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# SHEERAZA

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Jammu and Kashmir  
Academy of Art, Culture and Languages



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## EDITORIAL

The existence of theatre seems to have been confluent with the history of Kashmir. There are historical references indicating a robust culture of imitation and mimesis in ancient Kashmir in the shape of Band Peather. Though art in general terms has been in existence in all ancient cultures, theatre seems to have enjoyed an unusual popularity in ancient Kashmir. Be it the courtyards of Viharas or temples or the lawns of Sufi shrines, the theatre of Band Peather would be a regular spectacle on the arrival of the spring season, harvesting in autumn, celebrations like birth and marriage and even occasions like drought and flood, which were quite common in Kashmir. Such artistic performances reflected the feelings of the local populace and the spectacular histrionic skills of the performers.

Band Peather provided the much-needed amusement and led to the proverbial cathartic relief among the audiences. It was a fully developed but unrecognized art form. There were whole families and even villages fully dedicated to Band Peather and its allied arts.

This theatre form normally culminated with hands held high by the performers beseeching for mercy from the Divine for all, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex and religion. The humanising effect of such prayers on the performers as well as the audience needs to be emphasized.

Band Peather also functioned as a channel for addressing the grievances of the public to the powers that were. It will not be off the mark to call Band Peather the media of yore which helped the authorities notice the issues and problems facing the people like corruption, exploitation, inflation, etc., and then redressing them.

There are still some villages like Wathora and Akingam which can easily be categorized as cultural villages and can be developed as model cultural hubs, thereby helping this vintage art form of Kashmir to survive the onslaught of time and history and stay relevant for our future generations and to help the families that are still solely dedicated to Band Peather and its propagation.

The consoling part is that the art form has somehow managed to survive for thousands of years and the need is to help it keep pace with shifting sands of time.

With the arrival of modern theatre in Kashmir, Band Peather managed to stay relevant by incorporating various elements from modern theatre. It also strived to integrate elements from folk and modern theatre to keep this legacy alive.

Gauri Shanker Raina has been a well-recognized name in the field of theatre and dramaturgy. This issue of Sheeraza carries his reminiscences where he discusses his long association with theatre and playwriting. The paper is expected to enthuse other veterans in the genre to pen down their journey in art for posterity.

(Dr) Abid Ahmad  
Editor

## ARTICLES

### MY BOND WITH THEATRE

**Gauri Shankar Raina**

I was born in 1955 in the month of October. My birth was a celebration for my parents as I was born when they were nearing their middle age. While in hospital, during the night of 27<sup>th</sup> October, when my mother was about to give birth to me, she uttered the name of God and said, “Gauri Shankar!” So I was given this name on the day of my birth itself. My father was transferred to Jammu and given the position of a Fire Officer. My initial schooling started in Jammu and my date of birth in the registers got wrongly recorded as 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1954. After my father’s transfer back to Srinagar, I got admitted in National High School, Karan Nagar. My father retired at the age of 55 and I continued studying in the same school. I enjoyed participating in the extracurricular activities and watching films in the school auditorium. These films used to be screened by the Information Department. It was fascinating to watch the technicians install the 16mm projector and then change the reels on the single projector-screening machine. Satyen Bose’s ‘Jagrati’, Manoj Kumar’s ‘Shaheed’, Kishore Kumar’s ‘Door Gagan Ki Chhaon Mein’ and other such films captivated and mesmerized me. A play was also staged by our drawing teacher and his group on some special occasion. The plays always enthralled me.



After being promoted to the next class (to be exact 9<sup>th</sup> standard), I chose drawing as an optional subject, mainly with the objective of being in touch with my drawing teacher. He was really very kind and supportive. After realizing that I was interested in art, craft and drama, he encouraged me to read plays. Inspired by his exhortations, I read many drama scripts but could not understand much the technical aspects of play-writing and production. During the autumn months, a function was to be held in the school premises. A temporary stage was erected in the centre of the ground so that all the students, the teachers, the principal, the chief guest and the invitees could sit around the stage. The preparations were on. Music rehearsals had started in the auditorium. It was an afternoon and I was still in the art room. The drawing teacher came and asked me to prepare a 15-20 minute skit to be presented as part of the function presentations. I couldn't say no. "Choose the script, select your actors from the class and direct the play," he told me while keeping his programme schedule on his desk. "*Acheba hona chahiye!*" he insisted.

I chose a play from a Hindi text book. It was titled 'Angulimal', and was about a person who renounces violence after meeting Lord Buddha. The actors were chosen from my section, all of them being my friends. On the day of the function, after the speeches and musical presentations were over, my name was announced and I presented the 15-minute long play with my actors. It was liked by all. The chief guest and the principal admired my presentation. That was a red letter day in my life!

After a month, I was chosen to be a part of a play which was to be presented by the school at the Radio Station. The rehearsals started in the Art Room and I acted in this Kashmiri play. The play underlined the importance of education. It was broadcast on

the children's day. Next year, I passed the board examination. I was presented with a provisional and a character certificate by the school to enable me to apply for the PUC course, but along with these two certificates I was also offered a certificate for 'Excellence in Drama Activities'. I was the only student to receive such a certificate for drama accomplishments that year.

The college proved to be a different kind of involvement for me. In the college, one could spend time in the well-stocked library and pore over the literary classics most of which were bound in leather jackets to acquire knowledge. One could also walk down to the neighbouring Tagore Hall to watch Kashmiri plays—Prem Chand's 'Godaan', Mohan Rakesh's 'Aashad Ka Ek Din' and other seminal works translated into Kashmiri by Prof. R L Shant, besides all the Drama Festival plays stacked there. Fascinating!

This was the period when I started going to Radio Station to present talks in the youth programme produced by late Autar Krishen Rahbar. Besides, I joined the college Dramatic Club and was supposed to act in its productions. I was offered a minor role in 'Kanjoos' (Moliere's play in Hindi). The readings started in the open air theatre of our Amar Singh College. However, I could not be a part of the production as I broke my ankle in an accident and remained confined to home for almost a month. What a paradox it was that only after two years, I translated another play of Moliere for Radio Kashmir into Kashmiri! It was broadcast successfully. The chance to translate that play into Kashmiri was given to me by veteran writer and playwright Pran Kishore, the then in-charge of drama. I also passed the drama audition as a B-grade Artist. At college, Prof. Hari Krishna Kaul used to encourage me and it was he who inspired me to watch 'Waiting for Godot' at Tagore Hall. It was a different experience. The next day, I narrated the peculiarity of the play to my friend R.K.

Munshi while leaving my classroom. He was also excited and suggested that both of us should go to Hindi Sahitya Sammelan to revive Abhinav Bharati or form our own theatre group to produce plays. Abhinav Bharati was a registered theatre group associated with Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. It had produced Tagore's 'Dak Ghar' under the direction of Moti Lal Kemmu who was the founder of this dramatic club. We went to Kralkhud and started participating in the weekly literary meets of the literary organisation. We also requested them to revive the dramatic club. Kemmu Sahib supported us. Finally, the writers' organisation passed a resolution and we were allowed to revive the dramatic club. Our friends Reyaz Ruffaie, Hira Lal Kaul, Shadi Lal Kaul, Kaka Ji Safaya, Ashok Kalla and others joined us and we staged our first play 'Shiv Lagan' in Kashmiri. The presentation was not very good but the hall was jam-packed.

In the meantime, I joined the Theatre Repertory of J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages. Prof. Nemi Chandra Jain from the National School of Drama had come to monitor its functioning as it was a collaborative effort. Ten persons were selected for scholarships from the government. Most of the members of the repertory were interested in acting only whereas I had an interest in backstage planning, light-designing, sets and direction too. So I concentrated more on interpretive elements of a play. The final production was J. M. Synge's 'Riders to the Sea'—a conflict between religion, superstition and nature. I had designed the lighting and the sets of the play. The music was live and the play was presented in Tagore Hall before the prominent people of the state. Certificates were distributed amongst the participants and I was appreciated for my lighting design and the concept of the set. Then a Theatre Workshop was also started by Kemmu Sahib in which Hira Lal Razdan also participated. The

workshop was for a month and the final play of the workshop was the First Act of 'Nagar Vodas'. A play, 'Bhagwat Ajjukam', directed by Kavi Ratan Sharma, was also presented during the workshop and I was given the role of Parivrajak, the central protagonist in the play. After the workshop was over, I concentrated more on the productions of Abhinav Bharati.

The first play that I wrote for Abhinav Bharati was 'Das Hazar' in Hindustani. It was staged at Baghi Dilawar Khan and Vishwa Bharati, Srinagar in 1973. The theme was education of girls and the social evil of dowry in Kashmiri society. It was a sensitive play on a burning social theme. Ashok Kalla, Rajkumar Munshi, Hira Lal Razdan and other members of the group, including me, acted in the play.

The second play written by me was 'Harichandraz' based on the popular legend of King Harish Chandra who stood for truth in the most trying circumstances in his life. The music for this long, three-act play was steered by Kakaji Safaya and a song was sung live by Vijay Malla – *Vuchtav kyabchu taqdeer, razza banev faqeer*. In the play Sohan Lal Kaul acted as Harish Chandra and I essayed the role of Sage Vishwamitra. It was a great success. Staged at Tagore hall in 1974, the play was so popular that Abhinav Bharati had to arrange additional shows for its presentation. The play was later staged in Anantnag in the open air ambience.

The third play written by me was 'Phir-Thur'. It was staged on the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Function of Abhinav Bharati. The play presented a conflict between tradition and modernity. It posed the crucial question: Who is right – the modernist, the traditionalist or the neutralist? Some sections of the society did not like the play. I, Ashok Kalla and some other members of our group were even beaten up for being associated with it. However, Kemmuji liked

the play immensely. “Keep writing! Keep writing! Don’t stop,” was the response from him.

Next was ‘Gur-Buth’. It was the translation of Girish Karnad’s Kannada play ‘Hayvadan’ into Kashmiri. The translation was done jointly by me and Sohan Lal Kaul. I had to travel from Srinagar to Delhi for getting the permission from Girish Karnad. He was the president of the Sangeet Natak Akademi those days. After obtaining the permission for translation, we, with unwavering attention, settled at my house and worked for long hours. The light was erratic and most of the translation work was done under the light of a *devargeer* (lantern). My late mother would come with hot cups of tea during those wintry evenings. The play was presented in the Drama Festival of JKAACL in 1977, and was much appreciated. It was suitably awarded too.

Immediately after the successful staging of ‘Gur-Buth’, I wrote a play ‘Ek Wahi Mein’ in Hindi. It was a representational play. One of the key figures of the Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett’s belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and the search for order brings the individual into conflict with creation had somewhat appealed to me. The play that I wrote was not exactly similar to this idea but had some elements of absurdity. There was no coherence in the dialogues, there were no sets, no particular place and time was defined for the characters. When P. K. Raina read the script, he got excited. He wanted to stage it but due to his official commitments at Doordarshan, he could not start the rehearsals. So he handed over the photocopies of the script to some actors and also to the principal of one of the schools in Srinagar for staging it. Some critics rejected its style but the veterans Harikrishan Kaul and Moti Lal Kemmu appreciated it. It was later published and the well-known playwright and

scholar Sidhanath Kumar included it in the list of important Hindi short plays of India.

‘Trinov’ is a significant play written by Moti Lal Kemmu in Kashmiri. It exposes the hypocrisies and hollowness of the contemporary social life and values. Abhinav Bharati decided to stage it at the short play festival outside the valley. So it had to be translated into Hindi. I was asked to translate the play. It was then translated by me as ‘Trinam’. It was also published in ‘Sheeraza’ (Hindi). After some years the Hindi translation was included by Satyendra Sharat, Chief Producer (AIR), novelist and the writer of the film *Manchali*, in the collection of Indian regional plays ‘Shreshth Bharatiya Ekanki’.

Next year I was selected for the coverage of Asian Games-1982 by Doordarshan, and was sent for training to Rai. An orientation course was also held in Delhi. During that period an associate met me at Shri Ram Centre at Mandi House. He requested me to write a play on the life of Bahadur Shah Zafar, and insisted that some of the ghazals of Zafar be integrated in the drama. Initially I refused but later agreed to write. When the Asian Games culminated, I returned to Srinagar and wrote the play ‘Zindagi Ya Khwab’ which was staged at Aiwan-e-Ghalib in 1983. The play was published in ‘Sheeraza’ by the JKAACL many years later.

‘Tota Aur Aiana’ is the Hindi translation of *Tota ta Aiana*. No group in the valley tried to stage this Kashmiri play of Kemmu Sahib. The reason could be the difficulty of blending realistic and conventional elements in one narrative. However, the translation got me ‘Hinditar Bhashi Hindi Lekhak Puraskar’, a national award constituted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 1990. The play, in its Hindi version, was subsequently staged by the Bharatendu Natya Akademi, Lucknow at two places—

Lucknow and Delhi. It was ably directed by Ravi Kemmu with the repertory actors of BNA. After this triumphant production the play was also directed and presented by my guru, Padmshri Moti Lal kemmu ji at Jammu , on behalf of the ALG Cultural Society, in 2014.

