

# In Face of Assaults on Hinduism

**BRAHMA DUTTA SHARMA**



Published by :

**ARUNDHATI VASHISHTHA ANUSANDHAN PEETH**

# **IN FACE OF ASSAULTS ON HINDUISM**

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**2019**

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Prayagraj

***Published by:***

Arundhati Vashishtha Anusandhan Peeth,  
21/16, Mahaveer Bhawan,  
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Edition: 2019

ISBN: 978-81-931312-8-2

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***Printed in India***

Published by Dr. Chandra Prakash Singh for Arundhati  
Vashishtha Anusandhan Peeth, Prayagraj, India

Letter Graphics: **Tirupati Enterprises**, Civil Lines, Prayagraj

## From the Publisher's Pen

Bharat has never invaded any country in her known history because we considered the entire world one family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*). When the sage in the Vedas, while praying for the happiness of all, for the good health of all and for the well-being of all without all without any discrimination sang :

*sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niramaya*

*sarve bhadrani pashyantu ma kashchid duhkh bhagbhaveta*

He rose above the narrow walls of colour, caste, creed and country and made himself a spokesperson of the whole human race. It is that breadth of vision that is needed today more than ever in order to enable the people of the whole world to make their talents bloom and to use them for the genuine progress of mankind. We have every right to be proud of the fact that it is our Hindu thought that produced sages having such a broad outlook. There is an unbreakable unity in our hoary past and the glorious present. However, it is not easy to understand Bharat at the first sight. The famous Indian historian R.K. Mukherjee rightly observes: "...[Any superficial observer] fails to discover the one in the many, the individual in the aggregate, the simple in the composite." The geographical diversity and climatic variations of this vast land have affected the food habits, dress and housing patterns, social environment, economic activities and language of the people. These factors in turn have influenced the thinking and philosophy of the people which has given birth to various kinds of social, economic, and political and religious institutions. Vincent A Smith has rightly observed: "India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying

fundamental unity far more profound than that produced either by geographical isolation or by political superiority. That unity transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners and sects.” Indian culture is unique as it takes into account the aesthetic instinct as well as the spiritual impulses of a human being. Many great cultures that developed in different countries and regions of the world have perished or have been replaced by other cultures. However Indian culture has had an enduring character. Despite major changes and upheavals significant threads of continuity can be traced throughout the course of Indian history right up to the present day.

If we put this broad vision by the side of the other visions we find a glaring contrast. The narrow visions have caused humanity immense misery: the history of the world is red with the blood of millions who were killed because they refused to adopt the religious or political views being imposed on them. Such unfortunate incidents occurred in India as well as overseas. However, it can be asserted with pride that in its long history Hinduism was never forced upon anyone at all. As a matter of fact the votaries of Hinduism have been victimized for their metaphysical views over the ages and undergone manifold hardships. The Hindus always preferred to be persecuted rather than persecuting others. Despite this different religious groups have tried to invade India in different ways and manners directly and surreptitiously. St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), after whom we have hundreds of institutions in India, came on a proselytizing mission: “I want to free the poor Hindus... They are as perverse and wicked a set as can anywhere be found ... . If there were no Brahmins in the area, all Hindus would accept conversion to our faith”. Maria Wirth in her blog writes: “The clergy of [Muslim and Christian] religions [tell] their own flock: “Hindus go to hell, if

they don't convert to the true religion. ... But God/Allah is great. He will punish them with eternal hellfire." Elsewhere she writes: "Fundamentalists see it as their duty to make all of humanity accept Islam and often take literally commandments in the Quran like 'Strike terror in the hearts of unbelievers.'" There prevail a number of prejudices, misconceptions, and misunderstandings about Hinduism in the world. Many of these misconceptions owe themselves to the vilification campaigns and propaganda being carried on, perhaps, in order to divide the Hindu community and weaken it. Therefore, there is an urgent need to put things in their right perspective.

