondent rushed in excitedly.
- 19 "My God! This is the fourth volcano to come alive in three months. Looks like Mother Earth has an upset stomach," remarked Rajiv to Vasant.
- 20 We should be worried more about her covering than her stomach," Vasant replied shortly,
- 21 "What do you mean?" asked Rajiv.
- 22 "Yes, Vasant! Come out with it," added a professor from the University of Maryland.
- 23 "Well ! When a volcano erupts, not everything falls down on the earth. Some ejecta get into the atmosphere. It depends how much. For, beyond a certain limit it may upset the balance of nature. I fear that we are already close to that limit, if not beyond it," Vasant replied, gravely.
- 24 "Upset the balance of nature? What will the implications be?" an American reporter pulled out his pad, sensing a 'story'.
- 25 Looking him squarely in the eye, Vasant countered, "Suppose I say that you may have to shift your capital from Washington D.C. to Honolulu?"
- 26 "Why should that be necessary?" asked the reporter.
- 27 "Since you reporters don't like riddles, I will give the answer too," replied Vasant smilingly. "With a minor Ice Age coming up, you'll have to evacuate these northern cities like New York, Chicago, and even Washington."
- 28 Before he could elaborate further the discussion was interrupted by the arrival of a VIP from the State Department. The conversation became general but Rajiv wanted to probe Vasant further. At the next the available opportunity he buttonholed him and came to the point. "You have the reputation of backing all your claims with solid proofs. But wasn't that remark about Ice Age somewhat far-fetched? I am, of course, not in your field, but my impression was that we won't have another Ice Age for thousands of years. Unless, of course, the conventional wisdom ..."
- 29 "Is wrong!" replied Vasant, helping himself to some *papadam*. "I can prove that with the delicate balance we find our present ecosystem in, the disaster can come within ten years. But Mr Shah, you don't have to worry! You are safe in Bombay. Plus-minus twenty degrees belt of latitude around the equator should be okay."

- 30 "If I have retained a few items from my heavily stuffed course of school geography, one of them is the latitude of Bombay – about nineteen degrees north. Pretty close to the limit of your belt."
- 31 So we Bombayites would have to face a real cold wave, with snowfall and all that. I should say that we are being let off easily," chuckled Vasant.
- 32 "I can't believe it! Snowfall in Bombay within ten years? Impossible. Here ... I'll bet this ten-dollar note against a dime from you that it won't happen. Surely these odds are generous?" Rajiv pulled out a ten-dollar note.
- 33 "I am afraid they are too generous in my favour. I don't accept bets on certainties, Mr Journalist! You will lose your ten dollars for sure. Let us exchange our cards instead. Here, I will write today's date on my card. You do likewise. If within ten years it snows in Bombay, you simply return this card to me with an admission that you lost. I will do likewise if I lose."
- 34 While they were exchanging their cards, the hostess announced, "Come and enjoy the special dessert prepared by our host."
- 35 A huge iced cake was brought to the central table where the buffet had been laid out. Rajiv and Vasant, both noted wryly that it was called 'The Arctic Surprise.'
- 36 "The real surprise is coming to us in ten years," muttered Vasant. "Only it will not be so pleasant."
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- 37 A snowball thrown by Kavita hit Rajiv and brought him back to the present. Yes, he had lost the bet. He will mail the card. He descended the steps.
- 38 But when he took out the card from the desk, the phone number on the card gave him a better idea. Yes, he will mail the card as per the agreement. But why not talk to him on the phone? He dialled the number.
- 39 "Dr Chitnis?" he asked, as the person at the other end responded.
- 40 "Vasant Chitnis speaking. May I know your name please?"
- 41 "I am Rajiv Shah. Do you remember ..."
- 42 "Our bet! Yes, I was thinking of you today. So you are conceding the bet?" Rajiv could visualise Vasant smiling at the other end.
- 43 "Of course. But may I request half an hour's interview with you?"
- 44 "What for?"
- 45 "I would like to know the scientific basis of your prediction. I want to publicise your theory."
- 46 "Just like a journalist! But it won't be of any use whatsoever. Still, you are most welcome if you can make it to the institute by, say, eleven this morning."
- 47 Rajiv agreed. As he began to shave, he switched on the radio. A special bulletin was on: '...The whole of north India is reeling under unprecedented weather conditions.

From west Rajasthan to the Bay of Bengal and from the Himalayas to the Sahyadri ranges, there have been snowfalls of varying intensities. It's simply impossible to estimate the number of casualties of men and cattle. Several thousands of migratory birds were found dead as they were taken unaware by the rapid change in climate. Most of the crops are gone. The roads and rail tracks have become severely disrupted. The Prime Minister and the State Chief Minister made helicopter surveys of the local regions. The Prime Minister has announced a special fund for combating the ravages of snow. Everybody is invited to donate generously to the fund ...'

- 49 Rajiv tried to switch on to another station, but that too carried the same bulletin.  
50 "Daddy! Come and watch the TV ... there are pictures of snow everywhere," called out Kavita.

- 51 The TV too carried special bulletins. There were pictures of snow from all over north India. At least technology was able to cope with the flow of information. Rajiv was reminded of the scenes in Russia from the movie 'Dr Zhivago'. The TV also gave information of the prevailing temperatures - Srinagar - 20°C, Chandigarh - 15°C, Delhi - 12°C, Varanasi - 10°C, Calcutta - 3°C; Only south of Bombay had the mercury above the psychological figure of 0°C. Madras 5°C, Bangalore 2°C, Trivandrum 7°C ... appeared warm by comparison.

- 52 Then came the news flash: "The President has called an emergency meeting to be attended by the Vice-President, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, the Services Chiefs, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and leaders of the opposition parties. At this meeting a decision will be taken on whether to shift the Nation's capital from Delhi to Bombay."



- 53 'You may have to shift your capital from Washington to Honolulu' - Rajiv was reminded of Vasant's words spoken five years ago to the American reporter. If a warm country like India was facing this catastrophic situation, what must be happening in Europe or Russia? He switched on to the B.B.C. World Service to find out.  
54 Yes, there were disasters and tragedies everywhere. Temperatures had fallen by twenty to thirty degrees. Canada, Europe and Russia were accustomed to cold weather and for them the change was not as much a shock as it was to India.  
55 Suddenly Rajiv remembered his appointment. His watch showed the time as 9.05. The sun was discernible but was as pale as a planet or as the moon. Kavita and Pramod had taken it for granted that the school would be closed today. They were



watching the TV comforted by the fact that their mother, who would be harassing them with daily chores and homework, was away in Pune for a wedding of her friend's daughter.

56 Rajiv hurriedly finished his breakfast and took out his car from the garage. The engine was cold and started after a great deal of coaxing. But the real difficulty came on the roads. The car skidded on the slippery surface and only because Rajiv had driven under such conditions while abroad that he was able to control it. This was not so for the great majority of Bombay drivers as the abandoned or collided cars and buses all along the Ambedkar Road testified.

57 "We Indians start considering ourselves as skilled drivers as soon as we get to know where the brake and accelerator pedals are," muttered Rajiv to himself, as he carefully steered his Maruti through the mud and debris.

58 He realised that it was going to take him much longer to reach Colaba than the customary forty-five minutes, or the hour-and-half he had allowed for.

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59 "Come in, Mr Journalist! You are an hour late. Did you find another victim to interview on the way?" greeted Vasant as Rajiv entered his office.

60 "I apologise, Professor Chitnis, I would probably have arrived sooner had I walked instead of driving through this chaotic city." Rajiv lowered himself in an armchair while Vasant seated himself on his revolving executive chair facing him.

61 "But, first my congratulation, Professor. You sure hit the bull's eye with that prediction of yours. But we journalists are inquisitive, if nothing else. Please enlighten me on how you made the prediction. And why you said that publicising it won't be of any use."

62 "Your questions will find answers in this pile of papers," replied Vasant, dumping a pile in front of Rajiv.

63 The file contained reprints of papers in international journals, typescripts and some handwritten notes. Rajiv, being a layman in the field, could not make much of it except for noting the titles and abstracts of the printed articles.

64 "My scientific theory of the Ice Age prediction will be found more in the unpublished part than in the published one," Vasant remarked drily.

65 "Why so?"

66 "Because of the so-called objectivity, the peer review system and sense of fairness on which we scientists pride ourselves," Vasant's face carried fleeting shades of sarcasm and frustration before it became featureless again as he continued, "You people think of us as perfect scholars in search of knowledge for knowledge's sake, undeterred by jealousies and temptations. It's all about bunkum! We scientists are human. We possess all the weaknesses of the human mind. If the establishment finds new discoveries

unpalatable, those belonging to it will do everything to suppress them. I had to water down my hypotheses, blur my predictions in order to get some of my ideas in print. The rest – those in manuscript form – were considered too crazy or outlandish to be published."

67 "Pardon me, Professor Chitnis..."

68 "Call me Vasant," interrupted the Professor.

69 "Thank you, Vasant! But what you are saying bears a striking similarity to the days of Copernicus and Galileo. Copernicus, if I recollect correctly, found that the original preface of his book had been replaced by a milder version by the publisher ... so that the book would not find resistance from the religious establishment." Rajiv had put the tape-recorder on to record the interview.

70 Vasant marshalled his thoughts before replying, "Well, in those days they had the religious establishment. Today we have the scientific top brass, the wise men who decide what is publishable, what constitutes science, and what must never see the light of the day. These are the Popes and Cardinals of science replacing their religious counterparts of five centuries ago ... I am sorry if I sound so bitter about it."

71 "Vasant, you are no doubt passing a judgement on the system, such as it is, on your personal experience. But if I were to defend it, I could say that scientists come across hundreds of cranky, half-baked ideas in the course of their career. Who has the time to examine them all? So, if they tend to shy away from any new, unconventional ideas ..."

72 "Who is to blame them? Right? I agree. But if that unconventional idea is well reasoned and supported by factual evidence, should it not get a hearing? Surely it is not difficult to distinguish one such idea from hundred cranky, half-baked ones. Especially if the scientist proposing it has already established his credentials in the field, ... but, let's leave these generalities apart, and come to my theory."

73 "Yes, Vasant. Let us hear about your theory and what it predicts," Rajiv added. Vasant took out a map of the earth and spread it on the coffee-table in front of Rajiv.

74 "Here. When you look at our terra-firma, you find that land occupies only about one-third of the total area. The rest is all water – seas and oceans. The oceans play an important role in controlling our climate. The hot air above them rises, mixes with the earth's atmosphere and spreads around before coming down. Right?"

75 "This much is text-book material in schools," Rajiv replied.

76 "But we always take it for granted that the oceans are warm and will remain so. To what extent is it correct? A few years ago I measured the temperatures of the sea down to great depths and was shocked at what I found. The sea-water is warm in the upper layers and can be quite cold, down to freezing levels, deeper down. What came



as a shock to me was the realisation that the upper warm layers on which we rely so much for our climate are quite thin. And over the years they are getting thinner."

77 "But what about the sun? Does it not provide heat to the oceans?" asked Rajiv.