From 1990 to 1999, I didn't write or translate any play.

In 1994, I took over as Drama Producer, Doordarshan, Delhi and remained as the incharge till 2005. During this period I directed and produced many long plays, short plays, telefilms and mini drama series. Having come from stage, I had a special interest in stage plays. I used to go to watch plays produced by National School of Drama on a regular basis. This stimulated me to present some stage plays for television. I redesigned some plays to suit the medium of television. These were: Tagore's 'Bansuri', Radhe Shyam Kathavachak's 'Veer Abhimanyu', Sophocles' Oedipus as 'Shahanshah Oedipus', Vijay Tendulkar's 'Cyclewala', Badal Sircar's 'Sari Raat' and 'Ballabhpur Ki Roopkatha', Agha Hashar Kashmiri's 'Yahudi Ki Ladki' in Parsi style and Rudraprasad Sengupta's 'Football'. The production of 'Shahanshah Oedipus' got me selected for a TV drama direction course by Deutsche Welle, Germany. I went abroad and got exposed to the modern techniques of TV drama and film-making. 'Shahanshah Oedipus' with English sub-titles was screened there, in the assembly, and discussed animatedly.

In 1999, Moti Lal Kemmu came to Delhi for a meeting at NSD. In the evening we went to Shri Ram Centre Book Shop. Shri J N Kaushal, the Chief of Drama Repertory Company, NSD, was also with us. We sat in the coffee shop adjacent to the book shop. As we were discussing 'Nagar Odaas' and the use of chorus in this long Kashmiri play, theatre director Mushtaq Kak joined us. He

was interested in staging the play. The translation work was entrusted to me. After almost a year, I handed over the Hindi translation and the rehearsals started in the basement of Shri Ram Centre. The play titled 'Nagar Udaas' in Hindi was staged. It was a great success and was discussed widely. All the English dailies of Delhi covered it extensively and long reviews appeared in the papers. Well-known theatre critic Ramesh Chander admired it and called it a major historical play. It won wide applause from the critics as well as the audiences who watched it.

'Trey Gobar' is a Kashmiri play which I wrote after translating 'Nagar Udas' in Hindi. It was to be staged in Srinagar as part of a theatre workshop with some Bhand groups of Kashmir. However, due to some reasons, the workshop could not be held and the play could not be staged. I then wanted to get it published in Kashmiri but the scene of Kashmiri publications is disheartening. Kashmiri book publishing is in a very bad shape. Most of the Kashmiri books are published by the authors themselves and distributed, sent to cultural establishments or gifted to friends. Kashmiri books do not have an expected readership base or market like other regional languages of the country.

'Albela-Albeli' is my stage play based on the 'Taming of the Shrew' of William Shakespeare. I had translated the original play into Hindi which was published by National Book Trust of India. Its second edition was also released a few years ago and it may go for its third edition too. It was adapted for stage as 'Albeli Naar' and directed by Sohaila Kapoor. In a review published in *Friday Review* (October 12, 2018), the reviewer termed it as a play that explores the elements of comedy, farce and irony, creating a distinguished show. 'In the Hindi translated version, Pajero Singh hails from Haryana which is considered to be notorious for



patriarchal oppression—this illustrates subtle ironical touch to the inhuman aspects of patriarchal system.’ After its Hindi presentation, I adapted it in Kashmiri as ‘*Akb ta Akb Kab*’. Ayash Arif wanted to stage the Kashmiri version with late Shadi Lal as the main actor, the central protagonist. Last year I had given him the script. He had planned it for this year, but due to the passing away of the lead actor and also the Covid situation, the Kashmiri version by Ayash Arif, could not be staged.

Moti Lal Kemmu’s famous play ‘*Manzil Nikka*’ which was translated by me earlier was for the first time staged in July 1981, at Sri Ram Centre, Delhi. The first production of ‘Palane Ka Poot’ was directed by Ravi Kemmu gloriously. It was praised and the play continued to be staged by different directors throughout the country. Three arts club staged it in 2019 under the direction of M.K.Raina.

In the intervening period I wrote two more short plays in Hindi. The first one is titled ‘Paatalketu’, based on the legend of Jalodbhava and the second one is ‘Yatra’, which is based on a real incident. Both the plays have been published by J&K Academy of Art and Languages in the special drama numbers of ‘Hamara Sahitya’.

I wrote many plays and radio adaptations for the prestigious ‘National Programme of Drama’ of All India Radio. A play selected for the National Programme of Drama is translated in all the regional languages of the country and broadcast in all the languages simultaneously from all the stations of All India Radio/FM once a month. The master script of the play is prepared by the Central Drama Unit of the Directorate General, All India Radio and sent to all the stations, one month in advance for production by the respective stations. The first play ‘Deen

Duniya' was broadcast on 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2014 and the second play 'Saumyagandha' on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2017. The second play was broadcast in all the regional languages except in Dogri and Kashmiri. When I asked for the reason, I was told that the translators for translating the masterscript were not available. I felt like a child deserted by its own mother.

As far as stage direction is concerned, I directed most of the initial plays of Abhinav Bharati including 'Das Hazar' and 'Shiv Lagan'. The theatre scene was quite encouraging those days. My contemporaries like Bushan Betab (Navrang Theatre), Santosh Tikku (Kamal Theatre), Ashok Jaikhanani (Vasant Theatre), Ayash Aarif (Kalidas Theatre), Makhan Lal Saraf (Rungmunch), Piyare K. Raina (Sangarmal), Anil Warikoo (Art Theatre), Mubarak Gul (Shah Dramatic Club) and some other theatre enthusiasts were quite active. Significant plays were being staged by these groups. Kalakendra, where Trilok Dass was at the helm of the group had staged plays like 'Mango' and 'Taentkor'. Bushan betab's Navrang had staged 'Shuturmurg'. Santosh Tikku at Kamal theatre had staged 'Fundbaz'. Piyera K. Raina had presented 'Baqi ithas' and 'Waiting for Godot'. Ashok Jaikhanani had directed 'Hatya ek Akar ki'. Makhan Lal Saraf had presented plays like 'Bu chus Tchoor' and 'Chapath'. Shah dramatic club had presented 'Harum Khanuk Aina'. Altogether it was a very encouraging scenario. The good thing was that all the friends of theatre fraternity would interact and support each other. During those days I directed the opening production of 'Hero Machama'. Then I directed 'Shakespeare' which was presented in the annual Drama Festival of JKAACL. 'Lal bo drayas lolre' was directed by me for the Women's College, Nawakadal, Srinagar. It was a big hit. I used to go from my office in the afternoon and rehearse for two to three hours and do the blockings in the auditorium of the college. Soon after this

presentation, I staged the play in Delhi, but with a different cast and live music. Sharad Joshi's 'Ek Tha Gadha' was also directed by me for the Delhi audiences. Having acquired some understanding of designing the sets and lighting, I used to do the sets and lighting of my stage plays myself. And my theatre friends would always encourage me for designing and sometimes even for costumes. For two of the Abhinav Bharati productions, I received JKAACL awards in 1983 and 1984 consecutively. The plays were 'Chakravyyooh' by Sohan Lal Koul and Edward Albee's 'The Zoo Story' as 'Chidiya Ghar'.

Over the years I have brought to stage my diverse aptitudes in writing, translating and directing and provided inputs to some theatre groups. In the recent years my adaptations have attracted wide and diverse audiences to the theatre. The journey which started in seventies is still continuing.

(The author is a noted playwright, presently based in Delhi.)

## READINGS

### REFLECTIONS ON SOM RAJ GUPTA'S

#### *THE WORD SPEAKS TO THE FAUSTIAN MAN*

Dr M Maroof Shah

The idea of seeking usually implies a movement, a longing for an object that may be somewhere. The idea of receiving better captures the traditional project of knowing the Real – one might put it as seeking to receive. Receiving the Real or “What Is” – the classic two word formulations of the “definition” of God – is the question. And to the question of how one receives, the answer is hidden in the question and involves “attention without distraction” as Simone Weil has formulated it – an answer that both believers and nonbelievers would not need to dispute. In fact the key theological, philosophical and spiritual question about ultimate reality defined as the Real or What Is implies, in its very formulation, a call or summon that is an answer. One can say, with spiritual masters/sages from Nagarjuna to Sankara to Abhinavgupta to Ibn Arabi to Ramana Maharishi, that it consists in sharpening attention/awareness. It isn't that an awareness of anything in particular or any ecstatic experience or dream or vision is demanded but awareness pure and simple – awareness of being, awareness of mysterious ground of every existent, awareness of the subject who is aware. Linguistic constructions, logical concepts, mere speculation or disputable propositions have to be dropped to be truly aware. “Just to be is holy,” as

Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it. The Sufis call it attention to breathing and this is deemed as perpetual obligation (*farz-i dayim*) on man and the end or essence of prayer. These formulations strike a chord in artists or poets, both secular and religious. And philosophers have traditionally allied themselves with art and religion/mysticism on this point. In modern times, philosophers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Whitehead have especially asserted this connection both in their lives and works.

We find in Som Raj Gupta's voluminous *The Word Speaks to the Faustian Man* published by Motilal Banarsidas – a major contemporary translation of most of Sankara's works – a compelling formulation of the point that our job is to open to the Real and escape the need of interpretation. Gupta provides the original texts (*Upanisads, Gita* or *Brahma-sutras* as the case may be), Sankara's commentaries, and then his own commentary. Gupta uses passages from western literature to “demonstrate the universality of Shankara's truths, and the futility of the Western philosophic tradition.” Covering wide ground, Gupta's argument moves across the spectrum of Western thought taking on major thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Lacan and Derrida on their own terms. We may begin with a few statements from Gupta that make striking effect on those beholden to modern episteme.

The Interpreted world alone is hell. You do not have to seek it elsewhere. It is a mutilated version of the existent.

Modern man has ceased to feel the dread extent of the mystery of what we ordinarily deem to be familiar things; he cannot even suspect how fearfully and redemptively abysmal are the depths that ever heave within them. He can only find them ‘interesting’ or problematic. They rouse his curiosity and greed but do not strike him dumb

and deaf. And if he ever comes to feel fear in their presence, it is a petty narcissistic fear that he feels, not the dread that can shatter a man into beatitude... Man is no longer expected and asked to open himself out to reality, to allow it to visit him, to enrich and suffuse him; he is only asked to move on from one interpretation to another.

He proposes a cure that is as simple as it is daunting for moderns:

But for him who has self-submitted to appearances, to maya, maya will benignly transform itself into Brahman. The apparent will become the real, the other the self. He does not have to seek a transcendental reality *beyond* the world of appearance. For the surface itself will reveal itself as the depth.

And “It is the impoverished soul alone that can hope for redemption.” And “We moderns killed god to replace him with man, but succeeded in killing both god and man. Today, man is as much a chimera as god is.”

From Ricœur to Lyotard, noted philosophers praised the work. Commenting on Gupta and importance of exegetical approach we find a contemporary scholar stating:

The difference between such traditions and the pronouncements of certain post-modern figures is evident in the lackadaisical approach taken by the latter, in which commentary is always selective and strategic, whereas the rigor of the traditional approach — in which nothing less than working line by line, or even word by word, is adequate — assumes a degree of intellectual seriousness difficult to find among those who scoff at the absolute. In Gupta’s hands, this form becomes all the more remarkable for the effect it has on all of the other texts

incorporated in his analysis — the totality of his reading of the *Prasthanatrayi* bleeds into everything else, seeming to unite all of Western literature into a sacred text running parallel to the ones interpreted by Shankara and Gupta. So far as I know, there is nothing else like it. It is a great misfortune for most serious readers that its length, rarity and obscurity will deprive them of the opportunity of reading it — Gupta’s prefaces alone are a treasure, and the dedication, revealed only in the fifth volume, is the most moving I have ever read.

In Gupta we find attempt to address the following questions: How do Upanisads and its illustrious commentator Sankara address postmodern man who is skeptical about the otherworld or Beyond? Related questions are: Does Vedanta demand we need to perceive something to qualify as *jñani*? Does it require from us the experience of a particular state called Samadhi as a qualification for liberation? Does it demand a secret adventure into the higher worlds or states of consciousness as a prerequisite for entering into the Kingdom of God or final beatitude? I think the answer to all these questions is no. The only thing that is clearly needed from us is receptivity or passivity towards the real which in turn demands transcendence of egoistic attachments or possessive mentality or object directed consciousness and thus sense of agency or doership. When one achieves such innocence all distinctions dissolve, Maya becomes Brahman, subject becomes object or knowing becomes being. The duality of appearance and reality or world and the Beyond gets transcended and we land in what Rumi calls “placeless place” or “trackless track” and just are in pristine repose of be-ing with all hopes, dreams, aspirations, objects coming to naught. Our little world gets rounded off with a sleep, with a death of our choosing so that there can be no new death as future or re-birth has no meaning now, for a supremely innocent self that is content

to be nothing, to drop off from the temporality of rounds of rebirths. Again, we have seen that we are not invited into explorations in the unknown through torturing the body or the mind but only to let ourselves be usurped by ever new revelation of the real without imposing any demand from our side. As the pure subject term I comes to rest in itself rejecting the temptation to project outwards, rejecting the need to posit, possess and move towards objects, the world there, This becomes That or Aham Brahmsi is realized. As Som Raj Gupta phrases it:

The unmanifest is the Brahman of thought and the manifest is the maya of thought. When they become one to the man of calm, they get, so to say, transformed into Brahmsn. When the wise man sees no difference between Samadhi and the wakeful state, Brahman and the world, then alone does he become the knower of Brahman. As long as he prefers one to the other, death will not fail to make him its victim (Gupta, 1991: 87).