The world's first university was established in Takshashila in 700 BC. Ayurveda is the earliest school of medicine known to mankind. So are our Vedas the first books of the world. The Indian *Rishis* and *acharyas* have enlightened and guided mankind from time to time selflessly. No wonder that in Dr. Brahma Dutta Sharma's novel *In Face of Assaults on Hinduism* the protagonist, is also a teacher. He has to face queries and questions about not only English authors but also India and Hinduism. This teacher in his characteristic way tries to answer their questions and, thereby, to remove their misunderstandings and prejudices. The variety of the ways in which he relates to the people around him is itself a very interesting dimension of the novel. The characters in the novel and interactions between the protagonist and each one of them deserve a careful study. The relations which develop between the characters range from friendly to inimical. What lies at the root of each one of them also deserves careful analysis. The protagonist of the novel seems to hold that hatred does not have any place in the world. Love is the only way to connect with the world. Love breaks all barriers including political, social, cultural, religious, racial and national. We are all the branches of one tree. The root is one. The world is our root; the

nations are its branches, and the people are its leaves. Therefore there is no enmity between various characters of the novel despite the difference in their viewpoints. Dr Sharma's book is also a good guide of the do's and the don'ts to all those who go to the alien work places in the gulf countries. This novel is also different from most other novels being written these days: one can read it in the company of even one's daughter and son. The novel is valuable for its language and style too. I am delighted to publish it and take it to the readers' desks. Both the author and I will welcome suggestions for the improvement.

Dr. Chandra Prakash Singh

## Preface

In this age when the world has turned into a global village people with divergent metaphysical, cultural and ideological leanings come together and have opportunities to exchange views on these issues and resolve their differences by a meaningful dialogue. This is a happy development as it can lead to a better understanding of divergent ideologies and identities. If properly used these opportunities can bridge the gaps between them and can enable them to understand each other better and also to modify one another's views in the positive direction.

The protagonist of this novel is an orthodox Hindu whose stay in a country of West Asia gives him an opportunity to compare and contrast his religious and social views and practices with those of the natives of that country and vice versa. No doubt, he chooses not to change his religious ideology but he has an opportunity to persuade his colleagues and students to study his ways sympathetically. No doubt, there is no give-and-take between the two religious ideologies here, yet the exchanges of views the two sides lead the parties to know each other's views and practices better and accept the idea of peaceful co-existence. Since attempts to bring about regimentation in different parts of the world caused widespread bloodshed, peaceful co-existence seems to be the only course left open. So it is an imperative these days to accept diversity as the strength of a cultured society and to cease making attempts to replace it by uniformity. Let the days when attempts were made to have uniformity in a society be a part of history.

I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Chandra Prakash who so readily agreed to publish this book. My heartfelt thanks to AVAP which Shri Ashok Singhalji had conceived as a platform for Indian intellectuals to make policies for the welfare of the country. I dedicate this book to the memory of the great soul and visionary, Hindu Hriday Samrat, popularly known as Shri Ashok Singhal.

15 June, 2018

***Brahma Dutta Sharma***

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## **Chapter One**

### **The Hindu Final Rites**

"Sir, I have read in some books that in the ancient times people in your country used to burn to ashes the bodies of their dead kinsfolk. Is it true?" asked Mohammad.

Mohammad was one of my students studying at the University for the degree of Bachelor of Education in the year 2008-09. It was in the month of April (or May 2009?) that Mohammad came to me one day when I was on my way back home from the University. Like many other students he was curious to know the details of the Indian ways and the other facts about India, and often came to me with various kinds of questions and queries in this regard. Whenever he came to me I heard him patiently and tried to answer all his questions without getting offended or even disturbed though his language was often ironical, sometimes sarcastic, and sometimes even satiric.

"We the Hindus of India burn the dead bodies of our kinsfolk. We do so even now, not to speak of the ancient days. In order to dispose of their dead some communities bury them, some set them ablaze, and some leave them in the open so that birds may eat up their flesh. The Muslims and the Christians bury their dead just as the Muslims of your country do," said I.

"Sir, to tell you the truth, I know that you people burn the dead bodies even now. But in my question put to you I attributed this practice to the ancient Indians so that you might not feel offended by my question. As a matter of fact, I was giving you an opportunity to defend your community by saying that the practice had been discontinued. But you are honest enough to accept that the practice is prevalent even now. That is very good. I am happy to find that. Yet, please, tell me whether the people in your country burn the

dead bodies of even their own parents?" said he.