78 "As a direct supplier of heat, the sun is very inefficient. There is bright sunlight on the poles in summer, but how much ice does it melt? Rather, the ice reflects the sunlight, thereby not allowing it to carry its heat in. But, indirectly the sunlight can, and does, prove more effective ... I will show you an experiment if you step in my lab." Vasant got up and led the way across the corridor to the laboratory.

79 A big glass vessel was standing on a work-table. Vasant switched on an apparatus and explained, "I am gradually cooling the air in this vessel. It has some humidity, that is, some water vapour. If I perform my operations carefully, the temperature should fall below zero without the vapour solidifying into ice."

80 The temperature indicator was dropping and it crossed the zero mark without any ice formation. Then Vasant sent a beam of light across the vessel. Seen at right angles, the inside of the vessel was quite dark.

81 "This is because light goes thorough this humid air," explained Vasant. "But, now let me lower the temperature further."

82 When the temperature dropped to forty degrees below zero, the vessel began to shine. The change was remarkable.

83 "It happens because the water in the air has now solidified. The ice particles scatter light, which the humid air did not. This is the key point," Vasant pointed out.

84 Returning to his office, Vasant continued, "This happens in polar regions. When the temperature drops to about forty degrees below zero, the so-called diamond dust forms. This is just the ice particles you saw in that experiment. As in the experiment, the dust scatters sunlight. We don't see this happen in other places because the temperature there hardly ever falls to such low levels."

85 Rajiv Shah was busy taking notes while Vasant's voice was getting recorded. But he was still very far from the answer he was seeking. Noting the puzzled frown on Rajiv's face, Vasant smiled and continued, "Now, to compete my reasoning. Suppose that the oceans are cooling and are not able to supply adequate heat to the atmosphere. This will lead to a drop in temperature everywhere and the formation of diamond dust in more places than just in the polar regions. What does the dust do? By scattering the sunlight it will prevent it from reaching the ground level. Imagine a dust screen partially shielding the earth from sunlight!"

86 The penny dropped, Rajiv completed the reasoning cycle excitedly, "And so, the earth will cool further, the oceans will be less warm and the diamond dust will grow and spread, preventing yet more sunlight from reaching the earth ... and so we spiral towards the Ice Age. But if the oceans are warm enough this spiral will not even start."

87 "Hold it!" said Vasant, "Ordinarily, the upper layers of the ocean are warm enough to keep the atmosphere stable against the threat of diamond dust. But if something happens to set off a chain of events which lower the ocean temperatures, then we've had it. For example, whenever a volcano erupts, the particles from it may find their way to the atmosphere. There they help absorb or scatter sunlight. So, if we have a more than normal volcanic activity, we run into the danger of creating dust screens that prevent the sunlight from performing its warming operations ... As I noted several years ago, the safety margin kept by nature was getting narrower and narrower."

88 Only now could Rajiv appreciate that bit of conversation carried out five years ago in Washington and why Vasant had been so worried at the news from Vesuvius.

89 What lay ahead, now that Vasant's worst fears had been realised?

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90 "The Ice Age has arrived! Predicted by an Indian Scientist" – this is how Rajiv's article was headlined. It got considerable publicity in India and later the foreign news agencies also picked it up and circulated it widely. Soon Vasant Chitnis became a celebrity. The fact that he had scientifically predicted the catastrophic change in the climate earned him respect from the masses and credibility amongst his scientific peers. And as a result, his prognostications about the future began to be taken seriously.

91 There will still a number of established scientists who did not agree that this was the onset of an Ice Age. They attributed this to a transient perturbation in the climate; no doubt larger magnitude than usual, but transient nevertheless. They promised that the good old warm days would return within a few years once the balance was resolved to the process of heating and cooling of the oceans and the air above. It was however hard to convince the countries caught in the freeze out.

92 At a press conference by international reporters, Vasant warned against any complacency. "There may be some thaw in the summer but don't take it as the end of this Ice Age. For, a much colder winter will follow. There is a way of preventing it, which, we can try now before it is too late. It is still possible to reverse the trend, but, it will cost a lot of money. Please spend it."

93 But this warning proved to be of no avail. In April the spring arrived with a slight rise in temperature. The summer everywhere (in the northern Hemisphere) was warm and sunny. Even the winter down south was nowhere as bitter as that in the north had been. So, the weathermen as well as the others began to predict that the thaw had set in.

94 The Wimbledon matches took place as usual. Although the players had to wear warm pullovers, everybody was happy that it did not rain. Australia recaptured the 'ashes' and for once no one could blame the weather. The US Open Golf tournament was played, out in unprecedented balmy weather. Down in the tropics, the excessive

heat was absent but the monsoons came to the Indian subcontinent promptly and in adequate measure.

95 "We need not have panicked," thought all nations, great and small. For once the Indians thanked their red-taped bureaucracy which was still working on the modalities of shifting the capital from Delhi to Bombay. They now wound up their half-finished deliberations with the remark, "Decision postponed till further notice."

96 But Vasant Chitnis was getting increasingly worried. Just as a flame brightens before flickering out, the summer too was going to behave like that. He told this to others, but no one was in a mood to listen.

97 There was one exception, however. Rajiv Shah had implicit faith in Vasant's reasoning. One day, as he sat in his office, scrutinising the teleprinter news, Vasant dropped in. From his face Rajiv guessed that he had brought some news.

98 "Here, look at this telex," Vasant handed him a short message to read- "As directed by you we have measured the ice cap in the Antarctica. We confirm that it has expanded and the water temperature has dropped by two degrees compared to what it was a year ago."

99 "The message has come from the International Institute at the Antarctica," said Vasant. "I had expected this result but wanted it to be confirmed. And unfortunately, I was proved right."

100 "You mean that we are in for a winter more severe than that in a year ago?"

101 "Yes, Rajiv! Who cares? We are all going to be frozen to death anyway."

102 "Come on, Vasant. Is it really that bad? Is there no way out of this ice spiral?" Rajiv asked.

103 "There is, but now my mouth is shut, until these wise men come and ask me for it. In the meantime, Rajiv take my friendly advice. Go as closer to the equator as you possibly can. Perhaps life in Indonesia may be somewhat tolerable in the next few months. I am buying a ticket to Bandung."

104 And Vasant stalked out.

105 Man may claim to be the master of the earth but the best of his technology is no match to the scale on which nature can operate.

106 On November 2 the people of Bombay saw a remarkable sight. Overhead were flying thousands of birds. All going in disciplined formations that air squadrons would be proud of. Ornithologists came out to watch and wonder that many of these birds had not flown to this way before.

107 Soon even the crows, sparrows and pigeons of Bombay joined them.

108 They were all heading south, Rajiv noted as he remembered Vasant's parting words. These birds knew instinctively what man was yet to discover with all his advance

technology. They had commonsense and they had learnt from their previous year's experience.

109 The discovery was made by all the geostationary satellites two days later. On November 4 came the warning: 'Atmospheric changes are taking place rapidly and indicate heavy snowfalls in several parts of the earth within the next twenty-four hours.'

110 "This advance warning would not have come but for our advanced technology," the meteorologists proudly announced. The birds by then had reached the safe haven of the equator.

111 Unable to match their discipline, the humans panicked. The technologically advanced countries like Japan, Canada, the USA and Europe were complacent that having survived the previous winter they would be able to face any cold front. They were not prepared to find their big cities buried in the five-metre deep snow. In the ensuing chaos, only the fortunate few who ran to the nuclear war shelters survived. In the traditionally warmer countries the cold wave was less severe but it extracted as much a toll from their less prepared populations.

112 Rajiv Shah moved in with a cousin in Madras which was barely habitable. Pramod and Kavita were no longer thrilled with the snow and were asking, like so many others, when would the good old warm days return. But no one, let alone any expert, could say anything with any confidence. Those experts, who had taken the previous years' cold wave lightly had mostly perished under this one. One of them who had survived because he had moved down from Washington to Miami Beach was Richard Holmes, a member of the US Energy Board.

113 One day Rajiv was surprised to hear from him on the phone.

114 "Hi, Rajiv! How are you? I bet you are warmer there in Madras than our freezing Miami here." Richard was trying to be humorous but Rajiv detected a hint of the underlying anxiety.

115 "Come on, Richard! I bet you have centrally heated house there," he bantered.

116 "Central heating in Miami? You must be kidding. But Rajiv, I called to find out where Vasant is... Vasant Chitnis, you know. Where has he vanished? No phones in Bombay or Delhi are working normally."

117 "As if they ever worked normally," muttered Rajiv. Aloud he gave Vasant's address and phone number in Bandung to Richard.

118 "I would like to know what he makes of all this. May be he has a way out of this mess," Richard said as he thanked Rajiv for the information.

119 Now, are the wise really ready to talk, wondered Rajiv! A few months ago, the same Holmes had ridiculed Vasant's doomsday forecast. Still, it was not too late even now. He only hoped that Vasant would be in a mood to listen.



120 "How is your Washington doing, eh, Richard?" asked Vasant as they shook hands at the Bandung airport.

121 "There is not a soul left here ... in fact, the birds were wiser than us. They left well in time," replied Holmes. He was considerably subdued compared to when they had last met. Not knowing how Vasant would react, he had brought Rajiv along. Silently they drove to Vasant's residence.

122 "You have chosen a nice corner for yourself, Vasant! You don't know the havoc caused all over the world. Here take a look at these telexes and faxes." Rajiv handed him some sheets of paper.

123 Vasant read what would have made alarming headlines in normal times but which had become routine now: 'The British government has announced the completion of its transfer programme of the surviving forty percent of its population to Kenya. The programme took two months to complete.' 'Moscow and St. Petersburg have been evacuated, the Russian P.M. has declared.' 'We can survive for up to a year in our underground shelters-Israel President.' 'All rivers in north India totally frozen, reports UNL'

124 Vasant passed back sheet after sheet to Rajiv as he read the detailed messages, his face expressionless. When he had finished, he made a laconic comment, "Last year we got a glimpse, now we are getting it in full. Next year, I wonder if we would survive to see the aftermath!"

125 "Is it as bad as that?" asked Rajiv anxiously.

126 "Can't it be prevented?" asked Richard.

127 "It is probably too late, but I may be wrong, Richard. We can try; in any case what alternative have we? We should have done it last year." Vasant produced a typescript from his desk. It was labelled: 'Project: Invasion of Indra'.

128 "Indra is the Lord of the Heavens whose abode is up above where all the trouble lies." Vasant pointed his finger upwards. Holmes quietly took the manuscript, the very one he had refused to look at a year ago.

129 Six months had elapsed since the Holmes-Chitnis encounter. Only the ten degree belt, north and south of the equator, still retained the green and blue so well identified with the planet. Elsewhere the Ice Age had set in. And in this thin strip contained all that remained of the human civilisation and the efforts that the civilisation was planning on to counter the ice invasion.

130 Last ditch efforts!

131 But Vasant was more optimistic now that the rocket was ready to be launched. As he stood beside the rocket launcher at the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) at Thumba, he was impatient to begin.