Gupta further elaborates:

It is only when the manifest and the unmanifest reveal themselves as one that reality is reached. Reality is to be seen not only in this state but also in the world. Heaven is not to be perceived in heaven alone but also in hell and what comes between the two... One has to find knowledge in ignorance itself. For in truth there is no difference between the two and between their respective correlates, Brahman and maya (Gupta, 1991: 87-88).

Who is qualified to be *Veda-vit* or have *jnana*? Attention to this question will further illuminate the logic of the Beyond in Advaita Vedanta or Sankara and show that hankering for the greener pastures of the Beyond is a disqualification. One must consent to



be nothing. Humility is the royal road but as long as one thinks that one is going to *achieve* something for the self by means of humility one is deluded. I again quote Gupta:

*Jnana* means *samatvam*, equality between the manifest and the unmanifest, between bondage and release, between Samadhi and mundane life, between God the world. Brahman is not an object to be attained to. It is only *samata*, equality. You attain the world and the abyss; you lose the world and the abyss. When their attainment and loss become one for you, then you become Brahman. Then alone are you free (Gupta, 1991: 94).

Man must not seek eternity or immortality supposed to be in the Beyond. One must look alike at the mortal life and the immortal bliss to attain real immortality. One must consent to be thoroughly impoverished and thus relinquish everything, worldly or heavenly and this demands death before dying, a prescription for travelers on the path that we find advocated across traditions. “For the already dead alone there is no more death. He who seeks the eternal, the abyss, will not escape death” (Gupta, 1991: 95). “The reality that is sought in the reality as *yajna*, as mortality. Man is to live as mortal, as the constant giver, and die as the giver. To die constantly and to die for ever as consciousness of death is immortality. That is the truth that the Upanisad prays for (Gupta, 1991: 96). The Isa Upanisad’s dictum exhorting one to remember what one did at the time of death is brilliantly interpreted by Gupta in the following words.

All our life our actions conceal us from ourselves. To remember our actions at the time of death will expose the hollowness of our actions, their futility against the inevitability of our ultimate undoing. This kind of

remembrance liberates us from the bondage of doership and its illusions. He who has liberated himself from doership alone comes to terms with the truth of our mortality- only he can die into immortality, for, to repeat the point already made, immortality is nothing else than genuine acceptance of mortality (Gupta, 1991: 100).

Transcendentalism leaves us with an unhappy consciousness to accomplish something, to move from the world to the Beyond by various means. “For the seer of oneness, of samatvam, sameness, and for the seer of sameness there remains no desire to fulfill, no action to do, no destination to arrive at, no purpose to accomplish. He is a *kratakerryta*, one who has done all that was to be done (Gupta, 1991: 102). Ashtavakra is emphatic on the point that he has no purpose to accomplish and no unfinished job.

Gupta is able to give us compelling formulations in contemporary idiom of Vedanta as interpreted by Sankara for which he brings the work of sages like Wordsworth at the forefront.

## SHORT STORY

# BLOODBATH

Habib Kamran

TRANSLATED FROM THE KASHMIRI BY PROF NEERJA MATTOO

It was an autumn afternoon. Sultan Ahmed was sitting in his kitchen garden, enjoying the warm sun with his wife Hasina, when someone opened the gate and walked in. It was a peddler, vender of small merchandise. A bag slung from his shoulder, he carried a basket in his hand. "Oils, perfumes, antimony, soaps or ribbons, Madam?" he called out. "No, we don't want anything," Sultan Ahmad said. The peddler was about to leave, when Hasina seemed to remember something and called him back, "wait a minute. Do you keep mothballs? We need some,"

"Oh yes, madam, certainly." He put his bag and basket down and spread a cloth before him. Then he began to unpack his basket. Bottles of oils, Ittar, little jars of antimony, soaps, combs, ribbons, glass bangles, knitting needles and many other items of feminine interest were neatly arranged on the cloth----it was a veritable shop spread out before them. Hasina protested, "But we only want mothballs, none of this stuff. Why have you set up this shop here?"

“But madam, it is lying right at the bottom, I have to locate it first, no? These things have a habit of getting mixed up, that is why they have to be placed like this, separately.”

Meanwhile sultan Ahmed’s six year old daughter, Pinky, came out and began to stare at the peddlers’ stuff with fascinated eyes. The peddler now took out a cardboard box and overturned it on the cloth. Out came little spinning tops. Wooden or plastic, they certainly were pretty. All of the same form, size and colour, it seemed that they had all been cast in the same mould. The base was black and the rest red, with streaks of gold. “Sorry madam, I seem to have run out of mothballs”, the peddler said and began to pick up his wares and put them back into the basket.

“I want a spinning top”, cried pinky, picking up one.

“What sort of a fellow is this?” Sultan Ahmad thought to himself, “trying to be clever with us, is he ? We asked him for mothballs, which he never had in the first place, and he goes and sets up this shop here! Does the wretch want to con us into buying something which we didn’t ask for and which we never wanted?”

“Leave it alone I’ll buy you something much better”, he told pinky. But she threw a tantrum, No! This is the one I want!” . And sultan Ahmed was forced to ask, “How much is it”.

“Three rupees, Sir”, the peddler’s tone suggested that there was no room for negotiating the price. Sultan Ahmed picked up a top and thought, “Three rupee is not such a big sum, but these are too lightweight, they can’t really spin.” Putting it down he spoke to Pinky in rather stern voice, “Return it to him, it won’t be of any use. I’ll get you a bigger, much nicer spinning top.” Pinky set the top down, but placed it at a slight distance

from the others. The peddler had begun to pack away his stuff, but left the tops to the last. He seemed to be reluctant to put them away.

Pinky was crying loudly, "I want a top!" And her father knew that once she set up a wail for something she wouldn't stop unless they yielded. He threw three rupees at the peddler and picked up a top. Thrusting it into pinky's hand, he shouted at her, "Here, take it and stuff it into your throat!" Pinky withdrew her hand and cried. "No! Not this one, I want the other," and she pointed to the one she had set apart from the other "But it is the same ! They are all the same. Look, isn't it like all the others?" Saying this he again tried to give it to pinky, but she clenched her fists and hid her hands behind her back, "No! I want *that* one." she again pointed to the one she had chosen first and kept aside.

Sultan Ahmed threw the top away and landed a tight slap on pinky's face. She fell down, hitting the ground and there was a gush of blood from her nose and lips. Hasina looked at her husband, her eyes filled with surprise, reproach and sadness, but she said nothing. She carried her daughter to the bath-room and poured cold water on her head. She put a little burnt cotton wool on her wound and bandaged it, succeeding at last in staunching the bleeding. By the evening Pinky's nose was swollen and it hurt. It was only with a lot of effort that her mother was able to feed her a few spoonfuls of milk. And then it was as if a dam had been breached, "What was this child's fault, I ask you? What had she done that you were ready to kill this innocent lamb?"

"Did I not yield and give her what she wanted? What was wrong with the one that I gave her? Why did she want to have only the one she chose herself and not the other that *I* picked up?"

Were the two different in any way? Then why refuse *that* and why this obstinacy at such tender age?"

Hasina was not to be silenced. She answered angrily, "That is how all children are. But why did you want her to have the one that *you* picked up and not the one she herself did? If the two were not different, one would not cost you more than the other. Why did you stick to the one of your own choice? After all a child's feelings have to be cared for. But you, you became even worse in your stubbornness than this baby here."

Sultan Ahmed did not utter another word in his defence after this. He himself had already realized that he had gone too far. Yes, it was true, a child's feelings should not be hurt, he should have given her what she wanted and besides, he had no right to injure her physically- it was such a trivial matter, after all. But when he analysed the sequence of events, it seemed to him that his hand was raised involuntarily and without his even knowing it, Pinky's head received the blow. But why did that happen? He could not find an answer, no matter how hard he tried. He knew for certain now that a change had come in his nature. Yes, an inexplicable change, since that day when that strange beggar had crossed his threshold, asking for alms.

It must have been six months ago, or maybe more. It was a holiday and he had just settled down to read the newspaper in his room after breakfast, when his elder daughter Riffat walked and said, "Papa, there is a beggar at the door."

"What does he want?" he thrust his hand in his waistcoat pocket, took out a twenty paisa coin and continued, "give him this, anyway".

Riffat left with the coin but returned almost immediately and threw the coin before her father, saying in a surprised voice, “He says he wants one rupee!”

“Of course, we have rupees coming down like rain, haven’t we?” But again he put his hand in his pocket, took out another twenty paisa bit and gave it to her, saying, “Well, give it to him and throw him out!”

She was back again, with both the coins and placing them before her father, said, “He refused to accept them, he says he wants one rupee, nothing less”. Sultan Ahmad pocketed both the coins and said “He gets nothing, now. Go and tell him that we have nothing for him. The fellow begs for a living, but will not give up his style!” About a quarter of an hour later, Riffat came back, “Papa, the beggar is not leaving, he is still at the door.”

“Shamelessly brazen he must be! Let me take a look at him,” Sultan Ahmad threw the paper down and went outside angrily. He saw the beggar. It was a *keul-faqir*,\* robust and healthy. His complexion was wheatish and his face bore some pock marks. A long-healed wound had left a scar on his temple. It seemed that the place had been branded at some time. The left ear lobe was pierced, but there was no ear –ring in it .A small *taweez* hung from his neck. His long black hair fell to his shoulders. A sliver ring with a huge blue stone adorned a finger of his right hand, while on the left he wore two rings on two fingers, one a copper band and the other studded with a black stone. His eyes glowed like embers—he was a picture of supreme confidence. He wore a black waistcoat over a black shirt and a check *lungi*, his feet shod in polished peshawari sandals.

“What do you want? “Sultan Ahmad asked him in Urdu. The man lifted a finger and said, “one rupee.”

It wasn't merely that he had asked for one rupee—some beggars will demand five, even ten but the way he asked was different. For one thing, his tone was not that of a bagger, he demanded it as if Sultan Ahmad owed it to him. For another, he stood there in the stance of one who wouldn't leave till he had collected it. And Sultan Ahmad decided that no matter what happened, he wouldn't let him have it.

“No rupees or anything here! Go away,” said Sultan Ahmad. The beggar did not say anything, but he did not leave either. He looked at Sultan Ahmad as if he was of no more consequence than an insect. His expression suggested that he had no intention at all of leaving without the rupee.

“What a strange beggar he is, blooming in youthful health, like a well fed ox, dressed to his finger tips too! Sandles polished like a mirror! Demanding a rupee as if a government tax collector is at the door,” Sultan Ahmad fumed to himself,

“I would be nothing if I gave this arrogant wretch of a beggar that rupee! Let him stand there waiting till eternity for all I care! I am going in.”

“Sultan Ahmad saheb! How is everything?”, he heard someone call and turned back to see his friends and neighbour Abdul Hameed Bhat. The two were extremely close to each other and their two homes were like on big family. Hasina and Hameed Bhat's wife Nabla also got along with each other very well. They would chat for hours together, exchanging notes on God knows what. Hameed Bhat was also a Government employee like Sultan Ahmad, holding a good post. He was of a cheerful disposition, always with a smile on his face. His laughter would reveal his pearly white teeth, making him look even more handsome.



“Oh it is only a beggar. But just look at his style!”  
He wants a rupee, as if his grandfather had left it here in trust for him!” Sultan Ahmad said.

“You should have given it to him and sent him off” Hameed Bhat said with a smile.

“We did offer him two twenty paise bits but he wouldn’t touch them! That is why he will get nothing from me—he deserves nothing”. Sultan Ahmad’s tone was angry.

‘Listen to me Sultan Saheb, gives him what he want without demur and then be grateful if he deigns to accept it! Apparently you have never met a beggar of this kind before”

“He too must never have met a man of my sort in his whole begging career! He has to be taught a lesson. Just look at him, he doesn’t beg, he demands, fancies himself a tax collector,” Sultan Ahmad was losing his cool.

“Do as you please and find out for yourself, saying this Hameed went inside his house.

A long time passed. Hasina and Riffat kept peeping through the crevices to see if the beggar had left. But he was still standing there, immobile like a tall polar.