Thus Mohammad was talking about the ways of the Indian Hindus rather than those of all the Indians. He seemed to believe that the country of India was populated exclusively by the Hindus.

"Yes, we do that without any discrimination. Moreover, you can burn the dead bodies of only your parents. Who else will allow you to burn the dead bodies of his parents? A dead body is set ablaze by the dead person's eldest son or, if the eldest son is not present, by the youngest son, and, in case neither of them is present, by any of the other sons if any. If the man has no son, his dead body is set ablaze by the nearest male kinsman. Mind you, only the males are allowed to set the pyre ablaze. Daughters or nieces have not been given the right to set a man's pyre ablaze because it is believed that a woman tends to honour her husband's wishes and instructions and can set ablaze a pyre if her husband asks her to do that without ascertaining whether the man can be revived. We believe that a son will not set the body ablaze until he is sure that the man cannot be revived," said I.

"Very bad, very bad!" said he.

"What is bad about this, Mohammad? You bury your dead kinsfolk and make earth consume their dead bodies, we make fire consume them. These are only two of the various ways adopted by various communities of the world to dispense with the dead bodies. A dead body is no longer a human being. It begins to decay fast and, unless some preservatives are used, begins to send out a repulsive odour. It may have in it the bacteria causing some contagious or infectious diseases too. If it is burnt to ashes one is absolutely sure to escape the harms it can cause to any of the living people. That is the reason why we see to it that not even an ounce of the dead flesh is left unburnt so that no germ is left to harm the living human beings. We have to take care of the living human beings as much as that of the dead ones," said I.

"But how can one be cruel enough to burn the dead bodies

of one's own parents? I am a little sentimental and I cannot imagine how a person can become so hard-hearted that he sets ablaze the dead body of his own father, or that of his own mother. Your parents gave birth to you: they brought you up with care; they took infinite pains to bring you up. Your mother fed you with her own blood when you were in her womb; she made you suck milk from her breasts for about two years when you were an infant. Your father toiled hard in order to gratify your needs and fulfil even your wild desires during your childhood and boyhood days. Do you not feel any sense of guilt or any pricks of conscience in burning their bodies? How can you set their bodies ablaze? I fail to understand the psychology that leads you to burn the dead bodies of your parents," said he.

"I appreciate your sentiment, Mohammad, but as there is no disrespect to the parents in burying their dead bodies, there is no disrespect to them in burning their dead bodies. A dead body is a dead body. It is no more a living being and it has to be treated as a dead body, rather than as a living being. We have to do to a dead body what we shall never do to a living body. Will you think of burying the living bodies of your parents? But you do bury their dead bodies. Don't you? Several communities of the world do that, For example, the Christians bury their dead kinsfolk. Do you have any sense of guilt when you bury the dead bodies of your parents?" said I.

Mohammad's face gave the impression that all my arguments had gone unheard and that he was ready to argue further.

"Did Doctor Kumar also burn the dead body of his father last month when he went to India on the death of his father?" asked he.

"Doctor Kumar went to India chiefly to burn the dead body of his father, though the job had already been done by Kumar's son as Kumar reached India four or five days after the death and they did not want to wait for the last rites that long. As a matter of

fact in our country every Hindu father desires that his dead body be set ablaze by his son and prays to God that it be done," said I.

"Very bad! Very bad!!!" said he.

Dr. Kumar was an assistant professor from India teaching with me at the university. His father had died a few weeks before.

"Oh, Mohammad, you remain unconvinced even in face of the arguments I have given. Maybe my arguments have not been able to calm your sentiments. Or rather they seem to have hurt your sentiments," said I.

"The very idea of burning the dead bodies of parents sounds cruel to me," said Mohammad.