- 132 "We are ready," said the Chief of Operations.
- 133 "Then fire!" ordered Vasant, who was never one to wait for an astrologically auspicious moment for beginning any project.
- 134 The Chief pressed a button and, after a moment of anxious waiting, everybody heaved a sigh of relief as the majestic rocket rose upwards. The invasion of Indra had begun!
- 135 The VSSC had previously launched rockets to get information about the atmosphere. Now this rocket was going to control it, if it and the other rockets being launched all along the equatorial belt would do what they are designed for.
- 136 Sriharikota, Sri Lanka, Sumatra, Kenya, Guatemala ... these were having launch pads with similar rockets or satellites. Because Vasant had initiated the campaign plan, he was given the honour to preside over the first launch.
- 137 For the first time he smiled as he inspected the instrument on the panel in front. He picked up a red phone and spoke into the receiver, "The invasion has begun successfully."
- 138 Rockets, satellites, balloons and high flying aircraft – all were pressed into the attack. These were the four components of the invading army. And mankind anxiously awaited reports sent by the geostationary satellite – the Sanjayas of this modern Mahabharata.
- 139 "In our mythology kings from the earth have successfully attacked Indra. Will this invasion succeed?" wrote Rajiv in his diary.
- 140 What was the invasion about?
- 141 It carried the ambitious plan of bombarding the atmosphere with tiny metallic particles. These particles would absorb the sun's heat and convey it to the down below. This was Vasant's plan. He expected that by now the ejecta of volcano that had settled in the atmosphere and reflected back the sun's rays, away from the earth, would have percolated down. The hope was that the newly injected metallic particles would undo the damage done by them.
- 142 But this was not going to be enough. The diamond dust in the atmosphere had to be reduced immediately. This could be achieved only through explosive heating of the atmosphere. To achieve this Vasant had stipulated the use of weapon technology harnessed for constructive use rather than destructive. Driven to the point of extinction, all countries came forward in the spirit of cooperation. And so those six months were used for devising ways of generating heat in the atmosphere through explosive release of energy. Still, at the end point of this collective effort was the question: 'Will it after all work?'
- 143 Came September and the question was answered affirmatively. The first hint came with the melting of snow and ice in the Gangetic plains. Soon thereafter the land stretching from California to Florida began to shed its piles of snow. From Miami, Richard



Holmes called Vasant, "Vasant! Congratulations. The invasion of Indra has accomplished victory. The diamond dust is rapidly disappearing. And there is a global warming on the way. Vasant, you are a genius."

144 Vasant's face carried the satisfaction a scientist gets when, after many difficulties, his work is recognised by his peers. But underneath was a deep layer of anxiety and uncertainty.

145 They had won the battle but the war lay ahead. As it often happens, after fighting a fierce battle even the winner gets exhausted. Man may pause briefly to pat himself for his achievement. But great struggles lie ahead. The Ice Age had slashed the human population to less than half its original size. The invasion of Indra had drawn heavily on energy resources and other essential commodities. And now the melting snows were going to unleash heavy floods all over. Will their spirit of cooperation continue as men faced these problems? Vasant felt sweat accumulating on his brow. These were the first drops of perspiration he felt in the last two years.

### Let's Think and Do

1. Does the prediction of Dr Chitnis remind you of any other such prediction which came true? How does the scientist's prediction has a striking similarity to the days of Copernicus and Galileo?
2. Share with a friend your own experience of enjoying a snowfall? Contrast snow fall with heavy rainfall and sweltering heat.
3. How do birds adapt to environmental changes?
4. Does the story warn us against the consequences of global warming? How? Explain.
5. Do a project work on
  - a) The Ice Age
  - b) How to keep your locality pollution free?



## THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

**Amarnath Jha**

*Prof Amarnath Jha (1897-1955), Padma Vibhushan award winner was born in Madhubani in Bihar. An artist in words, he was known among the educationists and students for his erudition and command of English language. Prof Jha's writing is always noted for beauty of language and ease of expression. His style is reminiscent of the great poets and prose writers in English literature throughout the ages. Prof Jha held several academic posts such as the Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University as well as Banaras Hindu University. He was the Chariman of Bihar Public Service Commission and Maithili Sahitya Parishad. Besides English, he had good command over Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit, Bangla, and Maithili. The present piece **The Teaching of English in India**, taken from **Occasional Essays and Addresses** was first published in **Teaching** in June 1929. In this essay Prof Jha talks about the problems and ground realities of teaching of English in India.*

## THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

- 1 English has now been taught in this country, at different stages of education, for almost a century, and it is desirable that those engaged in the task of teaching it, as well as others interested in it, should pause and ask themselves if all is well with the subject, if those who teach it are competent, if it is any longer necessary to keep it the medium of instruction, and if a distinction is not needed between the teaching of the language and the literature. I have experience only of college and university teaching, but having, passed through the school classes, and as Chairman of the English Committee of the United Provinces Board of High School and Intermediate Education, I may perhaps be permitted to refer briefly to the earlier stages of English teaching also. My observations refer especially to the provinces in north India.
- 2 In the Primary schools, English is generally very badly taught. For one thing the educational authorities have refrained from giving a proper lead, and there is much confusion of ideals. The ancient method of 'cramming' is tacitly condemned; of the

newer methods - Direct; Dalton, Montessori, and the rest - the teachers know little, and that little inaccurately. There is also a mental antagonism to what they consider 'fads'. The consequence is that the Primary school boy is the victim of incomplete and half-hearted experiments. This, however, is not the whole trouble. Ordinarily the juniormost and least qualified teacher is placed in charge of the primary classes; or else, an old teacher on the verge of superannuation. In either case, the teaching is unsatisfactory - callous, experimental, unbaked, or disillusioned, desultory, and slipshod. During his most impressionable years the boy's mind receives bad nutrition. He learns incorrect pronunciation which leads to bad spelling - 'loin' for 'lion'; 'claver' for 'clever'; 'fother' for 'father' - defects which become so much a part of his equipment that they are never eradicated. Much of what is laughed at as 'Babu English', much of what seems so tragically pathetic in the literary effusions of 'plucked B.As' can, in the last analysis, be traced to incompetent, unqualified, inexperienced teachers of primary schools. Ruskin's 'deformation' is a term that can truly be applied to the results they produce. What is needed, then, at the Primary stage, is a declared policy of the educational mandarins regarding the system of training. Then, properly trained teachers should be appointed for these classes. Indeed, I would suggest that the best teachers of the school should be selected for looking after 'the young idea'. Child psychology is a subject of which most school-master, except empirically, are totally ignorant. They should go through a course of training in phonetics: the new linguaphone ought to be of much value. Elocution is another branch of which they should know something.

- 3 So much for the teacher. Then most of the primers and readers prescribed for the junior school classes relate to subjects that are far removed from the life of the boys. They can take no real interest in them. Efforts should be made to bring the subject-matter of these books more in relation with the traditions and environments of Indian boys. Thus taught, English can become a subject of real interest and even enthusiasm, where it frequently is at present a dull, insipid and lifeless subject, endured only as a necessary evil.

- 4 English is a 'gorgon, hydra, or chimera dire' to most Indian boys, because not only is the language in itself difficult as an independent subject - and who will deny that it has numerous pitfalls for the unwary, 'shall' and 'will' and the definite article, for instance? - but also because all the other subjects are taught and examined through its medium. Examiners in history, science, and geography deduct marks frequently not because the candidate is weak in these subjects, but because he is not able to express his knowledge of these in correct English. The bewildered students' question, 'But how many teachers of science, history and geography themselves speak and write correct English?' is not entirely beside the point. What in other countries a young boy learns and expresses in

his own 'mother-tongue', he has here to acquire and state in a difficult foreign language. He finds it difficult to assimilate knowledge, and even more difficult to express it. The description of the grammar school children whom Roger Ascham knew in the north in the sixteenth century might have been written today:

- 5 "I remember, when I was young, in the North they went to the Grammar School little children; they came from thence great Lubbers, always learning, and little profiting; learning without Book everything, understanding within the Book little or nothing. Their whole knowledge was tied only to their Tongue and Lips, and never ascended up to the Brain and Head; and therefore was soon spit out of the mouth again."

- 6 The Indian boy labours hard and unceasingly, and denies to himself rest for recreation and relaxation: there is on his face always a look of strained seriousness; the shades of the prison-house close upon him in his earliest years. And yet, Max Muller said that the Indian students cannot make even a clever mistake! Exaggeration apart, it is undeniable that the burden on the boy is more than he can bear. There



are various causes—inadequate physical nourishment, entirely unsuitable school-hours, economic pressure; but one of the most important is the linguistic bondage under which he labours. It will not be very easy to free him from it; the rival claims of indigenous tongues—as numerous as in the tower of Babel—will have to be settled; text-books will have to be produced; teachers will have to familiarise themselves with technical terms in these languages. But these are all difficulties that can and should be overcome.

- 7 When the boy comes to the High School stage, he is able to think for himself, and to know his tastes and distastes. But there is hardly a normal, healthy, full-blooded lad to whom literature in some form or other does not make an appeal—a book of adventure, may be, or a poem, or a biography. Here, too, the great need is that of suitable selection of textbooks. They should be selected as good literature, as passports into 'the realms of gold', and not, as they frequently are, as forcing a moral down the young throats, or as teaching natural science. So long as the pieces can pass as literature—pleasant primarily, and well-written, and only incidentally instructive—they have a right to exist. Teachers, too, should teach them as literature, living, warm, and vivid. For most of the boys the parts and figures of speech, the varieties of metrical forms, scansion, and the rest can only remain the fopperies and fripperies of literature: if they are familiar with

the spirit, if they can recognise good poetry when they read it and vicious prose when they see it, the end has been achieved. I am far from despising the technical parts; they are useful and even necessary for the craftsman, and sorely will he repent ignoring them. But for the amateur who is not to live by it, what matter the tools of the trade, if he has the skill to enjoy the finished product? The sovereign method is not to alarm and frighten the aspiring student; let him see the best models and live in their company. He must be dull, indeed, and not suited for literary training if he cannot imbibe through this contact all that is worth while in literary mechanism.

- 8 Once a student has reached the university stage, it is for the tutor to 'educate', to develop the young man's tastes and correct them, to guide him to newer avenues of delight and inspiration, and to teach him the higher qualities of style, the intellectual and emotional analysis, the thoughtful explanation of what had hitherto been mainly a vague like or dislike. Here the student should familiarise himself with the best books, not necessarily the most famous ones, and familiarise himself so that they become not so much aids to elegant conversation or apt reference, but parts of his daily and hourly thought. Here again, the teacher can do much. The favourite method of teaching employed by the late Sir Walter Raleigh was reading aloud to his class of his favourite prose and poetical passages from the various periods of literature. Far more satisfactory than dull pages from dry-as-dust literary histories, far more impressive than set lectures on well-worn themes, this method was calculated more to arouse general interest in a large class than to guide the eager searchings of the specialist. But specialisation can be effective and useful only after a fairly comprehensive general background has been set. When that is done, what is needed is only an occasional lighting of the rush lamp at the central flame.

### Let's Think and Do

1. Write a short essay on the problems of teaching – learning English in Bihar.
2. Describe your experiences of learning English at Primary and Secondary stages.
3. What is 'Babu English'? Find out the reasons that give birth to 'Babu English'.
4. Describe the role of teachers and textbooks in teaching-learning English.
5. How can English become a subject of real interest?
6. What should be the role of a teacher of English at the University stage?