It was lunch time Hasina served her husband and daughters. After they had eaten, she helped herself. Finally she filled a plate with a big helping of rice, vegetables and a couple of pieces of meat. she went out and handed it to the beggar, but he refused to take it. He did not even say that he did not want it, just looked at Hasina with unseeing eyes, as if on a lifeless object. Standing there for a while, plate in hand, Hasina began to feel uncomfortable and went in. she addressed her husband, “I took some food for the beggar, but he did not even look at it, the

question of eating it did not arise! He could at least have said that he did not want it. He seems made of some strange metal.”

“ Who asked you to serve him food, if I may ask? Such people do not deserve it, far better to serve a dog.”

“Will you listen to me and give him the rupee and throw him out? His sight fills me with fear. He shouldn't do some harm, I apprehend”. Hasina pleaded with her husband.

“Not a paisa will he get from my house, even if he shrinks to the size of a single hair! I have said it once for all-do I owe him anything that I should pay up?” Sultan Ahmad said firmly.

“All right, you don't give anything, I'll give him a rupee and get rid of him. After all we have our children to think of. The man looks menacing.”

Hasina was rising to go when her husband stopped her with, “ If anyone from my house gives him a rupee, they will find me dead!” Hasina looked at him with dismay, heaved a deep sigh and retraced her steps. She went into the kitchen to finish her chores.

Sultan Ahmad himself went out to take a look. The beggar was still standing in the same posture. Sultan Ahmad asked him to go, in a stern voice. But he was met with the same stare. He tried very hard to make him submit to his will, but could make no dent in his armour. He was not uttering a single word, just standing there like a pole. His face sent only one message—his resolve of demanding a rupee had not weakened at all.

‘What should be done with him now?’ Sultan Ahmad thought to himself, ‘the thing to do is to physically throw him out

with a few hard kicks! But there was something in the beggar--- he could only be kicked out in imagination, not in actual action.

‘Why don’t I call the police?’ an idea struck him, ‘But how can I do it? The police station must be at least two kilometres away, there is no telephone around either. How can I leave my family alone in the house with such a horrible character inside it? Besides, what do I charge him with? His only misdemeanour was to enter the house without permission to beg for alms. He did not threaten us in any way, nor did he use any force; he is not even saying anything-----beggars are constantly entering people’ houses, does anyone ever think of lodging a criminal case against them? And would it stand a chance in a court of law? Even if I could get the police to come, would they understand the real issue? They would only ask why an issue was being made of the matter of just one rupee. No, it would only humiliate me even more.’

Sultan Ahmad was standing before beggar, lost in his own thoughts, while the subject of his thoughts was staring at him unblinkingly, uttering not a single word, patient, as if he had all the time in the world. Sultan Ahmad was finding it difficult to stand his ground before him, he could not even meet his eyes ---- was it because of scorn or hatred or pain?--he could not tell.

‘Why don’t I just give him a rupee and get rid of this menace?’ a thought came to him. ‘But that means that in spite of adopting this stance-making such a big issue of it, I’ll have to submit after all and meekly give in. Why should I do it? Why must I give him what he demands? I don’t owe him anything. I am not bound in any way. Is it not upto me to decide whether I should give him a rupee in charity or not? My own money, from my own pocket?’

Hameed Bhat made an appearance once again. He had a smile on his lips. Sultan Ahmad suspected that he and his wife had been watching the whole spectacle as it unfolded itself. “Is the fellow still here? I had told you, my friend, he has to be given the rupee whether you like it or not.”

“I just can’t understand the devil! He is only a beggar, after all, don’t you see? What does he mean by this stubborn demand for one rupee and for nothing less? Supposing one doesn’t have it or doesn’t wish to give it, should he still hit his head against an iron wall? I am one knot in the log his axe cannot hack through!” But a whining note had crept into Sultan Ahmad’s voice, he seemed to be on the defensive.

“But his understanding is limited—he knows just one thing: he will leave your doorstep only when he gets his rupee! I’ll give it to him if you like”, saying this, Hameed Bhat put his hand in his pocket, watching his friend’s face all the while to ascertain his response. Sultan Ahmad’s face brightened—here was a solution to the impasse, now he could get rid of the fellow without compromising himself! But Hameed Bhat seemed to have changed his mind. He pulled out an empty hand from his pocket and went inside his own house.

“Perhaps he didn’t have the money in his pocket and has gone to get it,” Sultan Ahmad was hoping. But it was only a false hope—Hameed Bhat did not come out again.

Sultan Ahmad was at a loss. Could it be the same Hameed Saheb with whom he went for walks, who so often paid for his bus or cinema ticket when they were together, who would insist on footing the restaurant bills himself? What happened to him now that he wouldn’t part with a mere one rupee for his

friend's sake? Sultan Ahmad felt badly let down and went into deep thought once again.

Suddenly the beggar drew out a knife. It was a long knife, sharp and gleaming. He pulled up the lungi to reveal his right thigh, which was badly scarred with healed cuts, and plunged the knife in--he had given himself a long cut. Blood flowed down his leg seeping into his sandals and running into the ground.

“Oh No! what has he done?”, a loud cry escaped Sultan Ahmad. He was dismayed, confused and didn't know how to react to this new development. Quickly his hand went into his pocket, out came a five- rupee note and he held it out to the beggar, but he refused to take it. Again he held up a finger—he still stuck to his demand, he wanted one rupee, neither more nor less. Sultan Ahmad rushed indoors, grabbed pinky's little piggy-bank and dashed it to the ground. Five paisa, ten paisa, twenty paisa, one rupee coins, notes of small denominations were scattered all around the floor. Sultan Ahmad picked up a rupee coin and ran out Hasina who was watching the drama, followed him. Sultan Ahmad held out the coin and the beggar took it. He raised his hand to his forehead in a gesture of *salaam*. Then he tore out a strip from his brand new lungi, bandaged the cut with it and left.

At this moment Hameed Bhat came out again and said, “Well Sultan Saheb, you had to shell out a rupee after all! You might say though that he was a loser in spite of it—wounding himself and tearing his lungi in the process. But one must admire his grit and tenacity, he was absolutely steadfast in his resolve, nothing would make him break it. And this was only a lowly beggar--- had he chosen some other profession, think of what a

fine standard of integrity he would have set!”, he concluded laughingly.

“How he shows off these dog’s teeth of his! ”, Sultan Ahmad thought and went in, without even a glance at Hameed Bhat. Hasina was wringing her hands, “How terrible it was! What the fellow was ready to do to himself! My God, he wanted to lay his death on our heads! If you had only given him the rupee in the first instance, things wouldn’t have reached this sorry pass.” Sultan Ahmad was in control of his nerve once again and burst out, “you are talking about giving it to him in the first instance,? I say that he should not have been given it at all, even if all his blood had been drained and he had breathed his last at our doorstep like a slaughtered sheep!”

“So that the police came and dragged us all to prison? I just don’t understand what got into you today, why, you made such an issue of this one rupee! Why, only the other day you gave away your brand new pullover to that beggar who was shivering in the bitter winter cold---the one you were actually wearing at the time! You had just bought it for one hundred and fifty rupees and hardly used it. I was so upset and had begged you to give him your old one, but you had shut me up saying that he too was a human being and what warmth would an old rag give? That was your attitude then, and today one rupee became a matter of such great account with you?” Hasina’s words came in a flood of emotion.

‘But that was entirely different. That poor fellow never made a demand for the pullover I was wearing at the time! In fact his hand had trembled, and he protested that he couldn’t dare to wear something I had been wearing. And this fellow here, do you think he staged this whole drama for that one rupee? Why didn’t

he accept the five rupee note, I offered him in my confusion? Why, he thought nothing of tearing his forty rupee worth *lungi*! Do you think he was really in need of our rupee? He just wanted to twist my neck and break me, that's what he aimed at. It is a slap in my face that he has delivered, given me a dunking in a pool of slime. My name is mud! Did I owe him that sum? Was it not upon me to decide whether to give something in charity or not? Something which belonged to me, something that was *my* possession? What right did he have to force me, exert this pressure on me to do his bidding? But what can I do? My own weakness gave him power over me!" saying this, Sultan Ahmad began to hit his forehead with his hand violently, filled with a sense of impotence and utter inadequacy. Hasina was deeply disturbed at this unusual behaviour. Such an open demonstration of emotion was uncharacteristic of her husband. What had gone wrong with him, she did not know.

That was the day from when a change had come over Sultan Ahmad's disposition. He would react violently to anything that went against his wishes. No matter how small or insignificant the provocation, he just wouldn't put up with it. Nor could he tolerate the idea of anyone pushing him to the second place in anything. His family seemed to be scared of him now.

He had never been like this. He was once a very good natured person with an extremely pleasant disposition, generous to a fault. To his daughters he was so indulgent that no matter what they asked for, he would get it for them, never going against their wishes. In fact Hasina often complained that such doting indulgence was bad for them and they were already somewhat spoiled.

Holding the post of section officer in a government office, he was due for promotion to that of an undersecretary, soon. After a plot of land had been allotted to him by the government, he had sold his portion of the ancestral house to his brother. With help from Hasina's share of her father's property, they had been able to build a single storey bungalow with gables, without having had to incur any debt for the purpose. A little garden and a vegetable patch kept Sultan Ahmad busy on Sundays and after office hours. There he would be working with his hoe and rake, with Hasina and the girl chipping in, watering the *bak*, \* and weeding the turf.

They did not have a son, just their two daughters. Riffat, the elder, had just left school and was now in college, with science subject. She was a very bright girl and had always stood first in every examination. Sultan Ahmad was planning for her to become a doctor. Every one said that this daughter of his was sure to fulfil all his hopes and dreams. The younger one, Nuzhat, whom they affectionately called by the pet name "Pinky", was equally bright and already in class one, even though seeming to be more interested in play and mischief at the moment. Hasina herself had passed high school, and was working as a teacher in a government school. Ambitious and hard working, she kept a spotless home—immaculately clean and equipped with every thing needed for a comfortable life. Above all, the two were devoted to each other, very much in love and hardly ever disagreeing on any issue, quite like each other in taste and temperament.

The after effects of the beggar- incident stayed with Sultan Ahmad for a considerable length of time. But slowly he began to return to normal, becoming once again the cheerful, affectionate husband and father.



One day Riffat came back from college and immediately after tea, dropped a form before her father and asked him to sign it.

“What is it?” Sultan Ahmad asked and picked up the form, scanning it. He finished reading and began to think. Hasina asked what the form was about. He handed it to her, asking her to read it herself. It seemed that a Mountaineering club had been set up in Riffat’s college with place for thirty students; an introductory membership fee of fifteen rupee had been fixed. The form mentioned that the student selected would have to undergo a two-week training course, at the end of which judging from their performance and aptitude, only twenty would be finally selected to go on a day’s climbing expedition to a relatively low-peak and their stamina and ability to withstand the rigour would determine the selection of ten finalists, who would then be given a further intensive training for ten days. And at the end of it, the ten girls would be sent on a longish, more rigorous mountaineering expedition, lasting about two weeks.

This, the form explained, would mean climbing a high peak and having to set up camps in the forest. The girls would have to contribute two hundred rupees each for camping provisions and transport. The equipment would be provided by the college. The three best students in the group would have to go to the National Institute of mountaineering for superior training for three months, at government expenses, immediately after the examinations. The most important condition for membership of the club was for the form to be signed by the student’s father or guardian, approving the application for the membership. The signature would mean that the student could not be restrained from going on any expedition thereafter, nor

could he then refuse to pay for the necessary expenses in this behalf.

The training was to begin from the twenty first of June and today was the twenty first of May, which meant that there was a whole month left.

Hasina read the form through and put it down. She glanced at her husband, who seemed lost in thoughts, and asked Riffat, "Who is going to impart this training? And then who is going to accompany the girl on these expeditions?"

"Two instructors, trained outside the state, have been deputed for the purpose. They are to go round all the colleges in turn and it is the turn of our college this year. It is they who will accompany the girl in addition to two lady lectures, two peons and one maid," said Riffat.

"Are they lady instructors or men?," Hasina inquired

Riffat laughed and said, "Of course they are men, did you expect them to be women?"

"Now would it be seemly for a girl to go on such expeditions where it would mean staying away from home for days together? Particularly when accompanied by unknown men?,"\* Hasina asked her husband, who was about to say something when Riffat spoke up, loud and bold, "But I WILL go."

Sultan Ahmad's face turned red with fury as he looked at Riffat. He threw the form aside and said, "Even if not permitted, eh? You shall not go".

Riffat left the room in a huff and went to her room. She did not eat any dinner that evening, nor did she have breakfast the

next morning. Her mother pleaded with her, but she refused to budge and left for college without breaking her fast.

Hasina and Sultan Ahmad spent a restless day, worrying about their daughter. Riffat returned from college at four and went straight to her room without speaking a word to her mother. Her father was still in office. As soon as he came in, he asked, ‘Has she come back? Did she eat?’

“She has locked herself in. I stood outside her door for more than half an hour. My throat is hoarse, calling to her, but she just does not respond, nor will she open the door.”