"Mohammad, the soul leaves a body when it realizes that the body is too worn out to be of any use to it and once the soul goes out of the body, it never comes back. It is the soul that is the person, the body acts as the garb of the soul. So even if you preserve the body it is not going to be of any use to the soul. The soul gets another body, a new one, to use as its garb and thus begins its next life. If you preserve the dead body you are preserving a useless thing, not the person. If you know the true metaphysics, the practice of burning dead bodies will not hurt your sentiments," added I.

Since my arguments had not enabled me to convince Mohammad, I was in search of some other arguments so that I might succeed in convincing the next anti-Hindu knight attacking Hinduism.

I had been living in Yemen only for a year or so at that time. I kept in mind that I did not speak against any religion, but I was not willing to ignore unsound charges levelled against my religion.

One day a year or so later when I was talking to Abdul, a fellow teacher in the University, somebody whispered to Abdul, perhaps to create in Abdul's heart a feeling that I belonged to an ethically inferior community, that the Hindus burnt their kinsfolks' dead bodies to ashes. He seemed to be saying this as if that practice were a very serious charge against Hinduism and its practitioners.

Abdul appeared to have been shocked to hear this and asked me whether the charge was true.

"Yes, in most cases we do not bury the remains of the dead, but burn them to ashes instead," said I.

"But burning the dead bodies of kinsmen sounds cruel. Doesn't it? We cannot even think of burning the bodies of our parents. Why do you not bury them?" said he.

"We bury the dead bodies of infants, and yogis and let river waters carry to the sea the dead bodies of those who have been bitten by snakes or have died of small pox. In the other cases the dead bodies are burnt to ashes," added I.

"Why do you burn the dead bodies? How can you set the body of a kinsman ablaze? I mean the bodies of your mother, father, brother, sister and your wife. I cannot even think of doing this," asked Abdul.

"There are many reasons behind this practice of ours. One of them is that this is a fool-proof way to get rid of the harmful germs or bacteria which might be infesting the dead body and might cause diseases to the persons who come into contact with it. Secondly, we do so, perhaps, because ours is a densely populated country and we do not have at the moment sufficient land even for agricultural purposes. If we build a Taj Mahal for every dead person, within a year, perhaps, we shall find ourselves to have been pushed into the sea by these Taj Mahals, not to talk of having land for agricultural purposes. Our practice of burning the dead bodies enables us to serve millions just in a small plot of land of eight feet by four feet, preferably on the bank of a river or some other water body, and we can go on serving them like this for millions of years, if not for ever, because it will never be very difficult to arrange a plot of this size in every village. We have devised this way keeping in mind human needs of not only this moment but also those of the distant future," said I.

"Is that so?" asked Abdul.

"Yes, it is a criminal wastage of land to build a Taj Mahal for a dead person, especially in a densely populated country where the required area of land is not available for even agricultural work and where every farm-owner complains that he needs more land. Just imagine what will happen when for every dead person you build a Taj Mahal. No inch of land will be left for your descendants to build their houses on or to do agricultural work just in a course of a few years," said I

"Is that so?" said he.

"No doubt, we pity the person who has died and we pay homage to him, but he is not the first person to die, nor the last one. One who is born dies inevitably sooner or later. We should dispose of a dead body in such a way that proper homage is paid to the dead person and the rest of the world continues to live in the normal manner. All this we take care of," said I.

"Is that so? said Abdul again.

"And you will be surprised to know that we provide food to our dead ancestors one day every year in the period of sixteen days of Shraaddha in the months of Bhadrapad and Kwar (=Aashwin) from the full-moon day of Bhadrapad to the no-moon day of Kwar. During this period on the lunar date the ancestor left for his heavenly abode we give food to the crows and the Brahmins with the belief that the food given to the crows and the Brahmins reaches the ancestors. We believe that the soul is immortal and that it is the body alone that dies while the soul continues to exist even after death and that it enters some other body and begins to lead another life. This practice of the shraaddha observed by the Hindus was appreciated by a Muslim ruler of India named Emperor Shahjahan, the Mughal ruler who built the Taj Mahal in the memory of his wife Mumtaj Mahal," said I.

"What did Shahjahan say in this regard? " asked Abdul.