## A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA

Derek Walcott

*Derek Walcott (b. 1930) was a Caribbean poet and playwright. He became famous for his collection of poems entitled **In a Green Night** (1962). He is known for ironic, antithetical poetry of personal and artistic discovery. His descriptions serve as a means of taking psychological bearings. Walcott's poetry beams back racial consciousness and his sympathy for the victims. His plays such as **Henri Christopher, Drums and Colours** enact his interior exploration. They also combine with folk activities like singing, dancing and story-telling.*



## A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt  
Of Africa, Kikuyu, quick as flies,  
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt  
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.  
Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:  
"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"  
Statistics justify and scholars seize  
The salients of colonial policy.  
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?  
To savages, expendable as Jews?

5

10

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break  
In a white dust of ibises whose cries  
Have wheeled since civilization's dawn  
From the parched river or beast-teeming-plain.



The violence of beast on beast is read 15  
As natural law, but upright man  
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.

Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars  
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,  
While he calls courage still that native dread 20  
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands  
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again  
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,  
The gorilla wrestles with the superman. 25

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? 30

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cold?

How can I turn from Africa and live?

### Let's Think and Do

1. Who is happy to feed on the dead bodies?
2. Is the violence of beast on beast justified? How?
3. What light does the poem throw on racial discrimination?
4. Write in brief your views on caste discrimination in our society.



## **The Grand Beginning: A Daughter's Tribute to her Father**

**Meira Kumar**

*MEIRA KUMAR (b.1945), the only daughter of Late Babu Jagjivan Ram, began her career as a bureaucrat, but later joined politics. She has been elected member of the parliament several times. She has also served as a Cabinet Minister in the centre in different capacities. Like her father, she has passionate concern for the upliftment of the down-trodden and the untouchables both as cabinet minister and as members of several social and cultural societies. Kumar edits Pavan Prasad, a monthly magazine, on sociological and literary issues. She also writes poems in Hindi. In the present essay, taken from Jagjivan Babu: Ahead of his Times, she fondly remembers the days she spent in the company of her father and recounts the events which shaped Babu Jagjivan Ram into a Crusader for social justice.*



## **The Grand Beginning: A Daughter's Tribute to her Father**

1 It is not easy for a daughter to write dispassionately about her father because the bonds are too close, the sentiments too deep and the images get blurred. Ever since I remember, I saw him as a national figure, a performer at centre stage, bathed in limelight. He was called upon to meet the most difficult challenges facing the nation in his times and he met them all with devastating success. Equipped with remarkable grit, intellectual rigour and a strong commitment to moral and quintessentially human values, Babuji remained the longest in that rarefied atmosphere at the top where even the best survives only briefly. As a growing child therefore, I was naturally overawed by the aura of supermanship that always surrounded him.

- 2 I loved him as my father. While the world was curious about his words, his influence and the power he wielded, I was only concerned about his person, his childhood, his youth, his struggles and his dreams. As a little girl, I loved to listen to the tales of his childhood pranks which grandmother narrated as bed-time stories. She narrated them in a style so picturesque that I see them before my eyes as paintings coloured in great detail by a very fine brush. Whenever, Barka Baba, my father's elder brother, twenty-four years his senior, came to Delhi, I would shower him with questions about Babuji's childhood. I have treasured every word that grandmother and Barka Baba spoke about Babuji and have used them painstakingly to reconstruct his early life.
- 3 The earliest scene, then, is set in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century against the backdrop of Chandwa, a small, backward village in Bihar in a country reeling under the shame of being a British colony. Babuji was born here on 5 April, 1908 amidst poverty and untouchability. For thousands of years Indian society had treated the untouchables with utter scorn and contempt. The repression and exploitation had crippled their very psyche so that they could not entertain the idea of protesting against the unjust social system. They were the disinherited ones, a casualty of history, too feeble and with wounded souls to fight back.
- 4 But Babuji was different. He was made of sterner stuff. It was against his grain to accept injustice. As life began to unfold and he felt the trauma of his circumstances, he took the reins of destiny into his own hands and strode ahead unstoppable - to a new dawn. I can visualise him as an ill-clad, dusty little boy out to conquer the world.
- 5 Babuji was admitted to the village school at the age of six. It was Basant Panchami day and after offering prayers to Goddess Saraswati, he was sent to school, attired in a new yellow dhoti and velvet cap, a piece of jaggery in his mouth for good luck and a slate tucked under his arm.
- 6 My grandfather Sant Shobhi Ram had set great hopes in him – the youngest of his eight children. Grandfather was tall, handsome and very upright. As a young man, he had resigned from his job in the British Army, to protest against their unjust conduct. Thereafter, he worked in the Calcutta Medical College, but retired prematurely to settle down to a quiet, ascetic life in Chandwa. The produce of his land somehow sustained the family. As the priest of the Shiva-Narayani Sect, most of his time was spent in praying and writing the holy book "Anayas" in his beautiful, long hand to distribute among his disciples. He died young, when my father was only six. His last words to my father were "I have taught English to your elder brother but I have not even taught Hindi to you. May you scale great heights in life?" It was then that my grandmother Vasanti Devi, a lady of rare wisdom and courage, made a silent vow to

her departing husband that she would spare no effort to give the best education to her young son.

7 The village school was his temple of learning. There were new books to read and there was so much to learn. He had just learnt to spell his long name but one of his friends invariably spelt it wrong in order to tease him. Once the teasing led to a heated argument followed by fist cuffs. The friend went crying to Panditji, who not only scolded Babuji, but also thrashed him without giving him a chance to explain. This was his first encounter with injustice. Furious at the treatment meted out to him, he took a long stick and climbed atop a mango tree instead of going home for lunch. When grandmother made inquiries, she was told that he was very angry and threatened to beat anyone who dared to go near the tree. When further inquiries revealed that he was beaten for no faults of his, she headed for Panditji's house. She told Panditji's wife in no uncertain terms that her husband was not only guilty of gross injustice to her little son, but was also responsible for beating him and keeping him without food. She made these charges in a manner so forceful and so appealing that she won instant support from the Panditani who joined her in her mission against injustice. The two accosted Panditji who was already suffering from pangs of remorse. The child he had wrongly punished was the brightest he had seen in his long, teaching career and he had the intuition that the little boy would do him proud one day. He apologized to grandmother and the Panditani, who were still in a belligerent mood, and then proceeded to the mango tree to beckon his favourite student. Babuji politely came down, but declared his refusal to study in Panditji's school. Panditji was finally able to pacify him, but the little crusader had won his first battle.



Babu Jagjivan Ram

8 The incident, which left a lasting impact on him, occurred when he was around seven. It was rainy season and the tiny rivulet Gangi, which crisscrossed the eastern side of the village, had swelled. One hot afternoon Babuji and his friend went for a swim after school. The current was too powerful for the young swimmers. Being closer to the shore, the friend managed to come out, Babuji could not. Overcome by fierce mid-stream current he was fast drifting away when a woman spotted him. She had a long stick for driving her pigs. She rushed and extended the stick to rescue him. He saw the stick, outstretched his arm, held it tight and using all his might came out. It all happened in a flash, but it kindled a light within him forever. By accident, he had chanced upon the Moolmantra, the basic philosophy of his life, which he never allowed

himself to forget. That the elderly lady thereafter was accorded the same respect, which was reserved for his mother, is another matter. What is significant is that the incident became a reference point in his life, one to which he referred again and again for sustenance, especially in trying moments.

- 9 Perched on his knees as a little girl, or sitting by his side when I grew up, I often heard him talk of it. The elderly lady was, no doubt, a help, he would explain, but what really mattered was that he had the presence of mind to hold on to the stick and the strength within him to pull himself out.
- 10 After finishing middle school, Babuji joined the high school in Arrah town. Although his reputation as a topper had already preceded him, it was eclipsed by the social prejudices prevalent at the time- prejudices that unfortunately exist even today. The most unusual reception awaited him upon his arrival at the school. To the school verandah which hitherto had accommodated two earthen pitchers, the Hindu and the Muslim pitcher, was added a third one – the untouchable pitcher. At the sight of this, his innocent face quivered in anguish and his young frame froze with incapacitating humiliation. He bent, picked up a stone and, as if in a trance, hurled it at the pitcher with all the force at his command. The next day the broken pitcher was replaced by a new one. Once again he aimed a stone, shattering it, as if he shattered not the pitcher but what lay behind it, that age-old practice of inhuman discrimination which heaped untold hurt and insults on the likes of him. The breaking of the untouchable pitcher remained a mystery for the headmaster and the others in the school. But with every new pitcher meeting the same fate, the exasperated headmaster gave in and what followed can only be termed revolutionary by all standards in the Bihar of 1920s. The school veranda thereafter had only one earthen pitcher for every one.
- 11 At the age of ten when most of his classmates were content with the monotonous and uneventful life of that sleepy little village, Babuji was possessed by a strong urge to know what was happening outside its narrow confines. Reading the newspaper was one way, but the village provided no such opportunity. So, every morning without fail he would walk considerable distance to the Arrah railway station just to read a newspaper. While in the high school, he regularly spent two hours in the town library. Gandhiji's "Young India" and Bankim Chandra's "Anand Math" were of special interest. He specially learnt Bengali to read "Anand Math" in original.
- 12 The coming of the monsoon was always welcome in Chandawa, but that year it spelt disaster. Days of continuous and heavy downpour brought unprecedented floods. Babuji's humble mud-house caved in. Barka Baba was in Calcutta on work. Babuji, then in his teens, spent the whole day moving the household goods and the stock of food-grains to the tiny hillock nearby where he and grandmother took shelter along with the other villagers. Alone he had to make innumerable trips to and fro, carrying



heavy items on his frail shoulders. By sunset when he had managed to retrieve almost everything, it suddenly occurred to grandmother that some silver coins, her savings of years buried in the kitchen wall had been left behind. Scared to send her son at that hour to dig out the coins she went herself. Babuji naturally followed. But they could not go far. The water level had risen erasing every trace of their home as also of the earthen pot which contained their modest savings. Bewildered and helpless, they returned. The water receded in a few days and the house was rebuilt. But the experience, as Babuji so often recalled had toughened him beyond his age...

- 13 Of the myriad colours in the kaleidoscope of Babuji's childhood, I have brought into focus just a few. It is not that the others do not deserve to be highlighted, but taken together, they all serve to point to the informing principle of his life, to instil courage, to fight for the oppressed and to take charge of one's destiny.

### Let's Think and Do

1. 'Morning shows the day.' How does this apply to Babu Jagjivan Ram?
2. Attempt a sketch on the childhood of your parents/grandparents
3. Describe Jagjivan Ram as a crusader against injustice. Narrate two incidents that show Jagjivan Ram as a crusader against injustice.
4. How did Babu Jagjivan Ram chance upon the 'Moolmantra' (basic philosophy) of his life? Narrate the incident in your own words.
5. Narrate an incident that shows that adversity toughened Babuji beyond his age.
6. Organise a speech contest on 'untouchability is an evil'.
7. Do a project work on the 'Life and achievements of Babu Jagjivan Ram.





