

## Shambhu

The smooth drive was now being marred by hiccups, as the concretised road had given way to a rugged, uneven path. Majeed's Toyota had slowed down on the bumpy road, full of craters. It had been three hours now, since Majeed was driving. All the limbs in his body were aching and sore, and the constant bumps were causing his stomach to curdle and churn. He began to yearn for tea. He had started from the city immediately after lunch and a steaming cup of tea would have certainly reduced his fatigue. He looked out on both sides from the windows, but could see only small barren hillocks, beyond the clouds of dust that his car was spinning. He could not spot any sign of human inhabitation.

About fifteen minutes later, a few huts—sparsely located, came to sight. Majeed felt hopeful and began to look out more eagerly on both sides. A few metres ahead, he saw a shanty tea-stall. He stopped just outside and taking his head out from the window, ordered a cup of tea. Dust was blowing fiercely on the rugged terrain and he did not wish to come out, even for tea. He made a couple of inquiries and found that the place was called *Bhishampur*. He was around 80 kms from his destination-- a village called *Hindala*, where the very famous paintings were etched on the walls of caves that were thousands of years old. Majeed, though a busy business man, had a sustained passion for art and antiques and that had driven him to embark on this journey.

Sipping his tea, he realised that his Toyota had not generated any interest in the adjoining hutments. *They were probably used to seeing a lot of tourists and their cars passing by*, he quipped to himself. He paid for the tea, and was about to press his foot on the

accelerator, when he saw that a bundle was abruptly thrown out of the open door of a bus that had stopped a little ahead of his car. And then almost instantaneously, a man was pushed outside, through the same door. The bus staggered ahead, even as the old man sat panting on the road, clutching his bundle. *He is probably a poor farmer or a labourer*, thought Majeed and came out of the car. As he was helping the old man get up, the latter began to describe that how the conductor had behaved unjustly and was asking him to buy a separate ticket for his bundle and when he had refused, he was thrown out not-too-kindly.

‘What is your name *Baba*? Where do you wish to go?’ asked Majeed.

‘I have to go to Hindala. I was a teacher in the Primary School there, though retired since many years now. Everyone calls me Master Shyam Lal’, replied the old man.

Finding a teacher in this pitiable condition, Majeed was visibly embarrassed. He did not know what words of comfort he ought to offer.

‘Why don’t you come with me? I am also going there’, and saying so, Majeed opened the trunk of the car and kept Masterji’s bundle inside.

*Master ji* sat with Majeed and they drove off. Majeed’s mind was crowded with several uneasy questions: *Why were teachers not respected in our society? Did retired teachers not earn that well so as to wear decent clothes? What is the future of a society in which a teacher can be mistaken for a daily-wage earner?*

‘Why did the bus conductor ask you for a double fare, *Master ji*?’ he could not help himself asking.

‘That was the last bus to Hindala, for bus drivers refuse to ply after sunset due to the fear of dacoits in the area. Hence, these conductors do not hesitate in asking for twice as much the regular fare... Who will dare to stop them?’ said *Master ji* in a resigned tone.

‘What is this threat from the dacoits?’ blurted out Majeed. There was a trace of fear in his voice now.

‘Oh, haven’t you heard about the miles-long stretch of forest area, 30-35 kms from here, which is infested with dacoits? They are known for their fierce attacks, and they strike quite regularly too. No bus or any other vehicle dares to ply through this route after sunset.’

*Master ji* went on: ‘Even the police dreads to do anything about them...’

Majeed was non-plussed. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead and his hands were trembling, while clutching the steering wheel. *If I knew, I would not have dared to venture alone at this hour. I can go back even now... but what will this senior teacher think. I cannot be a coward in his eyes. And I cannot possibly leave him all alone now. Oh God, help me!!!*, he muttered to himself.

They had covered almost 30 kms, and the thick forest cover had begun to envelop on both the sides. Suddenly, Majeed saw a heavy log obstructing the road and applied the brake forcefully. The car stopped with a sudden forward jerk and before he could recover, 8-10 armed dacoits swooped on both sides of the car and menacingly screamed at them, instructing them to come out at once.

Majeed and *Master ji* were quivering with fear as they stepped out, to face the rifles pointed at them from all sides.

‘Where... where are you taking us?’ stuttered *Master Shyam Lal*.

The most dreadful of them all had a face which resembled a gorilla. He replied: 'Oh, you are quite the lucky ones. Today, we shall not rob you... In fact, we shall reach your belongings to wherever you tell us to do so.'

'Then why are you holding us cc..aa... ccaptive? Where are you taking us?' Majeed managed to implore.

The gorilla-faced gave a frightening and loud laugh...

'You shall be sacrificed today at the altar of our Goddess'.

A cold wave of fear gripped Majeed and he felt his chest tightening. Meanwhile, the gorilla-faced went on: 'Today is 30<sup>th</sup> November. Every year, on this day, at 8 pm our *Sardar* makes a sacrifice of two men and presents them to the Goddess. This year, you are the chosen ones. You should consider yourself lucky.'

Two others came forward and began to push forward Majeed and *Master ji* with the butt of their rifles... threatening them to walk fast and not cause delay. Four to five dacoits led them into the thick dark forest, while others were nudging the captives from behind and growling at them to walk fast. The dacoits knew their way too well, despite the total darkness, but Majeed and *Master ji* were simply not able to lift their feet and had to be incessantly pushed by the dacoits.

Soon, they spotted a flicker of light as they reached a hut in the midst of the thick tree-cover. A young dacoit was pacing in the compound outside the hut, while an old *Saadhu* sat waiting nearby, surrounded by items and ingredients for a *puja*.