Sultan Ahmad went and began to knock at the door, calling out his daughter’s name, “Rafoo, come and open the door.”

Hearing her father, Riffat opened the door. He looked at her face and found her still sulking. He went to Hasina and said, “look, the door is open. Go and take her something to eat.”

Hasina carried a plate of food in one hand and a glass of milk in another and went into Riffat’s now open room. Pinky followed with a jug of water. In his room, Sultan Ahmad could clearly hear his wife begging Riffat to eat something, but not a word was uttered by Riffat in response to her entreaties. Such stubbornness! It was too much for him and he angrily asked his wife to leave the food there and come out. Hasina came out and said, “Did you see? How she refused to listen?”

As time passed, Hasina anxiety grew. Finally she timorously approached her husband again, “Why don’t you ask her yourself? She might listen to you. She has starved herself since last afternoon, won’t it lead to dehydration? Just think of the consequences!”

Sultan Ahmad's own heart was pleading with him to go and feed her, but he had slipped up when he had angrily ordered Hasina to let her be and not go down on her knees before her. How would it look now if he flouted his own orders?

Another hour went by. Sultan Ahmad could no longer restrain himself and he went to his daughter and said "Look, do you think your own father would wish you harm? Everything I do is only for the sake of the two of you. Whatever I say or do is only for your welfare, do you think I am your enemy?" He pushed the plate of food towards her and poured water over her hands himself, continued with great affection, "Come on now, put a few morsels in your mouth, that's a good girl! Don't you see how your mother is suffering? She is shedding blood through her eyes. How she begged of you! You have broken her heart."

But he might as well have been addressing the walls for all the response he was getting from Riffat. She was sitting with her head between her knees, deaf to his words. In spite of all his persuasion, she still did not touch the food. Finally he left the room and went and sat near Hasina. They exchanged glances and sat thinking with bowed heads.

Suddenly Pinky came rushing and cried, "Mummy! Mummy! Riffat Apa slashed her arm with a blade! She is bleeding!"

Hasina ran to Riffat's room and Sultan Ahmad burst out, "What are you saying, Pinky? Sit down and tell me clearly what happened."

Hasina was back the next minute, "Come and see! She has slashed her upper arm with a blade. She is bleeding profusely. Oh do get up and see!"

Sultan Ahmad's fury knew no bounds. He was burning with rage and began to shout, "What! Has she become like that beggar? How dare she think that she can pressurize me like that wretch did? I say that even if she slits her throat with that blade. I will never bend before her wishes! Have we spoilt her to this extent?"

Hasina was wringing her hands with a tearful face and she said, "How can you talk like this? At this time? Your daughter is dying, I say, come and see?"

Sultan Ahmad's knees went weak when he saw Riffat. She was rolling on the floor, moaning. There was a long gash in her upper arm from which blood was flowing in a stream, drenching the white floor-covering. He rushed to her side and pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, tied the wound as tightly as possible, but within moments the handkerchief was soaked in blood. In a panic now, Sultan Ahmad carried Riffat out and rushed her to hospital in a taxi. She had fainted by the time they reached the hospital. It seemed that a vein had been cut and a lot of blood had been lost. The doctors stitched up the wound and bandaged it. And then they said that she would need a blood transfusion. Sultan Ahmad's friend and neighbour Hameed Bhat, a cousin and Hasina herself came forward holding out their arms for the purpose. There was quite a gathering at the hospital by this time. But the only person whose blood group matched Riffat's was her father. They took it and Riffat began to slowly revive.

The next day Riffat was allowed to leave hospital, but the doctors said that she must rest for a few days and not go to the college and also that she needed to be fed on a nutritious diet of

milk, eggs, fruits and chicken soup for another couple of weeks to recoup.

After a few days, Sultan Ahmad told his wife, “Why don’t you ask Riffat to go to college now?”

“I did ask her, but she refuses; says she doesn’t want to go.”

“How long will she stay at home? She will miss so much, who will help her to make it up?” Sultan Ahmad said with a worried frown.

“But she says that she doesn’t want to study anymore, “Hasina said with a sick look at her husband. Sultan Ahmad’s face darkened, “What do you mean? She says she doesn’t want to study? Is she back to square one, again the same stubbornness? What does she think she will do staying at home?” Hasina left the room in silence.

Alone with himself, Sulatan Ahmad was deeply disturbed. His daughter’s refusal to attend college was a shock worse than death. If she did not continue with her studies, what would happen to all those hopes he had nourished in his heart since the day she was born? What use would be the brilliance she had shown, in all her examination results so far? And what would her future be? The disappointment of not having a son had been forgotten in visualising a bright and shining future for Riffat, how could he bear it now? Tormented by these thoughts, he smoked cigarette after cigarette, hopes sinking and rising with each passing wave. When Hasina brought his food before him, he refused to eat. “You have lost all that blood in the hospital the other day, is it proper to undertake a fast?” said Hasina.

“What difference does a fast make? And then, why is it necessary to eat? How would it matter even if one died?”

Hasina had never seen her husband in such despair. He continued to lie in bed, awake, deep in thought and occasionally muttering with a sigh, “what is to be done now?” he went over everything in his mind, considered all the options before him. There was just one action that would resolve the crisis, and that was to sign the form, and that was the one thing he refused to even consider in his mind, the one thing he would never do. He thought that the basis of his existence revolved around whether he signed the form or not. He was sure that nothing would make him sign it. Throughout the night he struggled to find a way out of the impasse.

He rose from his bed early the next morning, had a cup of tea and dressed. But he continued to walk around his room, looking at his watch every moment. Hasina had already seen him writing an application for leave of absence from office. She asked, “Where are you going today?”

“Don’t ask me now, I’ll tell you when I am back.”

At about ten o’clock, Sultan Ahmad was at the gate of Riffat’s college. He sent in a slip with his name to the principal and promptly he was asked to come in.

The principal Mrs Mohini Parimoo was seated in her office. She was soft spoken, yet her personality was impressive. At the moment she was dictating something to a clerk. It seemed to sultan Ahmad that she dismissed the clerk sooner because of him. She removed her glasses and addressed him, “Why has Riffat not been attending college? Is she all right?”

The principal’s tone reassured him, and he said, “Oh she’s all right, thanks to your good wishes, madam. But she doesn’t want to come to college anymore, because I did not give my approval

to her going on mountaineering expeditions. I do not want her to join this club. That is why I am here today, madam, with the request that you reject her application for membership, so that she feels that it was not my refusal but the college itself that prevented it. That way she will, I think, agree to come back to college. Hope you understand a father's dilemma, madam?"

"But why won't you give her permission?"

"I have my own reasons', Sultan Ahmad was suddenly apprehensive that the principal might persuade him to change his mind, so he added, "If you won't reject her application, it seems to me that her education will come to an end."

The principal gave him a sympathetic look and said, "There is no need to take such extreme steps. We are not forcing any student to join, Riffat herself was keen to join and being the kind of exceptional student that she is, we would have given her preference over others. And now you are saying that it will mean the end of her studies, and that we would not like to happen. We know very well her worth, she is really a gem of a girl who will certainly scale the heights of achievements, if given a chance. We feel confident that she will get the first position this year."

"That is why I want her to devote all her energy to studies."

The principal said, 'If it is her studies you are worried about, then I must tell you that far from harming them, joining the club would only help her studies. Perhaps you may not know it, but the Government has reserved a seat each for the three toppers in the mountaineering course in the Medical and other professional colleges. I am confident that Riffat will certainly be one of the three."



“But madam, I have told you that I cannot give her permission under any circumstances. I would prefer that she give up her studies rather than....” Before he could finish the sentence, the principal intervened, “All right, if you are adamant, we will not admit her to the club. But it is not possible at this stage, because we have already submitted the list of the students and the entry fees to the Head Office. Riffat had paid it already. It is possible that some other parents might share of your thinking, and we cannot allow the whole programme to be upset. So let her stay a member for the time being and undergo the first phase of the training, which will be imparted in the college itself for two weeks. When the time comes, however, for the expedition to leave, we can easily drop her at that time. In any case we can only select twenty out of the thirty who undergo the basic training, depending on their aptitude. Out of these twenty too, only ten will finally make it. So there will be no problem in dropping her that way. She too will have no cause to complain or make an issue of. Is there anything else?”

Sultan Ahmad felt his burden lighten, but still he said, “Though I want that my daughter should not become a member of such a club, but I will allow it only because of what you have said and considering the training in the college as a part of teaching. But I shall never even consider her going on a small or big expedition, no matter whether for a day or more. The very thought is intolerable to me!”

“And we will not send her either, at least not against your wishes, that’s my promise!” a huge weight seemed to lift from Sultan Ahmad’s mind, “Thank you so much. Can I go now? I am extremely grateful to you!”

“Oh that’s all right. But please to send us the signed form, the head office has been pressing us for quite some time.”

Sultan Ahmad could still not countenance the idea of signing the form before his wife and daughter after all that had happened. He said, “I do not know where that form must have been misplaced by now. Could you do me another favour by issuing another form now?”

I shall sign it here itself and the matter will be over.”

The principal called for a form and asked Sultan Ahmad to fill it up himself and put his signature on it. He took it, filled it up, signed, and handing it over to the principal, left for home.

In the evening when Hasina brought him the food, he barely touched it, and went to bed soon after.

When the news reached Riffat that her form had been signed and sent off, she left for college for early the next morning, delighted.

Sultan Ahmad too left for his office without breakfast, taking just a cup of tea. He did not know what was happening to him. He had no appetite, his limbs seemed to be aching all the time. Gradually his appetite disappeared altogether. Now he even gave up his favourite pastime, gardening. He talked less and less.

About a month and a half later, Riffat came back from college and told her mother, “Mummy, please tell papa that we are going for a day’s expedition tomorrow. The principal said that she would let me go only if I had my father’s permission. Mummy please, I want to go!”

“Why bring me into it? Ask him yourself, don’t you have tongue in your mouth?”

“I am scared! Please, mummy please do it for me!”

“All right, relax, I shall talk to him later”.

After dinner Hasina went up to the bedroom to tell her husband. He was in bed, reading. Having spent all these years with him, she had learnt one thing very well and that was to read her husband’s mood from his face ---- she knew what to tell him when. And at this moment, looking at expression on his face she understood too well that now was not the opportune time to tell him what she had come up for. She went back without saying anything at all. She looked at her daughter’s face and knew it would be futile to dissuade her from going on the expedition the next day ---- father and daughter had the same streak of stubbornness in their character. She began to think, and a shudder ran through her body from top to toe, and did something unthinkable, something she had never imagined herself capable of doing ---- she told a lie.

“Your father says you can go, one day’s trip is all right.”

Sultan Ahmad had taken to rising late for sometime now. Meanwhile Hasina had prepared her story, after all it was only a matter of one day, if he asked for Riffat she would say something. But she was still in a tremor --- for the first time in her life she would be lying to her husband.

Sultan Ahmad came down only when it was time for him to leave for office. He did not ask for Riffat because these days she would usually have left for college before he came out of his room.

He came home from work at the usual time. When it was about six in the evening and Riffat had still not returned, he asked Hasina, “it is quite late, why is Rifat not home?” Her heart

beating fast, she said, “yes, it is rather late. She was saying something about an excursion or something.”

“What? Going on an excursion? Why didn’t she say anything to me?” he said, nonplussed.

“I did come up to tell you, but found you asleep, so I gave her permission to go. She must be on her way back now.” Hasina’s heart was pounding now.

Another hour passed. Sultan Ahmad could no longer restrain himself. He got up and left for Riffat’s college. He found the principal still in the college, apparently waiting for the girls to return.

“Why haven’t the girls come back yet, Madam?”

“No, not yet. But this being their first climb, the delay is not unusual. “Sultan Ahmad felt himself fall from a great height.

“What climb do you mean?”

“Don’t you know? Today was the one day mountaineering expedition they were supposed to go on — they have to climb the Mahadev\* peak.”

“But you had promised that you would not send her on any such expedition!” , there was reproach in his tone.

“What do you say?” the principal was surprised, “Riffat told me that you had given her permission! Did she lie to me? I am shocked. But I think I too am to blame, I should have asked her to get a written permission from you. I am sorry for it. But I must say that I could never imagine that a girl like Riffat would resort to lying. Otherwise I wouldn’t have taken her word for it.”

“No, madam, that is not the case --- she did ask me, she would never lie! It is only that they are late, I wonder why.”

“Oh, they will be back any moment, there is no need to worry,” the principal spoke in a reassured tone. Sultan Ahmad took his leave and left for home.

Her heart sinking as each minute passed, Hasina feared the worst. Sultan Ahmad walked in, cast a look at Hasina, and saying nothing, went straight away to bed. Hasina followed him and said, “It is not her fault, really. It was I who told her a lie. I said that you had given your consent and that she could go. It is all my fault.”

Sultan Ahmad lay on bed, his eyes closed. He opened them, cast a full look on her and said, “You did the right thing”. He closed his eyes again. But there was something in his eyes, his tone, his expression that struck terror in Hasina. “Why didn’t he hit me, kick me, drag me by my hair or beat me to pulp? Nothing would have hurt as much as his saying nothing!”