## A TRICK

R. K. Sinha

*Dr R.K. Sinha (1917-2003), a University professor of English at Patna University obtained his D. Phil from Oxford University in 1950 under the able guidance of David Cecil on the topic 'Literary influence on D. H. Lawrence'. Born at Maheshpur in Munger in Bihar, Dr Sinha served in Patna University for 42 years including 27 years as the head of the Postgraduate Department of English. He was a brilliant teacher who kept his students spell bound in the classroom. Dr Sinha guided more than 50 researches for the award of Ph. D. and D. Litt.*



## A TRICK

- 1 'Hallo, Varma, Congratulations,' said I, advancing from amidst a group of five persons loitering on the hostel lawn, and proffered my hand to the new-comer who took it coldly, rather suspiciously, hesitation upon his face. Such cordialities were rare among us, and he had perhaps detected the rapid, stealthy glance that had passed from one to another, while he was still on the road.
- 2 "Your old jokes!" answered Mr. Varma, "you shall better enjoy them yourself," and seemed eager to drop this topic, and resume another in quite a matter-of-fact manner. But the group insisted on congratulating him, and a vociferous acclamation came.
- 3 "You've stood first."
- 4 "Who told you so?"
- 5 "Mr. Chatterjee told us in the tutorial class."
- 6 "Well, I really admire your inventive brain, but I am not going to be led away by your insipid jokes," answered Varma, strictly on his guard to keep himself out of the possible snare.
- 7 But all of us had assumed such an air of innocence that it would have been blasphemous to distrust, and there was already a ray of hope peeping in his heart; he

was rather eager to believe all we said. And then came a further corroboration from one of my friends, in the recital of what Mr. Chaterjee had said about Roll 14 (he did not actually know his name) who had stood first, his marks approaching first class almost. (Mr. Chaterjee was a bit eccentric, and held the rather pessimistic view that nobody could secure first class in English. God forgive me if I insinuate that he himself did not.) He could not tell them exactly, Mr. Clarke had kept it all so secret.

8 And we dragged him into a room, talking in an off-hand manner, yet all conversation was pivoted upon one central point, Examination.

9 "But, I hadn't answered the questions quite to my satisfaction," began he, trying to exhibit that he was quite composed, and was not overjoyed, implying at the same time that there was nothing extraordinary in it, and he could stand first as a matter of course, "the last answer was almost unfinished."

10 "That doesn't matter in the least," cried I, trying to remove the last shred of doubt, specially at the hands of an English examiner. 'The spark of genius' that's what he wants, and once he has detected it in one of your answers, he is satisfied. Well, it is literature, but in mathematics I heard Dr. Das Gupta gave first class marks to a student who had answered only two questions out of seven."

11 "Of course they should examine in this manner," acquiesced Mr. Varma, in a low voice, tense with joy and excitement.

12 "O yes, it is given credit to the person who deserves," we added. "Whatever it might be ...." he left the sentence unfinished.

13 By this time we were quite deep in our talk, and Varma proceeded to describe at length his two best answers. We were all compliments, and praised them enormously.

14 It was all a deception, to be sure; the whole thing was as thin as gossamer: a fool could have seen that. Yet, such was the secret machination of vanity that all improbabilities were leapt over, the specks of doubt enveloped in the flooding light of hope.

15 Mr Varma was pleased - pleased beyond measure. Joy had suffused his whole face, and he condescended to stay in my room (a favour never even dreamed of) and listen to the poems of Tagore, which a Bengali friend of mine had undertaken to read in the original.

16 Two hours - we had been listening to one poem, and then to another, evidently attracted by the charm of the preceding one. Urvasi then Sonar Tari we stopped there, and talked a little about the beauty of the poem, and its philosophy. We little comprehended the meaning of the poem; yet there was a bizarre attraction. It seemed as if words, mere words, the metre were enough to transport one into a dreamland, or at least to create a mental attitude. Yet, there was the magic of the implicit idea pervading the poem, shedding a dreamy light into one's mind, which could but vaguely follow it. But it seemed that the person in whose honour all this was taking place, was but half

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attentive to the poems. An inadvertent glance told us that he was in his own realms of fancy, where the music of success was echoing with more tender notes than all the poems of Tagore. Every now and then his eyes seemed to cast a glimmer of that happy world among our midst. We, then, came to realise the extent of our careless fraud. Yet, how happy, how glorious, to be transported, even if it be for a moment, from the drudgery of a drab life to the beautiful Utopia, where success is the passport and joy the eternal counterpart. Yet how frail! How slender! The slight gust of reality would shatter all to pieces. The charm would be broken, the film of fancy would vanish, the harsh reality staring full in the face.

- 17 We had already passed into the penumbra of an impending disaster. The crash was coming - inevitably as death. But the step we had taken was irrevocable. The error had been committed, and we seemed to see the premonition of the 'justice' of the Greek Tragedians. The fun was gone, and I could almost realise the pathos of a shattered dreamland, of crushed hopes, of ruined joy.
- 18 It was early in the evening that he went to Kamala, one of his friends and said in notes of half-suppressed joy.
- 19 "Kamala, they say I have stood first."
- 20 "Oh, they must be joking."
- 21 There was a sudden twitching of the lips, a contortion of the face, that lasted only for a moment, the words meant a direct attack upon his merits. He was in no way inferior to any of the students. Could not he stand first! Why wonder!
- 22 "Anyway, let us go to Mr. Chaterjee, the father of the news."
- 23 Out he went in headlong haste, dragging Kamala along the stairs. The first outburst of his joy was exhausted, and then there emerged a curious feeling of dread, that the whole thing might be a hoax. He wanted to satisfy himself as soon as possible. Ill or well, he must clear himself out of this dilemma. The suspense was really killing, and every second seemed to him a whole long year. His mind was in a state of tension from which he was suffering continuously. The internal strain expressed itself in his hasty pace, and sometimes it seemed he would run.
- 24 Anyhow, he reached the house of Professor Chaterjee, like that interesting figure in Hindu mythology, flying between the earth and sky, occupied a debatable space as to his age. In the class he was a grave man of forty, outside a buoyant young fellow of thirty. Actually he was thirty-five. He was a person of cheerful countenance and boisterous happy spirits. He would laugh or shut up like a Jack-in-the box.
- 25 Mr. Varma was in deadly earnest, and straightaway asked him about the matter. He was surprised and professed an utter ignorance of the whole thing; then seeing a similar surprise upon his face, burst into laughter. The whole thing was as transparent as crystal. He could perceive the deception at the first glance. Then came the heart-

reading mortification. Mr. Varma was humiliated, ashamed, then infuriated. Wounded pride raised its head and an insatiable anger possessed his heart. He felt he would kill one of us or die himself.

- 26 By the time he came to the hostel, his first fury was pacified to some extent, but not quenched. Who could quench it unless the burning feelings of the heart were exhausted, in speech, in tears?

- 27 It was I who had initiated the plot, but some friends of mine had aided me in carrying it out. The most outstanding of them was Mr. Sinha. The first volley of rage, therefore, was sure to be discharged against us who formed the first phalanx. Moreover, the deception practised was not pure fun. It had originated rather harmlessly in my brain, but the succour from Mr. Sinha had imparted a tinge of personal jealousy.

- 28 The fact was that just a few days before there had been a hot discussion between these two on an absurdly insignificant point. The cause lay not in the diversity of the opinion about the subject, but in the long tension that had been between them since the first idea of competition and jealousy had crept into their hearts. A latent envy was fermenting in their minds, and might burst out any moment, on any pretext, like molten lava. The occasion had come.

- 29 "Have you read *Vanity Fair*?" asked Mr. Sinha.

- 30 "Of course, I have."

- 31 "Who is the author?"

- 32 "Well, ... I forget the name actually, can't say exactly."

- 33 Mr. Sinha in his moods of aggression was inclined to think too poorly of others, and he seemed to suspect Mr. Varma was merely aggrandising and had never come across the book.

- 34 "Perhaps you've never read it."

- 35 "I say I have. It is such a bulky book in two volumes, said Mr. Varma, explaining with his hands.

- 36 Mr. Sinha who had perhaps seen the one volume edition in Everyman's Library, was now sure of his point, and asserted, rather vehemently, that the book is not at all in two volumes, and never so bulky. There is only one truly expressive word for Mr. Sinha vehement. He was vehement in his gait, vehement in his talk, vehement in his gestures. He could sing to a roaring lion, God knows how he could roar.

- 37 They plunged into a hot discussion, Varma holding to his point and his opponent to his own. It seemed as if it would never be concluded, when both of them became aggressive, forcing their views in loud tones, praising their own merits, each despising the other's outrageously. Perhaps the hostel-bell rang and they parted. But the flame of envy, thus enkindled in their hearts was never completely extinguished and was ready to flare up on the slightest provocation.

38 Late in the evening I was walking on the hostel verandah when Mr. Varma stepped rapidly towards me on his return walk. His friend came along with him. There was an evident exhaustion on his face; his lips were parched; but his eyes seemed to be emitting fire. He was burning with rage. In a dry tone he showered congratulations upon me, saying it was I who had stood first. I understood it was no trick, no deception. He knew perfectly I could not be deceived; a wry smile upon his face expressed his grief, his rage, his wounded pride, more eloquently than a volley of words. He came to the point and began to upbraid me.

39 "It was not at all gentlemanly on your part ..." he spoke and stopped. He was choking with rage. It seemed there was a lump in his throat; he gulped it, and began again, "I never liked such jokes."

40 "What jokes!" ejaculated I, but soon perceived that it was no use carrying the fun any longer. I submitted but not out of fear. I had already had too much of it. I had lost that fun long ago, and now that the catastrophe had come. I was not at all ready to keep up the game.

41 Yet, the end had not really come. The rain had stopped suddenly and was to come with fresh thunder-storm. It was late in the evening, we were sitting in Mr. Sinha's room and taking tea. Suddenly the ward-servant came with two slips, one meant for me the other for Sinha. I read it carelessly and turned my glance towards Sinha who was still poring over it. His face seemed to express some resentment, with an undercurrent of glee. I could imagine the contents of the letter to be similar to mine, when he handed it over to me. So it was; Mr. Varma had wanted his books back from persons who could not like gentlemen!

42 How cold and simple the act looked; yet all the conglomeration of feeling turned into one molten form through the heat of rage, was metamorphosed there.

43 I attempted to laugh, but could not – perhaps I was a bit nettled at his mode of letter but I suppressed the feeling. What did this insult matter in the face of the grief I had inflicted upon him? I sent the servant back, and went into my room. A few minutes later Varma came himself. Now it was my turn to upbraid, and I was in no mood to let it go, without profit. But he was already sorry for what he had done not that he was pacified, for who could heal that sore except time. He was sorry at the meanness implied in his bitter tone of letter, and remained silent all the while I was speaking.