"You know Shahjahan had been imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb when the latter had become king of India. Shahjahan,

when he was a prisoner, complained that he was not being provided even water in adequate quantity and he sent a message to Aurangzeb that he (Aurangzeb) was such a bad son that he was not providing even water to his living father whereas the Hindu sons were so good that they provided both water and food even to their dead parents and other forefathers. On this ground I maintain that in no religion other than Hinduism are people as respectful to their ancestors as are we the Hindus," said I

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## **Chapter Two**

### **The Day Pakistanis Attacks Mumbai**

I joined Aiz University as a professor of English on the 30th of November 2008. I had left my home in India for Yemen on the 27th of November 2008. In the evening of that day when I was waiting for my flight to Mumbai at the Indira Gandhi International airport of Delhi, the Doordarshan telecast the news that some terrorists had stormed into a hotel in Mumbai and had killed some of the persons present there. The news bulletin also included in it the news item that the security forces had stationed themselves at strategic points around the hotel and an exchange of fire was going on between them on the one side and the aggressors on the other. When I reached Mumbai at about 10:00 o'clock, I found many persons talking about this attack by some Pakistanis. The exchange of fire was still going on and the police people at the airport were asking the people outside the entry points to disperse so that they might protect the airport adequately in case it was targeted by these aggressors or their accomplices.

Later on it was learnt that a Pakistani citizen named Hafiz Saeed had masterminded this attack and ten aggressors had come from Karachi to Mumbai by sea route in a boat to kill Indians present in the hotel. The police people took four days to overpower these aggressors and to bring the situation under control. These ten aggressors killed one hundred and sixty-four persons including eighteen police officers and two commandos, and injured at least three hundred persons. I wondered how these people from a foreign country succeeded in entering India and in carrying out terrorist activities there. Did they do this without the help of some Indian citizens? I was feeling guilty as I was leaving my family in

India in such a situation. I asked myself as to how the members of my family would be able to protect themselves in my absence. To me India of those days was a country where no town seemed to be beyond the reach of the Pakistani infiltrators. However, I was not in a position to make any change in my programme at that stage. I was already late by several weeks, if not months, in the eyes of the University I was going to join.

It was on the 28th of November 2008 that I flew from Mumbai to Sana'a at about 5:00 A.M. The flight took four hours and ten minutes and I reached Sana'a at about 9: 10 A.M. by my watch though the local time was 6:40A.M. A representative of the University was waiting for me at the airport and he took me to Aiz. On the 29th the University was closed with the result that I was able to join the University as a Professor of English on the 30th of November 2008.

I was posted at the Urba Campus of the University. I had been appointed to teach mainly Linguistics, especially Transformational Generative Grammar, to the B. Ed. students. I was fortunate enough to have there with me in the Department of English two Indian professors. One of them was Dube and the other was Indra. Dube was working as a Professor while Indra was working as an Assistant Professor. So we three Hindus found ourselves in an Islamic country having a culture much different from ours. Dube was the Chairman of the Department. Dube and Indra had joined the University in 2007 and had familiarized themselves with the ways of the residents of Yemen considerably. Nay, they had acquired modestly working proficiency in Arabic too, with the result that they were able to do even shopping in the market quite easily. Since I was a comparatively new man there, I had to depend on these colleagues of mine a great deal not only for information about the University rules and practices but also for dealings in the market. Rather I had the advantage of taking their help in translating Arabic utterances into English or Hindi. I did that in the university

as well as in the market. And they knew it.

I found Yemen both akin to and different from India. In some respects Yemen was like India, but in others it was different. Here people looked like Indians in form and colour but it was not easy to talk to them because very few of them knew English or Hindi and my proficiency in Arabic was very low. Many of the faces reminded me of my friends and acquaintances in India. In Yemen the vehicles on the road keep to their right while in India the vehicles keep to their left. When I was being driven to Aiz from Sana'a for a couple of minutes I feared an accident was going to occur whenever I saw a vehicle coming from the other side because Mohammad, my driver, kept to his right and did not move the motor-car to his left. However, when it had happened three or four times I realized that in Yemen the vehicles were kept to the right side of the road and not to the left side unlike India. Later I came to know that in the West too they had two different practices: in Britain they keep to their left side while in the U.S.A. they keep to their right. This makes a difference in the designs of the vehicles too: in India the driver's seat is on the right side of the vehicle but in Yemen his seat is on its left side. It was in Yemen that I became aware of these alternative possibilities and practices. Since I had become accustomed to the Indian ways during my 70 year long stay in India, the ways of the people of Yemen looked odd and made me feel uncomfortable with them.