Sultan Ahmad did not leave his bed. He was a sick man now, sometimes all right and sometimes burning with a fever, sometimes it was his head that ached and sometimes it was his whole body being pierced with sharp needles. His appetite had almost disappeared. Occasionally he would feel a craving for something, but as soon as the thing was brought before him, he would barely touch it and ask for its removal from his sight. He only left the room to go to the bathroom, otherwise he would either be lying in bed or sitting in a chair for brief stretches. His conversation had just dried up. He had no interest in his flowers and vegetable patch, any more, or perhaps he had no strength left. On long leave of absence from his office, he seemed to grow weaker with each day, his face pale, colourless.

One day while Hasina was at work in the kitchen, someone knocked at the door. It was peon from Riffat's college. "Is sultan Saheb at home? I have brought a letter for him, from the principal," he said. Hasina held out her hand, but the peon said, "No madam, the principal has given instructions that the letter must only be handed over to Sultan Saheb, no one else. She had also said that in case he is not at home, I must take it back. Now you know why I cannot deliver the letter to you."

"He is inside. You can go in and give it to him."

The peon went in and gave the letter to Sultan Ahmad. He read it and put it under his pillow. The next morning he told Hasina to ask Riffat to see him before she left for college. This was first time since his illness that he had expressed a wish to see Riffat. When she came in, he said, "The day after tomorrow your college is flagging off a major expedition to a distinct peak that is what this letter is about. Go and give it to your principal, but read it first, because it concerns you."

Riffat took the letter out of the envelop and read it. It was a reply to the principal's letter of the day before and said that he was giving his consent to Riffat going on the ten-day mountaineering expedition. She also founded three currency notes in the envelop, two hundred-rupees to be handed over to the college and a fifty-rupee one as her own pocket money. Riffat turned to leave and suddenly she noticed her father's face. There was something in it which made her freeze in her tracks. She went on gazing at him and he started back at her. She lowered her eyes, put the letter in her purse and left the room quietly.

That day she came home early, went up to her father and put an envelop down before him. Sultan Ahmad opened it and found his own letter with the currency notes in it. He looked at

Riffat in great surprise and she said, “Papa, I am not going on the expedition. I told the principal that my father did not give me permission.”

“Why? Was it your mother who stopped you?”

“She had already left for the school when I came up this morning. She has not returned yet.”

That evening Riffat found her mother looking at her with deeply grateful eyes and she said, “Mummy when I saw papa’s face this morning, a knife seemed to pass through my heart. All the time I was in college, his face haunted me, I could find no peace. He looked so helpless, so pale, just like a withered lily — it wrenched my heart and I couldn’t bare to stay in the college and rushed back home.” After a pause she continued, “Mummy, who do we have in this world other than papa? God forbid, if something should happen to him, what shall we do? What will happen to us, then?”

Hasina rushed to the bathroom and hiding herself there shed all the tears which had been bottled up inside her all these days, and which could no longer be contained.

There was a sudden improvement in Sultan Ahmad’s health. The very next day he was out of bed and seated in a chair. His appetite improved and within a week he was restored to full health and applied for the rest of his leave to be cancelled. Hasina could hardly believe her eyes at this sudden transformation, she had almost given up the hope of his ever going to office again and that too so smartly turned out. Her house was again ringing with laughter; friends and relatives were coming in hordes to congratulate them on his recovery. There was general rejoicing

and thanksgiving at God's compassion. He himself was so full of gratitude that he would not tire of giving to charity for days afterwards.

It was some time since his recovery, but visitors continued to pour in to offer their greetings on his seemingly miraculous recovery. And one day the thought struck Hasina that the walls of their living room were looking grubby and discoloured and that smoke had turned the ceiling, which had not been pointed yet, almost black with soot, what must all the guests be thinking?", she began to worry, "So embarrassing!"

She talked to her husband about it and a painter was called in.

"What do you say, shall we have the walls white-washed or painted? I would prefer a white-wash, it will cost less and bring in more light. What do you think?" Sultan Ahmad said.

"Leave it to me, sir, these walls must dazzle the beholder's eye, which is my job", the painter's tone exuded the confidence of a master craftsman.

"Then there is ceiling," Sultan Ahmad turned to Hasina, "what colour should we use?"

"That depends on whatever you select", Hasina replied.

"No, you tell him, don't leave everything to me!"

"The ceiling will get the colors that you select,"

Hasina insisted. She had decided in her mind that from now on whatever was done in the house would be done according to her husband's wishes alone. "So it is I who must decide, is it?",



Sultan Ahmad turned to the painter, “well, what would be the best?”

“What can I say? My job is to use the brush, the color doesn’t make any difference to me, and it may be anything.”

“That is true, of course. All colors are same to you. Now listen, I have been ill and confined to bed for a long time. Since I couldn’t go out, I used to long for a sight of the open sky, to lie under it. I can’t tell you what agony it was, this ache for the open sky. So if you could paint the ceiling in the colour of the sky, it would make me so happy, so whenever I lie down, I won’t feel as if cooped up in a room, but lying under the sky in the open.”

“That means you want the blue for ceiling”, said the painter, but Sultan Ahmad countered with, “What do you mean? How do you say “blue”? Is the sky blue in colour? Why won’t you look out and see? Does it seem blue to you? You seem to believe blindly what someone has vaguely described to you as blue. My dear fellow, the sky is neither blue nor white, but whitish blue. In brief I must tell you that the sky is its own colour—what everyone knows as the colour of the sky. If you can reproduce that very colour, then go ahead.”

“Oh I understand now. Please leave it to us. We will satisfy you thoroughly, make you so happy that you won’t be able to resist the temptation of giving us a fat tip.”

“Oh don’t you worry about it, just finish the job.”

The painter came to work after two days. Sultan Ahmad had asked him to buy good quality paint and other required material himself. The room had already been cleared out by Hasina and Riffat, everything safely out of the way so that nothing was stained with paint. Sultan Ahmad left for work and so did Hasina,

but she returned early as the workers had to be given their tea. She also wanted to put everything back in place once the work was done. A worker came to her and said, "Come and see, madam, how the room and the colour of the ceiling look."

"Hasina went up and froze at the sight of the ceiling ---- it had been painted green. She said in anger, "What is this? Didn't the Khwaja sahib\* ask you to paint the ceiling in a particular colour? What have you done?"

The painter said, "Madam, on our part we have done the best for you, as God is our witness. This is not the first job we have undertaken, hundreds of bungalows have been done by us. Don't we have the sense to know what colour would suit a ceiling? After all, when a customer spends all that money, it is our duty to give him his money's worth, and not do something that looks odd."

"It is for the customer to decide what colour looks nice ---- it is his/her choice that matters. Tell me, why did you go against the master's wishes?"

The painter was beginning to lose patience and said somewhat rudely, "What colour was Khwaja Saheb talking about, pray? Neither blue nor white nor nothing, if you please! Whitish blue, or was it bluish white? What colour would that be, Quadir?" he asked his apprentice, sarcastically.

"What should I know about it, Vosta!\*\* You are the one who would know or perhaps Khwaja Sahib himself" Quadir laughed and the master painter joined him with a guffaw. Their hearty laughter galled Hasina and she turned on them with, "what do you two mean, laughing in this vulgar manner? It seems that you have never worked for decent people."

The painter turned a bit serious and said, “madam we have done our best, if we haven’t let God punish us! But the fact is that we just could not understand what colour Khwaja Sahib had in mind. And if we had even tried to do what he seemed to suggest, we would have made a laughing stock of ourselves—people would think that these are novices, who have just dipped a rag in colour and run it on the surface anyhow. After all a craftsman has to be true to his profession, he can’t kill himself by earning a bad name. The customer might be ignorant, but we cannot afford to be! Our motto is lose the customer but don’t lose your own touch.”

“Well, you have done what you have done, but you do not know the master of this house. That you will know soon, when he returns and sees your work,”

“Let us see whether Khwaja Sahib is pleased to see our work or not. In case he isn’t, we will not ask for payment at all. Madam, you will yourself see how he will not only pay us our wages, but something in addition too, to show his appreciation!”

Hasina went into another room and suddenly a thought came to her mind and she began to tremble in trepidation, quivering like a creeper. A shudder shook her whole body.

What thought was it that reduced her frame to a jelly? What was the fear that ran through her, making her a wreck of nervousness? It was the same thought that had driven her to lie to her daughter that day. It was the thought of what always happened when someone resisted her husband’s wishes in any way – a blood bath, an inevitability of someone or the other being drenched in blood. Once again, images rose in Hasina’s mind: the beggar and his blood-soaked leg, Pinky and her bleeding nose and mouth, Riffat decked with blood, like a bride all in red. That was the reason why she had resolved that never again would

anything be allowed to go against her husband's wishes in this household, not a leaf stir without his permission. The painter's deed had struck terror in her once again. The fear of the inevitable took away her peace. Every knock at the door drenched her in perspiration. Finally she left the house and went to Hamid Sahib's house to spend a little time with his wife. Within minutes of her departure, sultan Ahmad came home. He went into the living room and took one look at the ceiling. He saw that it was not the colour he had asked for. It was an entirely a different one. Dismayed and furious, he confronted the painter with, "what have you done? What colour had I asked you to use?"

His work over, the painter was now enjoying a smoke. He looked up and said, "Why, sir, don't you like it? Is it not good?"

His voice sharp with anger, sultan Ahmad said, "to hell with good or bad! I only demand to know why you went against my wishes!"

Turning the pipe of his *hookah* aside, the painter said, "Oh sir, the love with which we have done your work — let God be our judge! Besides, we did show it to the mistress."

Sultan Ahmad's ears pricked up at this, "what was that you said? She asked you to use this colour?"

"Would we dare to do our own will? Look sir, you will find the ceiling done in this very shade wherever you go. Do you think everyone else is mad? We also desire that the customer's money should be well spent, his house should sparkle, and no one should be accused of cheating," there was a slightly bitter note in the painter's voice now. Sultan Ahmad was deep in thought. After a little while, he broke his silence, "Tell me clearly, did the mistress of the house ask you to use this shade?"

“You can ask her when she comes, but for now, please pay us our wages—we have to go far.”

Sultan Ahmad sank back into thought, he did not seem to hear anything. The painter revealed an entirely different face now, “Come on now, what is our fault? We have done a full day’s work, not committed a crime! Please hurry up and settle our account now, we have to get home. We don’t have all the time in this world!” his tone held a veiled threat.

Sultan Ahmad had no stomach for argument any more, he seemed to have been sapped of all strength and vigour. In a listless voice, he asked, “How much is it?”

“There are two cans of paint. You had asked for the best quality and you can see the empty cans right there, with the price printed clearly on them. No one can alter it! And we are not the kind to cheat.

And then there is the wages for the two of us. Everyone knows the rates these days, so there won’t be any argument about that either. We can give you a concession of five rupees, is that all right?”

Sultan Ahmad calculated the amount and handed the money to him. “We are at your disposal whenever it should please you to call us again. For now, sir, it is Assalaam Aleykum!”, were his parting words. Sultan Ahmad continued to gaze on them till they were out of the gate.

After half an hour Hasina was back. It was twilight and she asked Riffat, “Is your father back?”

“Oh he was here as soon as you left. I have arranged the room, meanwhile. Papa’s bed is back in its own place and he is lying in it.”

“Where are the painters?”

“They are gone. They have been paid off.”

Her heart beating fast, Hasina went to her husband. She found him in darkness and switched on the light. He was in bed, a blanket covering his face. She lifted a corner of the blanket and saw his face. It had reverted back to the days of his illness, sallow, lifeless.

“Are you feeling all right? What is the matter? Why are you in this mood?”

He raised his head and reclining against the pillows, said, “I had suggested that you choose the colour yourself, hadn’t I? Didn’t I say that I need not to be consulted while choosing the shade for the ceiling? And after forcing me to express my opinion, how could you go and do exact opposite?”

“But how do you say that it was my doing?”

“They told me that it was the mistress who asked them to paint it in this colour. Did I not tell them, in your very presence, to give it the colour of the sky?”

“Let all our ills fall on their mischievous heads! Would I have asked them to do this? It is their own doing, while I was absent from the scene. They were horrible! Laughing and cracking jokes with each other. I couldn’t bear to look at them, leave alone talk to them.”

“So it was their own doing?”, he muttered to himself, “but what did they stand to gain from it? First they disobeyed my instructions, turned them upside down and then they told a lie! What was their purpose? Why did they do it?”

Finally Hasina begged him to give himself a break from his thoughts. “How does it matter, after all? Perhaps they thought this shade looked best. And come to think of it, it doesn’t look bad. But one can always change it, if one likes.”