44 Then came an interval I shall never forget through my life. It was a period of leaden silence weighing upon us both; but neither had the heart to speak. We were silently sorry for what we had done at the sudden turn our fun had taken. It was for each a tacit acknowledgement of the wrong done; our hearts had been softened by remorse, and the mood of pride had given way to one of pardon. Silent we sat; one minute passed, then another. I wanted to get out, to raise some topic; but my mind failed. I



sank more and more into a kind of mental vacuity. Outside the students went talking to the mess. The shuffle of their shoes jarred upon our solemn calm. Suddenly the bell rang. I was startled out of my torpidity. Mr. Varma seemed to emerge from a dream. His eyes seemed to express remorse, to beg pardon. I wanted to avoid his looks. How they rent my heart. I was angry when I felt a drop of tear trickling upon my face.

45 "Let us go to the mess," said I in a hoarse voice, and he nodded in assent.

46 I thought the matter was over, but it came as an aftermath in my dreams. The feelings I had suffered from during the evening revived more pungently, but passed away quickly. Others came in rapid succession but they were not incoherent or inconsequential. It seemed I was taken before the Almighty Judge. All my crime was presented before me vividly. I had already been repenting for it, and I bowed my head listening to the ordeal.

47 "He shall be punished!" cried the Judge.

48 My whole frame trembled. I seemed to fall into a dark abyss, sense had deserted me. Some time elapsed (I was not at all conscious of it) before I felt a surging up of blood throughout my body – in the heart, in the head. A mosquito stung in my left leg. I felt annoyed, and seemed to realise that I was awake. I felt my bed, the wall beside it. It was pitch dark. My body was still trembling. There was an ache in my heart. I drank a cup of water and persuaded myself to sleep. In the morning the sun was fairly high when I awoke. I felt dog-tired and wished to be dead.

49 That very day the result was going to be out. We went to College, and waited for about two hours. The meeting at last dispersed, and the professors came out looking grave, as if the mystery of the universe were disclosed to them. One of my friends went to ask Prof. Chatterjee about the marks. He was sorry he did not know, Mr. Clarke had kept them secret. He came back disappointed, and I approached. My marks he did not know, but congratulated me saying "I had stood first." I came back; my head was swimming.

50 I could not analyse whether I was glad or sorry!

### Let's Think and Do

1. What does the story-teller feel for the trick he played?
2. Have you ever played a trick with your friend as the Narrator plays with Mr Verma?
3. At times tricks inspire us to do better. Can you remember any such trick?
4. An old man asked you about an address and you misdirected him. Now you feel pity for him. Write about it in 200 words.
5. Find out different meanings of the word 'trick'

## Cold Wave

K.A. Abbas

KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS (1914-1987), a noted progressive bilingual (English, Urdu) writer, journalist, filmmaker and critic, is known for his radical views on life in his short stories and novels. He wrote the scripts of some of the widely acclaimed films such as *Awara*, *Shree 420*, *Mera Nam Joker* and *Munna* the first songless film in India. His works depict the Indian political scene during the nineteen twenties and thirties. Nationalism, leftism, denunciation of fascism, untouchability and Gandhian values are major concerns in his works. A committed journalist, Abbas remained the editor of the popular weekly, the *Blitz* for 30 years. His collections of Short stories include *Rice and other stories* (1947), *Cages of Freedom and other Stories* (1947), *One Thousand Nights on a Bed of Stones and other Stories* (1957) and the *Black Sun and Other Stories* (1963). His important novels are *Tomorrow is Ours: A Novel of the India of Today* (1943) and *Inquilab : A Novel of the Indian Revolution* (1955). In addition to *Barrister At- Law: a Play About the Early life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1947), Abbas has written two autobiographies- *I Write as I feel* (1948), and *I Am not an Island* (1976):



## Cold Wave

1 In the dense fog, thought Baldeo, the lights of Connaught Place are like yellow leprous sores on the dark face of night. Then he became aware of a tremulous litany that was barely audible above the silky swish of the cold night breeze.

2 An old beggar, huddled in a corner with his bundle of rags, was whining in the mendicant's familiar monotone. "This accursed cold is killing me, *baba*. Give a blanket to a helpless old man, *baba*. May Bhagwan bless you and your children, *baba*." And because he was blind he did not know that Connaught Place lay deserted in the cold and foggy night like a doomed, dead city. There was not a soul to be seen

moving about anywhere. The sightless old wretch had heard a rustling sound and hopefully concluded that it was a charitable pedestrian, but it was only an old newspaper crumpled into a ball and blown by the wind through the stone-fagged arcade.

Baldeo caught hold of it with a desperate fling of his arm, hoping that the sheet of paper might serve as a shield against the inexorable chill. He had read somewhere that in cold Northern countries the poor folk use old newspapers to wrap around their bodies under their flimsy shirts. Maybe that night he would do the same. But when he unrolled the ball of paper he found it was riddled with windows gaping through every column where someone had neatly cut out bits of news or advertisements. A sieve, he bitterly reflected, cannot serve as a shield! Then idly he turned over the paper in the pale glimmer of the fog-bound street lamp. It was only two days old, and one of the surviving headlines declared:

COLD WAVE TAKES HEAVY TOLL, WILL HIT DELHI TOMORROW.

"NEW DELHI, Friday: North India continues to be swept by a cold wave and reports of more deaths are pouring in from all over the region. In many places the temperature has plunged below freezing point. Within the next twenty-four hours Delhi will also be in the grip of a severe cold wave which is travelling down from the snow-bound heights of Simla. Apart from the hundreds who have been frozen to death, many cases of pneumonia due to exposure have been reported..."

Baldeo did not need to read any further. He could write an even more exhaustive and poetic report on the current cold wave. The fog was like an icy shroud thrown over the capital. Every morning one could see thin layers of frost over the ponds and the tanks. With minimum temperature touching freezing point, people were sleeping under as many as three blankets and a heavy cotton-padded quilt. But the deadliest of all, mused Baldeo, is the breeze blowing down from Simla side. He never knew that it could be cold like ice, sharp like a razor blade, and vacuously, devilishly, omniscient and omnipresent. For the homeless there was no escape from it. Wherever you tried to hide, it searched you out in every corner behind every wall, across every threshold. It found you then, like a probing icy lancet it went through your shirt, through your very skin and slashed at your very bones.

I should write some verses about the cold wave, thought Baldeo. May be a *ghazal* in one of the shorter metres of Ghalib. If he died of exposure (and there was now every chance that he would) at least his poetry would live after him. But it seemed that in such a cold wave not only blood in one's veins gets congealed, but the very source of inspiration, the grey matter in the brain, is frozen into a block of unfeeling ice.

If the temperature keeps falling during the night (he thought) and this breeze straight from an icy hell does not slacken, then soon all my senses, my memory and my mind,

would be stricken by a cold paralysis. I must do something. I must speak something. At least keep on muttering like that poor old man, huddled in the corner.

- 9 But, no, I am a poet, an educated, cultured, sensitive young man, not a blind old beggar that I should be whining in a voice like the moaning of a street cur stricken with asthma. But, may be, my voice too is like the moaning of the asthmatic cur. May be, if I speak, my words too would come out whining and trembling with cold. I *must* say something, just to make sure the cold has not atrophied my vocal chords.

- 10 So he said, "Old father, whom are you asking for alms? There is not a soul here for miles—except me." Now he felt that his teeth were chattering and his voice, too, was like a moan. And he who was blind did not see, he could not see, that the one who spoke to him out of the eternal dark night, was an obviously well-to-do young man in silk shirt and woollen trousers. The beggar sensed the proximity of a rival claimant for whatever alms might be had that night. What chance had he, with his sightless eyes, against this one who obviously could see and therefore more successfully pursue the would-be alms-giver? So he picked up his bamboo staff and his bundles of rags and, groping his way with the end of his stick, he went clattering down the crescent-shaped arcade till the night swallowed him up.

- 11 Suddenly Baldeo was struck by the sense of loneliness which was no less vicious than the bite of the freezing wind. Loneliness, too, he thought, is a kind of chill. Or, maybe, cold is itself a kind of loneliness. When you are alone, without friend or beloved, no one to talk to, to share your thoughts and feelings, when there is no rush and bustle of the crowded market-place, then that solitude, too, has in it the freezing touch of doom. Some people believed that apart from the flaming hell where the sinners would be burnt, there would be another kind of hell too, where the sinners would be laid naked on blocks of ice. And even worse was the third kind of hell where every sinner would have to live in solitary confinement. And to Baldeo at that moment it appeared that his own private hell combined both the tortures of cold and of loneliness. His body already shivering with cold was shot through with the sudden realization that he was alone in a cold, unfriendly, unfeeling world.

- 12 I must do something, he thought, or this cold - and this solitude - will drive me crazy. I must speak something but there is no one to speak to. I must at least think something. Otherwise my idle brain will freeze and then crack, just as the thin layer of frost frozen on the surface of a pond breaks at the slightest touch of the morning breeze. In a little while I may lose my senses and even forget who I am, where I am, and why I am what I am.

- 13 Who am I? What am I? I am Baldeo Raj Sharma. I don't believe in castes and creeds, but since birth I am stamped a Brahmin. I am a graduate (Literature and

Political Science) from Meerut College. My father earns four or five thousand rupees a month from legal practice. Before Independence he was known as Raj Bahadur Ranbir Raj Sharma. B.A., L.L.B, Advocate, High Court. Now he is only called Pandit Ranbir Raj Sharma. But I am not just the son of my father. I am also something and someone in my own rights. I am five feet ten inches tall and I have an athletic figure. People say I am quite handsome. My friends even believe that I have a better personality than some of the Bombay film stars. My professors have more than once testified to my intelligence and my literary flair. True that I got only second class in B.A. but that was because I spent so much time in extra-curricular activities, debates, tennis tournaments, amateur dramatics, and *mushaira*. I am regarded as a promising young poet with the pseudonym of Nirmal. In *mushairas* they call me Janab Nirmal Meeruti, in *kavi sammelans* I am known as Pandit Nirmalji. They say that my Urdu ghazals and Hindi *geet* are marked by an intimate and urgent sense of passion which is not to be found in any other young poet.

- 14 Where am I? And why am I where I am? Why am I not in my father's bungalow where even at this moment the fire-place in my bed-room must be lighted, waiting for me? In the double-spring bed there must be a pile of soft blankets and silken *lihaaf* padded with three seers of the finest cotton-wool. Under the pillow must be lying my silken sleeping suit and my embroidered *pashmina* dressing gown which I had bought in Srinagar last year. In the book-shelves, also waiting for me, must be all those fine editions of the world's great poets – Milton and Byron, Kalidasa and Ghalib. And hidden behind these books – that half-empty bottle of brandy.
- 15 I am not in my cosy bedroom. I am not even in the draughty boudoir of Radha where at this very moment there must be singing and dancing – and drinking! All the gay young gallants of Meerut must be there – all expect me! And Radha, perhaps, must be singing one of my own *ghazals* or *thumrees*!
- 16 Radha! Radha whom I loved with such devastating intensity that I left my house for her sake. My father threatened to disown me but I did not care. I left the house, just as I was sitting there in a garden chair on the lawn, I did not stop even to put on a sweater or a jacket. My mother cried aloud to stop me but I did not pay any attention to her. I hardly heard her pleading and her wailing, in my ears resounded only the magical jangle of Radha's anklet-bells. I had decided to prove that a poet not only talks about love – he also experiences it and can sacrifice anything in the world for it. Romeo and Juliet, Laila and Majnun, Charudatta and Vasantsena. These are only legendary lovers, figments of forgotten fables. But Nirmal and Radha, Radha and Nirmal – we would become a living legend of love in our own times!