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### **Chapter Three**

#### **I Tried to Learn Arabic**

The main problem I encountered in Yemen was the linguistic one: I was living in an Arabic-speaking country without having any proficiency in Arabic. It was very difficult to find a man proficient in English but until I met an English-knowing man I was not able to get answers to my questions. Gestures were not always enough. Even in the University offices English-knowing persons were rare. The condition in the market was worse. In the office of the Vice Rector (Academic Affairs) there was only one English-knowing man, namely Feef. Ansoor, the man who had been entrusted with the task of dealing with the teachers knew only two expressions of English, namely 'thank you' and 'okay'. In the office of the Head of the Urba Campus there was no English-knowing person. They used exclusively Arabic in all the offices including the Banks, the Work Permit office and the Immigration Office. So I realized that unless I learnt Arabic, I would be facing endless problems everywhere.

I caught hold of a book meant for adults learning Arabic. I had learnt the Urdu alphabet as a student of class one at the age of five in India in the year 1947-48. So I found re-learning Arabic letters not very difficult. My students too helped me in learning Arabic. Rather they were zealous to teach me Arabic. There was a girl student named Reena. She used to come to me quite frequently and treated me almost as her student. I was taught Arabic also by Khowla a little later. I took the help of my compatriots too to learn the language. But the shortage of time was a handicap as I liked to devote most of my time to keeping my knowledge in my field up-to-date.

Abdul Wased, the owner of the house in which I lived, was a man of my age. He was able to speak English quite well. That is why when we met each other, we talked in English. He was good enough to help me as a translator when I talked to some Arabic-speaking person not knowing English. So he must have felt that I did not know Arabic at all. One day when I went to buy milk from a general merchant I found Abdul Wased too standing there.

*“haleeb ithnain packets, gwafa juice wahid packet”*  
(Two packets of milk and one packet of guava juice), said I.

“You speak Arabic, Doctor Sharma?” exclaimed Abdul Wased.

“I have learnt a few hundred words of your language Abdul Wased,” said I.

One day Abdul Qavi Husaini, Assistant Rector of the University, asked me how much Arabic I had learnt, I said I was able to write my name in Arabic.

“Write it on this piece of paper,” said he  
I took the piece of paper and wrote on it my name in Arabic.

“Ten marks out of ten! Good!” exclaimed he.  
However, he added that my progress in Arabic was not as good as that of Mesh Singh as the latter had acquired proficiency in Arabic to the extent that in the market he was able to haggle with the taxi drivers in Arabic.

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## **Chapter Four**

### **At the Barber's Saloon**

One day when I went to a barber's shop to get my hair cut and instructed the man to cut my hair no doubt, but to spare my queue (the tuft of hair at the central point of the head left uncut), he asked me why I had developed the queue, why I was nursing it and what purpose it served.

The Hindus are the only community in the world harbouring the practice of leaving the tuft of hair at the central point of the head uncut. It is a very ancient practice and an orthodox Hindu religiously protects his queue. Even the modernized or Europeanized Hindus do not leave the central point of the skull unprotected as they never get their heads shaved and have long hair on the whole of the head. In other words all the Hindus, orthodox or otherwise, consciously or unconsciously try to protect the central point of the skull with their hair.

“It serves as an antenna and keeps you connected with the network,” said I with a smile on my face.

It was a joke: I was trying to avoid answering the question. I think I did not know the right answer at that time. However, his assistant came to my rescue and said that he was familiar with this practice of the Indians as he had seen many Indians in Aden observing this practice. He was not able to explain the purpose but he defended me with the argument that I was not the only Indian observing the practice. I was thankful to him for coming to my rescue. But the head barber who was going to cut my hair was not satisfied. And I was expected to give a convincing argument.