The two captives were pushed and hurled forward.

'Look, *Sardaar*... we have brought two humans for sacrifice... and that too well in time,' said the beaming gorilla-faced dacoit.

‘Well done, Laal Chand... you shall be blessed!’ replied the pleased *Sardaar*, holding his machine gun high. Exhorting the *Saadhu* to begin the *puja*, the *Sardaar* said: ‘*Saanjha ji*, you may start the rites.’

The dark night had cast its eerie spell all around. Both, Majeed and *Master ji* were pushed to the centre in the compound and ordered to be seated. The visibility was low. There was only one torch of flame that was lit in a corner outside the hut. The *Saadhu* began his recitations. The *Sardaar* had straightened his machine gun and pointed it at the hapless captives. This was an annual ritual for him in a bid to appease the Goddess, who, in turn, he believed protected him against all threats.

The recitations had reached their zenith, and the darkness, its peak.

‘Laal chand, why don’t you get a lantern from inside? Let me have a clear look at these two divinely chosen ones... After all, I have to offer them to our deity’, roared the *Sardaar*.

Laal chand hurried inside the hut and came out with a kerosene-lantern and handed it to his *Sardaar*. Taking a closer look at Majeed, who was white with fear and muttering his prayers, the *Sardaar* exclaimed: ‘*Wah*, Laal chand... well done!!! You have brought such a healthy young fellow for sacrifice. The Goddess shall surely be pleased.’ Saying so, he broke into a menacing laughter that sent another cold stream down Majeed’s spine. The *Sardaar* then took the lantern up at *Master ji*’s face. Taking a close look at the ashen-faced old man who had tightly closed his eyes, the *Sardaar* was a bit disappointed. ‘Well, this one is quite old Laal chand, but will do...’ And then, on a sudden impulse, the *Sardaar* turned around again and took the lantern closer to the face of *Master ji*. Suddenly, his hand began to shake violently.

'*Master ji*', the *Sardaar* muttered feebly. And then, he looked back at Laal chand and screamed: 'Rasssscaallll !!! Could you not get any one else? Do you have any idea whom have you brought here? You have caught our own *Master ji* and brought him here'.

By then, even *Master ji* had opened his eyes and was looking at the *Sardaar* in astonishment. He was trying to recollect if he had seen this *Sardaar* before.

'*Master ji*, I am Shambhu... your student, but just for a day. Do you remember I was admitted in your primary school in the fifth grade? On the very first day, you had asked me several questions in the class and when I had failed to answer even one of them, you had beaten me severely with your cane. Frightened of the thrashing which lay in store, I never came to school from the next day onwards.'

The *Sardaar* continued with an emotion-laden voice: '*Master ji*, you had thrashed me for my own good but little did I realise that then... And even if I was your disciple for a day, you are still my *Guru*', and saying so, he began to untie the rope which had bound *Master ji's* wrists.

'No, *Sardaar*, you cannot leave him now. You will have to make the two sacrifices, or else the Goddess will be angry. The recitation of the verses has reached the final stage and now the sacrifices cannot be delayed further', spoke up the *Saadhu*.

'No, I cannot kill my own *Guru*... it is not possible', replied the *Sardaar* emphatically. He then began to untie Majeed's hands too.

The *Saadhu* feverishly protested: 'You cannot now back out. The implications will be too horrifying. You are defiling the *puja*. Any calamity could befall all of you'.

Laal chand was now trembling, listening to the harsh reprimand of the *Saadhu*. 'Yes, *Sardaar*, you cannot break away from this age-old tradition and defile the rituals. You must sacrifice these two men.'

The other dacoits in the gang had now begun inching closer together towards the spot where the sacrifice was to take place and the two captives were still sitting awaiting in horror, their fate. All the dacoits had now begun to nod their heads in approval to what Laal chand had just said. A number of voices now rang out in unison: '*Sardaar*, you must present these two men to the Goddess. Now, we cannot back out. We could all be destroyed...'

'Ok... quiet all of you!!! The rites shall be completed', roared the *Sardaar* and suddenly, pressed the trigger of the machine gun. Two shots rang out in the air. Majeed and *Master ji* shrieked in horror. And then, everybody saw two dead bodies writhing in pain on the ground for a few seconds and then lying completely still. The two dead bodies were those of Laal chand and the old *Saadhu*.

'Look, I have kept my word and two men have been sacrificed', declared the *Sardaar*, eyeing all his fellow-dacoits with a triumphant smile.

Cries of victory rang in the air. 'Long live the *Sardaar*... *Jai ho Sardaar*...'

Majeed and *Master ji* were set free. They were slowly walking back, after witnessing an unbelievable ordeal. The nightmare was over. They were both lost deep in their own thoughts. *Master Shyam Lal* was reminiscing over his 35-year long career, during which he had used his cane on hundreds of students. He was trying to remember: *I do not recollect Shambhu. If I had not perhaps, used my cane so severely on that boy... and that too on the very first day... Oh, what*

*have I done!!! He would not have then left the school... and perhaps not become a dacoit...*

*Master Shyam Lal felt that his heart was sinking under the load of guilt. He felt ashamed. All the heinous acts that Shambhu has committed till date... I am responsible for all of those... All the murders; the plundering... Yes, I am responsible for all of that. Shambhu is not a murderer. I am the murderer. Shambhu is not a dacoit. I am the dacoit... Master Shyam Lal broke down... fell on his knees and sobbed uncontrollably like a child.*

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