- 17 And so I had walked out of my father's house and, just as I was, only in my shirt and trousers, walked through the bazaars to Radha's first-floor flat with its professional balcony overlooking the street. At that moment I was not at all conscious of the cold weather. The afternoon sun was pleasant and warm, in my veins was the hot blood of youth, and my heart was aflame with the fever of love. I was sure (because she had often assured me) that Radha too was consumed by the same fire of love, and that she would do anything for me.
- 18 Seated in front of her dressing-table, with a glowing brazier by her side, she was drying her long silken hair after a bath. The fire in the brazier had cast as warm pink glow on her wheat-brown face and to me it looked like a face illuminated by the inner fire of love. I thought that any one who was lucky to have her love could never complain of cold weather or of the chills of a hostile world.
- 19 "Come, come, Nirmalji," she greeted me with a professional smile, but as she looked up at me I saw the unmistakable glow of love in those big black eyes of hers.
- 20 "Radha," I blurted out without any introduction, "I have left my house for ever..."
- 21 "Left your house?" she asked incredulously, "But why?"
- 22 "Because of you. Father has threatened to disown me because I said I would marry no one but you. Come, we will go to Delhi this very minute and get married there..."
- 23 "And if you are disowned by your father, how shall we manage to live?"
- 24 "I will get some job. If you like you can sing for the radio."
- 25 "Oh, what a simpleton you are, Nirmalji. Don't you know, no professional singing-girl is allowed to sing for the Government's sacrosanct radio? Go, my dear, ask for your father's pardon. Why do you kick the goddess of wealth that resides in your house?"
- 26 "Because I love you more than all the riches of the world, Radha!" I grew lyrical, eloquent, in the expression of my passion. "I will work as a teacher, as a clerk - I will do anything - but I will not go back to the house where I cannot keep you as my wife."
- 27 "Then do what you like, Babuji." There was cold-sting in that formal "Babuji" - as if suddenly I had become a total stranger to her. In a voice that was colder than ice and sharper than the sharpest sword-blade, she said, "I have no desire to be the heroine of this Laila-Majnun drama." Finally she dismissed me without even a pretence of politeness. "Go, Babuji, I have to get dressed. Soon it will be the hour of my business."
- 28 As I came down the narrow stairs, the evening shadows had settled over the bazaar. A cool breeze was rustling through the tree-tops in the park. I felt a sudden shiver passing through my body. Now I remembered that I was wearing nothing over my silken shirt.

- 29 All this happened yesterday. Hardly thirty hours have passed since then. From Meerut to Delhi, I have travelled only twenty-five miles. But in these thirty hours and twenty-five miles the world has changed for me. Yesterday I was a careless rich young man, heir to property worth a million, I was a well-known and even popular figure in my town. Fathers used to cite my shining example to their sons. Every mother was not only willing but eager to marry off her daughter to me. Several college girls made no secret of their romantic interest in me. And today I am jobless, homeless, vagrant on the streets, seeking shelter from the freezing cold wave behind a column in one of the curving arcades of Connaught Place. The stones under me are cold, I can't stop my teeth from chattering, and I have a fearful feeling that my mind is undergoing a slow process of paralysis.
- 30 Am I proud or am I obstinate? Am I suffering for an ideal or for a foolish, boyish whim? If I had gone back and fallen at my father's feet, surely he would have forgiven me. Now I would be costily wrapped up in my dressing gown, seated near the fire-place, sipping brandy. But more than the heat of the fire-place I am in search of the warmth of love. More than my body, it is at least inadequately covered with an under-vest and shirt, but in the last thirty hours my soul has been stripped of all the illusions which were its only protective coverings. Now it is stark naked in the 'cold wave' that no meteorologist can ever predict or describe.
- 31 I did not want to remain in Meerut and cause a public scandal about my leaving my home and so I took the train to Delhi. I spent the night in the crowded Third Class waiting-hall which looked - and stank - like a battle-field strewn with corpses. The stench from the latrine swept in with the draught every time someone went in or came out. And yet after an hour of shivering in the train, the waiting-hall was a haven of refuge. Lying on a torn newspaper (which I had picked up from the dustbin) spread on the hard tiled floor, it was not easy to sleep. But, I consoled myself, at least I am safe from the biting cold. Suddenly it occurred to me that in such a big waiting-hall there was not even a fire-place or heater. The pleasant warmth which I was now experiencing emanated from the mass of the people sprawled there on the floor. I sombrely reflected that if I had been alone in that vast, draughty hall I would have perished or exposure in the night and only my frozen corpse would have been discovered in the morning. Those two or three hundred people - rough-hewn peasants from the villages, shrivelled-up clerks, hawkers, railway workers, beggars and mendicants - who lay there huddled against each other in all the contortions of their sleeping postures, had saved my life. But then I too had contributed to each of them the warmth of my own body. Weren't we all involved in each other's survival? For a long time I lay awake pondering over the significance of that phenomenon, wondering what great truth lay

hidden there in that mass of snoring humanity. Then a distant gong sounded the hour of five, a railway engine shunted along rattling the whole station building, and a railway *babu* shouted aloud: "Eh, you get, up, all of you, and clear out of the waiting hall. It's not your darling auntie's mansion!" And as a group of sweepers appeared with brooms and pails and mops, the sleepers awoke and scrambled to get together their scattered belongings. I came out in the open where it was still dark and cold, and the rows of street lamps were being switched off, one by one.

32 I went to call on several of my friends. Ram Dayal, who was my class-fellow and whose father has a big cloth shop in Chandni Chowk, was very happy to see me and immediately suggested that we go to see a new film that was opening that day. But when I told him that I had left home and was looking for a job, all the warmth seemed to be drained out of his voice. "All right", he said quickly, as if anxious to dismiss me before I could ask him for a loan, "See me the day after tomorrow. Today I'm rather busy. My father doesn't let me out of the shop for a second."

33 When I came out of his house and walked through Chandni Chowk, I saw that the sky was overcast with grey clouds and bare, autumn-stricken trees were trembling in the cold breeze blowing through the municipal park.

34 Then I went to Amjad whose father has a shoe factory. They were about to sit down to breakfast and insisted on my joining them. I did full justice to the *parathas* dripping with *ghee*, spicy *kababs*, dried fruit, carrot *halwa*, and had three cups of steaming tea. But when I explained to Amjad the circumstances in which I had left home, and asked him to lend me a hundred rupees he replied in a tone that was soft like ice cream and just as cold. "So sorry, Baldeo, I'm rather hard up right now. Abba is very strict with cash, you know. But if you want two rupees..."

35 I got up and as I walked out through their garden I saw that all the roses had wilted and withered in the cold winter night.

36 From old Delhi I walked to New Delhi to Gurbachan Singh's bungalow. His father is Deputy Secretary in one of the Ministries. He was not in the same college with me but I had met him during a tennis tournament and together we had won in the Men's Doubles. Since then we were very good friend, calling each other "Partner." But he was not at home. His father told me that Gurbachan had gone to the club to play a game of tennis. So I trudged along to the club and found him in the card room playing rummy. "Hellow, partner," he shouted as he saw me, "what will you have to drink?"

37 I declined the drink and called him out. When I told him the situation he said, "Sorry, old boy, but you know how hard it is to land a good job these days. I will



seriously advise you to go back him. If you need the fare to Meerut I can lend it to you."

38 "No, thanks, Gurbachan," I said and walked out. He went back to the Card Room.

39 As I came out of the club gate, it began to drizzle. The ice cold drops of rain stung me through the shirt.

40 A cab-driver hailed me. "Taxi, Babu Sahib?"

41 "Yes," I answered, trying to sound casual and nonchalant.

42 "Where to?"

43 "Meerut."

44 So far! It will cost you fifty rupees."

45 "That's nothing. But it's Saturday and the banks close early today."

46 As I moved away I heard the taxi-driver telling someone behind my back. "I knew people go crazy in summer, but this is the first one I have seen losing his head in a cold wave."

47 Then I went to the Employment Exchange, I went to several offices, I tried for a job even in some shops. But there was no job for a young, healthy graduate. As the day dissolved in the shadows of the evening and the temperature fell steeply, one by one all the illusions were peeled off my soul. Now it is past midnight, Connaught Place is desolate as the icy wind from Simla softly swishes through the arcades. They say in the papers the cold wave is imminent. I can feel it in my bones that it has arrived already. They say there will be an epidemic of influenza and cases of pneumonia. I feel a choking pain rising in my chest. I and my soul stand alone, naked, shivering in the desolation of the cold night. Is there such a thing as pneumonia of the soul? I wonder

...

48 "Babu!"

49 A rough-edged but thin voice broke upon the solitude of Baldeo's thoughts. He tired round and saw the outline of a woman, presumably a beggar, shivering in her rags, huddles behind the next column of the arcade.

50 "Babu, have you got the *machis*?"

51 Baldeo felt the useless match-box in his pocket – the packet of cigarettes had long since been exhausted – and threw it to the woman behind the fat round pillar.

52 The match was struck, a little flame leapt up in the murky darkness and the beggar woman's face flowed in the flickering circle of light. Pitch-black complexion. Layers of dust and dirt on the unwashed face. Unkempt matted hair. Baldeo shivered at the impact of her ugliness, and thought of escaping from her neighbourhood by seeking shelter in some other arcade.

- 53 The pin-point of fire at the glowing end of the *bidi* seemed to have imparted the warmth of life to the beggar woman. Baldeo saw that she was no longer shivering. Blowing out a thin streak of smoke she said. "Father O father, how cold it is! Will you smoke a *bidi*, Babu?"
- 54 Baldeo wanted to refuse - he had no desire to strike up any kind of intimacy with the filthy woman in rags - but divining his hesitation she added quickly. "It's only a matter of exchange, Babu. Your machis, my *bidi*, take it." She threw the packet of *bidis* at him and slid across the verandah floor to his side. "Here, light up your *bidi*." A black, calloused hand brought the little flame to his lips. As the match lighted up their faces she was aghast to see the smooth-faced, silk-shirted "Babu". How could such a person have strayed out into her cold and ugly world? He, too, now had a closer look at her face. Beneath the layers of dirt the black face seemed to glow with a hidden fire like red-hot embers under a pile of ashes. The small and beady black eyes, too, had in them a flaming invitation. There was the yeast of youth in her bosom and from her body rose a pungent odour which was compounded of dirt and sweat and poverty and youth and passion.
- 55 They looked at each other for one brief, flickering moment till the match burnt out to the end singing the woman's finger. She dropped the match, and suddenly both of them were plunged in a pool of darkness. Baldeo felt the caress of a hot, quick breath on his face. The next moment the match was struck again and Baldeo lighted his *bidi*.
- 56 Now they squatted in the verandah, reclining against their respective columns. Their *bidis* were like two tiny stars in a dark, dark sky, beckoningly glowing at each other across the black vastness of the night.
- 57 As he puffed at his *bidi* Baldeo felt that his hand was trembling. He touched his forehead. It was burning with fever. He inhaled a long deep puff of smoke and a steak of pain went slashing against his inside. Pneumonia? He shivered with the cold premonition of death.
- 58 "Babu!"
- 59 "Hoon?"
- 60 "Feel very cold - yes?"
- 61 "No -" but in that very instant, a sudden gust of wind sought him out and, piercing through his shirt, stabbed him in the heart with a dagger of ice.
- 62 "Babu, you are shivering with cold. Have you fever?"
- 63 "No, it is nothing." But as he said it, he could not stop his teeth from chattering.
- 64 "Babu, this cold is deadly. You may catch *namooniya*."