The practice of having a queue has been being adhered to

by the Hindus for ages. This practice has been mentioned by the famous Hindi poet Bhushan when in one of his songs he says that Chhatrapati Shivaji, the Maratha chieftain, protected the queue of the Hindus when its existence was being threatened under the rule of the Mughal rulers, especially Aurangzeb. Bhushan was a contemporary of Shivaji who was the ruler of Maharashtra in the eighteenth century A. D.

The name 'queue', as has already been pointed out, is given to a strand of hair growing at the central point of the skull left uncut. This point is directly linked with the vital inner organs of the body and needs proper protection. And the minimum protection that can be given to it is that the hair standing at it is left uncut. That is the reason why the Hindus do not cut this strand of hair. The practice of keeping a longer strand of hair serving as the queue is observed in the twenty-first century only by the orthodox Hindus. Since these days people like to have long hair on the whole of the head, they do not feel the need of having a separate longer strand of hair at the centre of the head. Thus no Hindu gets the hair at the centre of his head cut and, thus, each of them honours the practice of protecting the central point of the head.

But the barber who was cutting my hair did not understand English, and my knowledge of Arabic at that time was very meagre. So it was impossible for me to convince him that the Hindu practice of having a queue was not an eccentricity.

The queue is one of the caste-marks of the Hindus. The Hindus have some other caste-marks too. The *yagyopaveet* is one of them. It is a set of three threads made to hang from the left shoulder to the right side of the belt. Sometimes they wear two such sets. This is regarded as the minimum possible clothing for the upper part of the body. If it is very hot and you find it inconvenient to wear some kind of tunic or *kurta*, you can do away with the tunic/ *kurta* if you are wearing a *yagyopaveet* and you can claim that you are not entirely uncovered. This *yagyopaveet* is sometimes

translated into English as the 'sacred thread'. According to the established practice in the Hindu society this thread is not to be touched with unclean hands. So this thread reminds one constantly that one has to remain clean and not to keep one's hands unwashed for a period longer than is strictly necessary. The caste-Hindus, especially the Brahmins, are expected to wear the *yagyopaweet* all the twenty-four hours. This thread is regarded as sacred not only because one is expected not to touch it with unclean hands but also because it helps one keep oneself clean and not to submit to uncleanliness or a vice of any kind.

Another caste mark of the Hindus is the *tilak*. The word '*Tilak*' is a Hindi word used to describe a full-moon like mark made on the forehead with turmeric or vermilion or sandal wood paste. The mark has a few variations too: sometimes one paints the whole of the forehead with the paste, and at others only a part of it. In most cases one makes a round moon-like figure at the point where the two brows and the nose meet. This is the point which plays a very important role in enabling a man to think.

Usually a Hindu prays to God twice a day, once in the morning and the second time in the evening as at either time the day and the night meet. Each prayer is called *sandhya*. The Hindus regard the meeting points as auspicious whether they are the meeting points of rivers, or of the night and the day. One prays in one's mother tongue or in Sanskrit. On auspicious occasions like those of the naming ceremony, the marriage ceremony, and the funeral rites they pray in Sanskrit. Those who do not know Sanskrit take the help of priests and make them chant the *mantras* from the *Vedas* on such occasions. I have in mind the marriage of Arun, a former student of mine. This former student of mine was working as a teacher in Arunachal Pradesh. He fell in love with a tribal girl there and married her. But his mother came to me and said that the court marriage or the marriage ceremony in the tribal way was not acceptable to her as the *mantras* from the *Vedas* had not been

chanted at the time of that marriage ceremony. She accepted the bride as her daughter-in-law only after a priest had re-conducted the marriage ceremony in which he chanted the traditional *mantras* and made the bride and the bridegroom go round the fire four times and observe such traditional formalities.

However, this should not be taken to mean that one who does not pray to God twice a day is not a Hindu. There are many Hindus who pray to God only once a day. You may also find Hindus who follow no rule of prayer at all. The Hindu religion is very liberal and allows a lot of freedom to its followers and there is a lot of variation in the Hindu rituals.