Sultan Ahmad did not contradict it, perhaps he was persuaded by her. Hasina breathed a sigh of relief: “Thank God, there was no bloodbath this time”! But when she brought his food before him he did not eat much. Sleep eluded him that night. The painter’s words continued to ring in his ears: “As far as I am concerned, I have only to use my brush — it may be any colour, how does it matter to me?” — ‘Of course it was true; how would it matter to him? For him any colour would do, so he could easily have used the colour that I had asked for. Why didn’t he?’ He just could not understand it.

Tormented by these thoughts, he was tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Hasina gave him the tiny pill that the doctor had prescribed for his earlier sleeplessness. He began to doze and was soon asleep. But the midnight hours found him awake and staring at the ceiling. He switched on the light. The shiny green stared back at him. The artificial light had accentuated the colour — green from one end to the other. He began to think again: ‘I had wanted the cool colour of the sky, but what I got was this green; who was responsible? —The painter, but why did he do it? Wasn’t he saying that all colours were the same to him? Yes, he was right, how it would matter to him? He could easily have used the colour I had asked for, but he didn’t. Why were my wishes of

no account? Why does it happen that my wishes are always crossed? Is it that I always wish for something that is not possible? Or something that is not right? But I have never wanted something that was not right'. Some more time passed and again his eyes were fixed on the ceiling. The green seemed to have become ever brighter.

'What is it that I actually want? What are my wishes and desires after all. Just whether pinky pays with this toy or that, Riffat moves around or stays at home, the ceiling be painted green or blue? What else? Oh of course, a beggar be given a rupee or fifty paise coin in charity or I sit in this chair or that in my office. Suppose all these desires and wishes of mine get full-filled? Will it disturb the order of the universe, upset affairs of the world or make a difference to anyone, anything? Why should everyone want to do the opposite of what I want? Why are they hell-bent to crush, obliterate me? Why should I alone stand beaten everytime.

Now supposing everything goes contrary to how I wish it to be, what then? How does that affect me? What difference does it make? But why this pain, like a sharp knife slicing my heart, my whole being. God, whence this agony, suffering, pain! To what purpose, why?'

He began to feel a pain in his chest, throbbing head seemed to have been put in a vice. Swaying on his feet, he popped another little pill from a bottle into his mouth, staggered to his bed and fell into a swoon.

He spent the next day lying immobile in bed, covered by a quilt from top to toe. He just lay there, not eating, not speaking. No one from his family dared to say anything to him. He had told



Hasina that he was not feeling well and no one should disturb him.

The day after the next, he rose early, had a bath and dressed himself in fresh clothes. After a meal he left for the office and came back as usual in the evening. He seemed to be all right once again, eating normally, rising early and going to work on time, but there was one change in him ---- he would hardly speak a word. Always lost in his own thoughts, he had nothing to say to anyone any more.

One Saturday, coming early from office, he went straight into his room. He was holding a parcel under his arm, which he deposited in the room and came out. He asked Hasina for the cupboard key. She understood that he wanted to put the article, whatever it was, into the cupboard. She did not ask what it was because in the past, whenever he brought anything home, he would either hand it to Hasina, or, if it was something that had to be put under lock and key, asked her to do so herself, the key stayed with Hasina. But today he did not give it back to her after locking the cupboard. He told her that all the furnishing of the living room needed to be aired in the sun as there was a smell here that bothered him, and that he would spray the room himself.

The next day was a Sunday. Hasina and Riffat cleared out the room very early and spread the furnishings and floor coverings in the sun. The room was to be given a thorough cleaning today. The afternoon found Hasina and her daughter still busy, shaking the sheets and curtains, beating the matting with thick staffs to drive away the accumulated dust, when Pinky came out running to them, crying, "Mummy! Come quick! Papa hurt himself."

“What happened?” Hasina asked in trepidation.”

“He was painting the ceiling, standing on a chair which he had balanced on a teapoy, when he lost his balance and fell.”

Hasina ran into the room and saw her husband sprawled on the cement floor, his head covered in blood. There was blood on the floor and his clothes. Beating her breast, Hasina screamed, “A bloodbath again!”

On the floor lay an overturned can of paint and a paintbrush. A chair and teapoy lay in a heap one side. She took a look at the ceiling and saw that parts of it had been covered in strokes of a brush dipped in the colour of the sky.

## POET IN FOCUS

### PROF LALIT MANGOTRA

Translated by Suman K Sharma

A scientist by temperament and a poet by nature - such is Prof Lalit Magotra (born 1944,

Jammu). He holds a doctorate in Physics (High Energy) and is better known in Jammu as the

President of Dogri Sanstha, a premier literary organisation of the city. He began his career as

an assistant director of the Forensic Laboratory and soon after changed over to teaching

profession, retiring as the Head of Physics Department of Jammu University. Prof Magotra

writes both in Hindi and Dogri. Among his critically acclaimed works are Jameen, Hello

Maya, Dogri Sahitya – Ik Nazarsani, Shabd se Maun Tak and the Sahitya Akademi Award

winning collection of essays, Cheten Diyan Galiyan. In recognition of his untiring

dedication towards the cause of Dogri literature, he has received numerous awards both from

the Union Government and the Govt of Jammu & Kashmir.

1

I, THAT'S ME

My body, the stuff,

Is nothing but dust,

And shall go unto dust,

That's a fact, I know.

My limbs,

My lips, my eyes,

My head, my chest,

Are all but dust,

That's a fact, I know.

Yet, these too are true:

Though my lips be dust,

My smile is not;

My heart may be dust,

But the passion

That rages in it, is not;

My eyes may be dust

But the anticipation in them

Of meeting the loved one is not;

My ears may be dust

67

But their appreciation  
Of a sweet melody is not.  
My wishes and aspirations,  
My longings or my gloom,  
My yearning for fulfillment,  
And the desire to transcend all my limits  
Are anything but dust.  
My frame, which is  
But an insignificant part of my being,  
May well be dust  
But most of me in it  
Is certainly not.

2

#### PROFITIOUS WAKEUP

When I was small,  
Papa-ji taught me -  
'Getting up in the morning  
The first thing you must do  
Is open your palms  
And behold them devoutly!'  
Daily did I contemplate my palms

68

And the years passed by.  
One day, it suddenly dawned on me -  
Why had Papa-ji told me to scan my palms?  
He didn't mean that I should  
Read the lines on my palms;  
Those are just creases  
That appear when idle hands fold into fists.  
Then I thoroughly looked at  
The fingers of my hands -  
Each finger as distinct from the other  
As one man is from the next.  
Now, getting up in the morn,  
When I see my hands,  
I feel I don't wake up alone,  
But with me arise ten more;  
Now I am not one,  
But eleven of us,  
Ready to set out on our paths  
To a bright future.  
Now, I look with much affection  
At the fingers of my hands;

The fingers  
That handle a pen, a brush  
The fingers;  
That move on a key-board  
Cook food;  
The fingers  
That tighten nut-bolts and loosen them.  
The brain weaves dreams of future  
Fingers make future.  
What more propitious a wakeup be  
Than having a good look at one's fingers  
The first thing in the morning!

3

### PEACE AT A PRICE

I have bought peace at a price.  
Now, I say nothing to the driver  
Who overtakes me on the wrong-side,  
A smile of the defeated force  
On my face instead.  
Now I see  
And turn a blind eye

70

To that street-Romeo,  
Who teases a girl before me  
And goes away  
Whistling.  
Nor do I criticize any more  
A neta who hollers  
Like a common street-performer,  
For, I don't want to lose my friends  
Who adore the fellow.  
Now, I don't expose  
Those biggies who,  
By dint of their cunning, falsehood,  
Deceitfulness and sycophancy,  
Have climbed to the top of the society;  
Rather, I bid them Namaste  
Joining my two hands,  
And if I get an opportunity  
I offer them honour and respect too.  
I am at ease now -  
For I have bought peace at a price  
Yes, to buy peace,



I had to sell off my conscience;  
My conscience I sold off cheaply,  
As cheap as sell the netas theirs  
Those who defect overnight  
From one party to another  
Just to elude the ED raids.  
I am hugely content  
With my paid-for peace,  
With my conscience gone  
I loll in complacency unimpeded.

4

SHIV

They were there, all of them,  
But only Shiv drank the poison  
Why did only Shiv drink the poison?  
Why is it that Shiv only has to drink poison?  
It could be  
that  
Shiv does not wear a crown,  
Nor does He sit on a bejewelled throne;  
He has no desire for being called a god.

72

Others do need to wear crown,  
And sit on a throne  
To be seen as deities,  
Yet, even a slight jerk to their thrones  
May put their godliness in jeopardy.  
But,  
Shiv is cool  
Intoxicated, ecstatic, detached,  
Unabashed is He;  
His body smeared with ashes,  
Fearlessly  
Natraj dances in ecstasy,  
Creation's mate in creativity,  
He, whose taandav  
Eliminates the difference between life and death -  
What harm could some inconsequential poison  
Do to such as Him?  
Of Him even poison got scared -  
It couldn't muster courage enough  
To go down His throat.  
There is irreconcilable difference

Between looking like a god  
And being a god.  
Deities,  
Who don't long for crowns and garlands  
Have the sky's moon as their crown;  
And  
Earth's Nagraj  
Adorning their necks with his coiled body,  
Considers himself blessed.  
Truly  
Shiv has always been drinking poison.

5

WHERE DO I LIVE

You ask me where do I live -  
How do I tell you where do I live!  
I live for a little while in Sainik Colony,  
Where my house is located these days;  
I live more in Fattu Chaugan,  
In the houses and tenements of which,  
In compounds and roofs thereupon,  
In lanes and by-lanes where,

74

My childhood wanders even now;  
I live a little in Panjteerthi, Paraani Mandi  
And at Pakki Dakki as well,  
Where knots of warm friendship  
Got tied to my life's sacred thread,  
Where, in the garden of my heart,  
Wafted new fragrances of love and affection;  
And occasionally I also live in places  
Which I myself know little of;  
I live in many hearts,  
I live in my poems and stories,  
On the paper ploughed by my pen  
I live there too.  
What then to say, where do I live!

6

CREATOR

As You are God,  
So am I a poet;  
They call You The Creator,  
I too am a creator,  
Only that to author a work -

75

I first savour its pleasures and suffer its pains,  
I live it from this end to that,  
I laugh its laughs and cry its cries,  
In my bones and flesh, and cell to cell,  
In the very core of my being,  
I imbibe every single syllable of it,  
I colour it with my lifeblood  
And shape its shape -  
Only then does my work come into being.  
And You!  
You are mere God.  
Neither of flesh, nor of bones are You,  
And not of blood either.  
You are safe from all pain 'n' pleasure,  
Or, for that matter,  
Above any mirth or tears,  
You have only to meditate  
And lo! There's Creation!  
Why would you need creativity?  
Creation is just a game for you.  
Creator You are not, my God,

But a gamester, playing games.  
If there is indeed a creator somewhere,  
It's here, it's me!

7

#### AN APPEAL

Say it,  
What you have to say,  
Or, this moment  
Too shall slip away,  
Only to fall  
In that pile of stone-dead moments,  
Sitting on which,  
You habitually sing,  
Dirges to the times wasted,  
When your life still had  
A little warmth left in it.  
Say it,  
What you have to say,  
Liberate your emotions  
From your self-made jail –  
Or else you will be left,

77

Only to looking back  
And feel bad.  
Then you would have to concede  
Your own fault  
And admit to the murder  
Of your own desires.  
Say it,  
What you have to say,  
Or else,  
You'll stand accursed  
By the firmament  
Which would otherwise have echoed  
With your delicate emotions.  
Scented with the fragrance  
Of your aspirations,  
And commingled with the morning dew  
It would merge with the soil  
For the flowers of your desires  
To grow!  
So, say it,  
What you have to say.

8

UNTITLED

Teacher,

Admit me, once again, to the kindergarten,

Teach me, once again, all letters of the alphabet.

The last time the highest truth you tutored me

Now stands out as the greatest lie in equal measure,

Such big and numerous lies have packed my mind to the full,

There is no space left in it for anything more.

Teacher,

First, tutor me to unlearn what lies I have learnt,

Teach me this time little things which are but true -

Make me capable of learning by myself, I implore you.

If you are able to achieve what I wish -

Then, dear Teacher,

Admit me once again to the kindergarten,

Teach me there

New letters that burn the very paper

On which any lie is written.

Let me practise syllables

That render the tongue senseless

79



If ever a lie is spoken!

9

### THE HEARTBEAT

When the important tasks of the world

Go off to slumber after a hectic day -

I am told -

Sometimes then,

In the pervading silence,

Shrouded in the night's dark sheet,

A lilting song of love emerges

From the sleeping hills.

On emergence of this song,

A magical glow illumines the four corners;

The wind loses its sense of movement,

Directions get confused,

As the song echoes

From every particle of the surrounds.

And I am told –

Every single song of the world

Comes from this song.

And I am told –

80

The heartbeat in every bosom  
Waits for long to fall in tune  
With this song.  
And I am told –  
Much before the people rise,  
The song resonates and then stops,  
As if it never were there.  
People get up in the morn and ponder –  
Where does our heartbeat come from?