- 65 "Let it be!" he said hoarsely, for now the noose of ice was choking and strangling him. His will, his consciousness, his very life was slowly, inexorably, helplessly, drifting towards an inevitable doom. With difficulty he gasped out, "It's all over now."
- 66 "No Babu, no." In her voice was a cry of anguish, a plea for life, a challenge and an invitation, "Come here, Babu. Come to me."
- 67 He forced his eyes open, saw the woman in torn sari who was muffled in some rags.
- 68 "But you have no blanket, either?"
- 69 "There is no blanket, Babu. But there is me?"
- 70 The fever burnt in his brain. His breath was being choked out of him. He was no longer able to understand the subtlety of passion. But as a fierce cold blast crept his spine, there was a tumultuous roar in his brain. Voices rang out across the horizon of his hallucination. Cold Wave! Cold Wave!! Cold Wave!!!
- 71 Beware, beware! The Cold Wave is coming. In its wake will come Influenza, Pneumonia, Death!
- 72 Cold Wave! Cold Wave!! Cold Wave!!! ... it was like the warning of doom, but soon it was drowned in a symphony of snoring in all the nasal notes of a million human beings huddled together in a vast, world-sized Third Class Waiting Hall. In this new symphony there was warmth, not freezing cold, there was the breach of life, not choking death. Baldeo felt himself sinking, sinking, into a soft and warm and fragrant depths of a body saturated with the life-giving warmth of love. Now he was no longer afraid of the coldest Cold Wave!

### Let's Think and Do

1. Comment on the title of the story.
2. Write a paragraph in about 100 words on the impact of growing commercialism / materialism on human relation.
3. 'A friend in need is a friend indeed. Comment on Baldeo's friends in the light of this statement.
4. 'I went to several offices, I tried for a job even in shops. But there was no job for a young healthy graduate.' Write a short essay on the job opportunity in your state/ country
5. Baldeo, a young poet, leaves his palatial home, in favour of Radha's love; but Radha refuses to accompany him, saying, 'I have no desire to be the heroine of this Laila Majnun....' Comment on the love relationship between Baldeo and Radha.
6. Write a newspaper report on the onset of cold wave in your city locality.

## THE MARTYRS' MEMORIAL

### Amarendra Kumar

*Amarendra Kumar (b. 1937), a poet and short story writer, was born in a north Bihar village. He did his M.A. in 1959 from Patna University. He was professor of English at R.N. College, Hajipur in the Bihar Univeristy Serivce from 1985 to 1997, and at Dhamar University in the Republic of Yemen from 1997 to 2002. In addition to publication in a number of journals and anthologies, he has four published books of poems, **The Real Episode** (1981), **Sound and Shell** (1986), **Stage Dilemma** (1988) and **Song/Anti-Song** (1996) and a collection of short stories **Passionate Pilgrim** (2006) in addition to his collection of short stories in Hindi **KachchaBela** (1993).*



## THE MARTYRS' MEMORIAL

The legendary martyrs of Patna  
who sought to break through  
the Empire's armoured, bayonet-pronged  
barricade  
for flag-hoisting at the Secretariat  
on the historic day of August Eleven  
Nineteen Fortytwo  
Felt the tower top grow moist  
By the mind's eye ...

5

Receptive clay's yearning  
to bear the native flagplant,  
to exorcise the choking pernicious  
alien spell.

10

The blazing victory-marchers  
of the trampled land  
heard only their blood-thunderous charge,  
intrepid unswerving flagmen's  
marching music.

15

The wide open agitated scene witnessed  
fed the tidal swell of the iron will  
and the fiery slogans ...

20

Down! Down! Down!  
On to the top!  
Our own ... Own!



Each breaker of the bond of slavery  
renounced earthly care,  
the warm tender ties of household love,  
the tangled knotty mesh of  
trivial concerns ...

25

Each in his paradise  
of the taste of freedom  
by the taste of his own blood,

30

## Preface to Bombay – London – New York Amitava Kumar

Amitava Kumar (b 1963), born in Ara, Bhojpur, grew up in Patna and later went to Delhi. His degrees are from the universities of Delhi, Syracuse, and Minnesota. He is professor of English at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. His latest book is *Husband of a Fanatic* (2004). The present piece is an extract from *Bombay – London – New York* which is an account of a literary journey. It describes the author's discovery of cities and people in the light of the vocations of reading and writing.



## Preface to Bombay – London – New York

- 1 ... In my hometown, Patna, there is a general consensus that culture, like the surrounding economy, lies in ruins. And yet visit to the Khudabaksh Library reveals another world, distant from the cramped, dusty streets outside filled with rickshaws and cars with loud, blasting horns. A librarian, his right hand shaky, pulls out a book on medicine that was written two thousand years ago. The book is entitled *Kitab-ul-Hashaish*. The edition the librarian holds in his hands is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. The book was translated from Greek into Arabic by the order of Haroun-ul-Rashid; it carries beautiful illustrations painted with herbal and mineral colours that still appear clean and bright. The librarian is old; his spectacles sit crookedly over his bulging eyes. He wants to show you ancient paintings of war scenes where, he says, 'no two faces are alike'. He keeps using the phrase 'hidden treasures'. There are 22,000 handwritten books in this library; about five thousand to seven thousand of them are rare manuscripts.
- 2 A well-known historian Surendra Gopal, accompanies me in my visit to this library. Gopal tells me that the library was gifted to the government in 1891 and is today 'the richest manuscript library on Islam in the world'. When I hear this, I am only conscious of the wretchedness on the streets outside. A stone's throw away is the Patna Medical College and Hospital, where I had been treated and operated upon when I was a boy.
- 3 My mother, too, was a patient there. Later, my sister worked in its wards as a doctor. Medical procedures in the hospital were sometimes performed in the light of

lanterns and torches: when it was raining, flying ants would crowd in and settle down on the open wounds during operations. Even during the day, stray dogs pulled away at bandages on patients. Patna is a place where rats carried away my mother's dentures.

- 4 The librarian at the Khudabkash has taken out from his safe another book. He tells me that it is a priceless book of poems by the Persian poet Hafiz. The book was presented to the Mughal ruler Humayun by the emperor of Iran. The Mughal rulers used the book to read omens, or '*shakun*': they would turn to a page and try to foretell the future from the words on the page that was open before them. Akbar was emperor when his son Jahangir, banished to Allahabad for his philandering, sought the help of the book to divine his future. The lines that the young prince came across were '*Gham-e-garibi wa mehnat chun barnamitabun/bashar-e-khud rawam washaher yaar khud bashan*' (If it is intolerable for you to live in the foreign land, then you should return home. You will be emperor). In the margins of the book, Jahangir had written that he was in Allahabad and had been perplexed; he returned home to Fatehpur-Sikri on reading the augury and a few days later, following Akbar's death, was crowned emperor.

- 5 The librarian's dark finger hovers the lines that the emperor had inscribed. The page is filigreed in gold, the bare portions stained with age. I want to touch the page myself. I ask the librarian's permission, and when he says yes, I gently place my index finger where the emperor has signed his name.

- 6 The librarian and the historian talk for a long time. I do not want to leave the library. It is hot outside. The temperature has exceeded 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The librarian, who knows Urdu, Arabic, and Persian, is reciting poetry. The words were written by the last Mughal governor of Bihar. The historian, Gopal, mentions his name. I ask the librarian to repeat the lines. The poet was addressing the deer in the forest, saying to them what they know, that Majnun, the lover, has died. But what the poet wants to know from the deer is what has passed over the wilderness, how the forest has suffered. The librarian is a man of courtesy, what is called *tahzeeb* in Urdu. When I am leaving his office, he gestures towards Gopal and says, 'He is a museum of knowledge. There are very few people left like this in Patna.' Patna is the wilderness; people like the librarian recall Majnun, who has departed.

- 7 Gopal has been affected by the conversation about Patna and the loss of cultural institutions. He says that there is a complete absence now of those kinds of conversations that he felt were essential to civilized life. He is nostalgic about his youth in a young India. We pass Patna's Gandhi Maidan, only a mile or so from the Khudabaksh Library; this is the place where the most important political gatherings have taken place in Patna's history. Gopal repeats the two lines of poetry that he had heard the poet Sahir Ludhianvi recite at a socialist meeting there in the 1950s: '*Har cheez yahan bikti hai, har cheez ko bikta dekha hai*' (Everything here is for sale, I have seen everything being sold here). The historian is burdened by his memories. He talks about the lack of funds, the theft of public money, the closing of colleges and libraries.



8 I think of the librarian with his unsteady hand, lovingly laying out the volume that was brought to India by Humayun badshah. The acquisition of these books was also a part of a process of trade and conquest. It was tied to commerce and indeed, to the sale of both precious and ordinary goods. But this was not all. There are other truths too, like the words written by a reader in the margins of text, about hopes, and fears, and the unknown. There are auguries of the future and melancholia about the past. Libraries are haunted by the marketplace – but, it can be hoped, the opposite is true as well. At the same time, there is the enormous tussle of memory and desire that cannot all be neatly or fully regulated by the market or, for that matter, the rulers of nations and corporations. Writers bear witness to this uneven battle too; it is part of the reality of the writer's work, of struggling everyday with the worldliness of the word. Writers are caught in the contradictory tasks of building imaginary worlds that are removed from the everyday life and, at the same time, establishing how the imagination is not detached from the quotidian world and very much a vital part of it. To realise the truth of this condition is to know that books not only offer refuge from the world, they also return you to it. When I had understood this truth, I had stopped worshipping paper and become a reader.



Khudabakhsh Library

9 This book is a record of my reading practice. It bears witness to my struggle to become a writer. I view the pages that follow only as marginal entries in a book written by others. In places, I have put my finger on the place where a writer has signed his or her name. This book tells the story of the many times that I have opened the thick book of Indian writing in order to divine signs for the journey I was about to undertake. The name I have given this literary journey is *Bombay - London - New York*.

### Let's Think and Do

1. Write a short essay on Khudabakhsh Oriental Public Library as the repository / treasure house of manuscripts/ rare books.
2. Write a short essay on the steps to improve the health of the PMCH.
3. The author presents a contrastive picture of life prevailing inside and outside the Khudabakhsh Oriental Public library. Describe your own experience in a library on a similar pattern.
4. Prepare a project report on the following:
  - a) The reputed libraries in your locality
  - b) The preservation of the manuscripts



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