10

#### FRAME OF MEMORIES

This day when you are with me,  
These passing moments  
Do not seem as fine  
As they will tomorrow;  
For, tomorrow these moments  
Shall have been framed in glass.  
Tomorrow, there won't be  
This coming-and-going  
Of wayfarers around us,  
Nor will we hear

81

All this hullabaloo;  
Time's scissors  
Shall have cropped  
These incidentals  
Out of the frame  
Of our memories.  
In that frame shall lie intact, however:  
The daintiness of your smile,  
The glow on your face  
Of our joyous togetherness,  
Your spoken words  
Riding on the redolence  
Of your breath  
And the subdued, silent, sweet warmth  
Of love between us.  
How fetching these moments  
Shall seem to us tomorrow!

11

SMILE

You question me justly:

Why do I have

82

Such a firm faith in life  
Knowing fully well  
That it's meaningless?  
My friend,  
The sole cause  
Of my assuredness is  
Our capacity to smile;  
We can smile,  
Which means  
The source from which  
Life comes  
Has the know-how  
Of making us smile.  
This bit of intelligence  
Keeps reaffirming my faith in life,  
That's why I keep smiling  
Apparently for no reason.

12

HAPPINESS

Don't grant me such happiness, O Lord,

That makes me satiated,

83

And puts me off.  
As to keep an earthen lamp burning,  
There's a need to maintain  
A little but steady flow of oil;  
So, to sustain life's glow  
One needs, but a thin stream of happiness.  
Pouring at one go  
Too much of oil into the lamp  
Would drown the wick and quench the flame.  
That's why I pray –  
'Send me, O Lord,  
'Happiness in drips and drops,  
So my life keeps its shine!'

13

LIFE

Life –A poem inscribed  
On the formless monolith of Time.  
Life –  
That gives Time  
A shape, a form,  
Or else,

84

What is Time by itself?

14

MANY A TIME, SOME POEM...

Many a time, some poem

Comes to your mind,

But flies away in an instant.

If you try to catch it,

The tips of your fingers

Meet across it,

But the poem slips away.

Many a time, some poem,

Without prior notice,

Just pours down,

Like the monsoon rain

And inundates inside and out,

Filling you with such elation,

That the mere task

Of holding a pen to inscribe it on paper,

Seems to interrupt the joy of creation.

Many a time, some poem

Comes to mind, only to go off,

85

It returns, and after a pause,  
Disappears once again –  
Like a little, frolicsome girl  
Playing hide-and-seek  
And making faces at you.  
When, by running after her,  
You've tired yourself out –  
She comes with a playful smile  
And like a well-mannered child  
Sits in your lap unbidden,  
Many a time, some poem...

15

NIGHT

Don't you fall asleep so early –  
The night – your friend –  
The night is descending from the sky  
Just to chat with you.  
If you go to sleep,  
Who will be there  
She might talk to?  
Finding you asleep,

86

She would stand at your feet,  
Looking at your face,  
Waiting for you to get up.  
Tired of the long wait,  
The night would fade away  
Star by bright star -  
Its rich, velvety kohl colour  
Would gradually blanch.  
Finding her pale and sickly  
The wanton day would gulp her down;  
Don't you fall asleep so early –  
I pray.

16

#### A VAIN STRUGGLE

My friend –  
You held my hand  
In both your hands  
And in those your hands  
I felt the coldness of death.  
Your eyes brimming  
With intense love

87



And your body exerting full force –  
The force that had remained in you  
As the life's leftovers –  
You had placed my hand  
On your heaving chest, my friend!  
I am aware,  
That you knew you were dying,  
And I would still be living on.  
In truth, it wasn't me,  
But life itself - slipping as it was  
Fast from your hands –  
That you were trying  
O, so desperately to hold on, my friend!  
In your throes, dear, little did you know,  
That I too would be vainly struggling  
To cling on, with all my might, to dear life –  
When the time comes for it to forsake me.

17

#### EARTHEN LAMP

No roadside earthen lamp I am  
That you may boot to extinction!

88

An earthen lamp though I be,  
The spot on which I am lit  
Is beyond your puny reach,  
My light you may not see,  
But it makes you see all  
That's there to see.  
If you wish to be with me,  
You don't have to use your limbs -  
Climb the ladder of your conscience  
And bask in the warm glow of my being,  
An earthen lamp that I am.

18

#### THE PARTING

When scattered all around  
Will be the shiny mist of stars,  
And the Space would be embedded  
With countless whirligigs  
Of scintillating, colourful galaxies;  
And when in this world your hand  
Will be slipping away from mine,  
And when your fingers

89

Will be slowly sliding from mine,  
And when my eyes will be meeting yours  
For the very last time;  
And when melting in that glowing mist,  
You will be about to disappear  
To some unknown abode;  
And when I too  
Will be on the verge  
Of disappearing into the endless void of Creation;  
And when we both will come to know,  
That on parting from each other,  
In this infinite universe,  
We shall never meet again;  
Then, what meaning would  
This life would have for us -  
The life that we are living together -  
Would it ever have a meaning?

19

DEATH 1

There comes a time  
When Life strikes out your name

90

From its list of active partners.  
Steadily then you feel  
That on the life's stage,  
You play a hero no more  
But have turned a mere looker-on!  
You're given only so much time  
To shout out your praise  
Of the act going on the stage.  
Then, you're denied even that  
And made a mute spectator.  
The play goes on -  
The play in which  
You're left neither a place,  
Nor any role to perform.  
Your eyes are open still  
And you keep breathing too -  
In a manner of speaking -  
Even though the life in you  
Has long since gone.

20

DEATH 2

91

I hate to recede  
Silently into the dark,  
Cold fold of eternal night.  
I would rather plunge  
Into the ocean  
Like the fiery sun,  
Creating sky-high waves  
With my unspent fervour.  
I don't want to die -  
With all my desires sated  
And with no more heights to rise to -  
Like a limestone lying long dead.  
I would rather die –  
With all my desires simmering  
Inside my bosom,  
My longings unquenched,  
My aspirations soaring high.  
How I wish to be fully alive  
Until my very last breath  
And bid adieu to dear life,  
While I have all the zest in me!

## POETRY

### HEENA MAHAJAN

#### There was a butterfly

A tiny caterpillar on a leaf,  
Dreaming and resting, seeking relief.  
Eating and growing, she starts to rise,  
Nature's wonder unfolds before our eyes.  
Then the pupa formed, a delicate cocoon,  
Hiding the little one beneath the moon.  
Though beauty surrounds her, she's kept inside,  
Wondering why from the world she must hide.  
At last, the beautiful butterfly emerged,  
With soft, folding wings, she gracefully surged.  
Pumping life into her wings, ready to soar,  
But here comes a frog, lurking near the shore.  
His eyes widened, drawn to her beauty bright,  
He plotted his game, intent on a fright.

He stretched out his tongue and captured the fly—

The only witness was the vast, open sky.

Twisted and broken, her wings now torn,

Laughter echoed as her spirit was worn.

The newborn now lost, no longer alive;

The frog found his refuge, where he could thrive.

Every butterfly from the heavens sky

Appeals for justice, united to cry.

They shout out for mercy, for what was denied,

A reminder that beauty can't always abide.

### **Life on the Jammu route**

Passing by a Jammu route,

College girls laugh, carefree and cute.

Waiting at a gathering point with friends,

Giggling and chatting about the latest trends.

Then a matador comes to a stop,

Girls form a line, excited to hop.

The last one, a bit late to board,

The conductor kindly pulled her toward.

Collecting fare from each girl with care,

Every time, he refused to take from the last one there.  
With a smile, she thanked him for his grace,  
In his heart, she sparked a warm embrace.  
Only public transport in this bustling town,  
Transporting crowds from up to down.  
Loud music plays, the conductor's heart glows,  
Altaf Raja shuffles Atif Aslam when the whistle blows.  
On hot days, the matador's full of life,  
A bustling ride amidst joy and strife.  
He watched her laugh as they rolled along,  
A connection blossomed, subtle yet strong.  
His new hairstyle, all pointed spikes,  
Coins clinking softly, the rhythm strikes.  
At every stop, he shouts the names,  
But boarding at Parade, his battery drops, no games.  
Offering seats to ladies first,  
Jammu's crowd, polite and versed.  
Seats shifted for the girls to sit,  
The last one sighed, a moment of bliss, a bit.  
These matadors carry the hardworking class,  
With scents of sweat as they pass.



But the last one, crossing with her friends,  
Brings an aroma of perfume that blends.  
Their eyes met often, in fleeting glances,  
A love story hidden in small chances.  
In the chaos of life, a spark ignites,  
Misunderstandings entwined under city lights.  
These matadors are lifelines, no doubt,  
Navigating traffic, they twist and shout.  
Banging on doors, they run and halt,  
A cause of many accidents, a shared fault.  
Three years have passed with the same old tale,  
Their paths crossed, a love that seemed frail.  
On the last day of college, the last one turned,  
Said, "Thank you, brother," as the wheels started to churn.  
Ahead, traffic cop arrived,  
Fining the conductor for the loud music and overloads he strived.  
Loudspeakers thrashed, and his heart crashed,  
The last one lost in the fray, the conductor's dreams dashed.  
Yet in every ride, their story remains,  
A love forged in laughter, amidst joys and pains.  
For in each journey, love finds a way,

Life on the Jammu route, come what may.

### **A toothless smile**

Wrinkled face and shining eyes,  
Alone she weeps beneath the skies.  
Her pale cheeks tell a tale of grace,  
A toothless smile, time can't erase.  
Whispers of laughter once filled the air,  
Now only echoes of love and despair.  
Memories dance in the still of night,  
Yet no one is here to hold her tight.  
Left alone in a world so wide,  
With every heartbeat, her heartache hides.  
Each day she carries her heavy load,  
A heart once vibrant, now worn and bowed.  
When her heart feels it cannot rise,  
Even the stars will dim their eyes.  
The day her heart will feel that sink,  
God's eye will surely pause and think.

### **Born to be a star**

On a Diwali night,

A girl was born in the bright,

Her eyes were glittering, hugs held tight,

Every home aglow with vibrant light.

A falling star dropped from the sky,

To herald an angel with a joyful cry.

Happiness danced in the warm night air,

But where, I wonder, is the joyful flare?

And again, a father smiled wide,

His joy so immense, he couldn't hide.

He opened his arms, embraced her there,

His heart overflowing with love and care.

Her laughter and giggles filled the room,

A sweet melody, dispelling the gloom.

Days, months and years quickly flew,

Dad and daughter made memories anew.

Nothing to win, nothing to lose,

Dad loves her most; she's his muse.

May every girl embrace this grace,

Chasing happiness at her own pace.

Stop killing and harassing girls,  
They brighten your life; let their light unfurl.  
Value their dreams, let their spirits soar,  
For they are the stars worth fighting for.

### **Whispers of Jammu**

Kashmir may be the jewel of this nation,  
Yet hidden behind is Jammu's creation.  
A city rich with stories untold,  
Where Dogras stand proud, their spirits bold.  
With a heritage woven in love and grace,  
Jammu welcomed all in their time of disgrace.  
Open-hearted people, a tapestry of culture,  
Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians nurture.  
This land of Jammu, a haven of peace,  
Where harmony blossoms and sorrows cease.  
Raja Jambu Lochan, in wonder, would see,  
The beauty of equality, wild and free.  
Tigers and deer at the river's edge,  
Drinking together, a silent pledge.  
In this sacred space, no fear, no fight,

Nature's embrace, a pure delight.  
The king, mesmerized by this land's gentle hand,  
Bound every creature in a harmonious band.  
He cast aside hunting, chose kindness instead,  
For peace reigned supreme where love was spread.  
The beauty of Jammu lives in every heart,  
A city of temples, where kindness is art.  
Sparkling with brightness, a radiant sight,  
In every embrace, it ignites the night.

## **KIRAN KANCHAN**

### **Who knows**

Who knows  
What is in store  
For us in life  
Who knows what will happen  
The next day  
But we have  
Many expectations  
From life  
And in achieving them  
We spend so much

Time and energy  
And we forget to give  
The much-needed comfort to our life  
But many times  
Life gives many signals  
To pause and take rest  
But we ignore  
While running the race  
And the mood of life is spoiled.

### **Power of God**

When we arrived in this world  
And when is our departure  
Is only decided by God  
What is in our hand  
Is to play faithfully  
In the playground of God  
And man should keep in mind  
That we are mere puppets in the hands of God  
Our roles are decided by him  
What we have in hand  
Is to do good  
So that our soul remains  
Lighter and light of God illuminates its path.

## **FAISAL JAVAID**

### **Ruminations**

When the stars traverse the cosmic reign  
When thunderous boom descends on earth

When the wind blows the veil off earth's murky secrets  
I rise to speak up for truth

When the city lights cast a shadow on dark  
When my inner self is torn into two  
When my dreams turn into ashes  
I rise to speak up for truth

When my self dies and decomposes  
When worms eat into my mortal frame  
When I cease to exist in any form  
I rise to speak up for truth.