Those were the days when I felt home-sick and wished myself back home. I felt I was not behaving in a responsible manner as I had left my family under nobody's care and that my wife and my sons had nobody to help them at the time of need. So long as I was in India I was doing something for them almost every day. I asked myself as to who would do for them what I had been doing. This gave me a sense of guilt. But I also knew that since my job in India was not as well-paid as the one in Yemen, I would have to stay in Yemen for many years. I even feared that there was no possibility of my ever leaving Yemen during my life-time. One day we talked about this possibility and what transpired between us is being recorded below.

“Now we may have to stay here forever and get buried under the ground, like the non-Hindus, when we die. There is little possibility of our going back to India and get our mortal remains set ablaze by our sons on the bank of the Ganga. I feel it is not likely that the ashes of our mortal remains will be immersed in the waters of the holy Ganga,” said I.

“Why so?” asked Dube ji.

“The fat salary we get here will keep us here as we cannot earn that much money in India now as we have retired. Even the members of our families will like us to be here so that we may keep

on earning handsome salaries. After all the members of your family like you only so long as you are an earning hand, and one who does not earn becomes a liability in the eyes of the family,” said I.

These words of mine upset my fellow Indians and like me they too seemed to feel like going back to India as early as possible. But the compulsions of life are weightier than our feelings and emotions. And we felt helpless in face of them. No Hindu likes his mortal remains to be buried under the ground. He wants them to be burnt to ashes and the ashes to be taken by the Ganga into the Bay of Bengal. I remember that one day when I went to the market in India a shopkeeper was shouting at his son and was cursing him for his laziness.

“If you are that lazy you will not leave behind you fuel enough for your sons even to burn your mortal remains to ashes and they will have to bury you under the ground as the non-Hindus are buried,” said he.

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## Chapter Five

### My Eating Habits Aroused Curiosity

The Urba Campus of Aiz University was facing the problem of the shortage of class-rooms in the sense that often there was no room available for a class to be held, and also in the sense that all the teachers of the Department of English had to use one and the same room as the staff room. This state of affairs, no doubt, had a few minus points, but it also had a plus point: we, the teachers of the Department, were able to meet in the same room without making any extra effort for the purpose and enjoyed the company of one another.

One day when I was there in this room we started talking about biscuits as edibles. I said I did not eat them as all so-called high quality biscuits had in them egg as one of the ingredients.

“You do not eat eggs? Why? You do not relish them?” said Yasmeen.

“I am a vegetarian, a *nabati*, Yasmeen. We the vegetarians eat basically what can be got from plants and trees, though we do not abstain from milk and other dairy products. You may say that a vegetarian should not consume even dairy products as we get milk from animals, not from plants. But we the vegetarians of India do not find any objection in consuming dairy products as in order to get milk from animals we do not deprive them of life. We hold this view because milk is the only food nature has provided to the human infant, and so every human being begins his life with consuming milk. So milk is not a forbidden edible for man in the eyes of Ishwar, the Supreme Being,” said I.

“That means you do not eat eggs because your religion has declared eggs inedible for man. Is that so?” said she.

“Yes, the orthodox Hindus are strictly vegetarian people. I am aware of the fact that not all Hindus are vegetarians. Many Hindus eat flesh. But in many parts of India, especially Gujrat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana the Hindus are vegetarians and consider flesh-eating to be sinful. But that is not the only reason why I am a vegetarian. I am a rationalist and this is my firm conviction that since I do not want any animal to treat me as its food, I have no right to make any animal my food. If in order to keep myself alive I deprive an animal of its life, I am acting against the principles of ethics. It is much more ethical for one to eat leaves of trees than deprive an animal of its life to keep oneself alive. I, thus, believe that it is unethical to eat flesh or eggs,” said I.

When we were discussing the issue, an argument that Ahmad, a colleague of mine in India, used to advance in this context came to my mind. He used to say that some eggs were unfertile and that no life was being harmed if one consumed unfertile eggs. I should have asked him whether he ate only unfertile eggs and abstained from fertile eggs. I know he was a non-vegetarian and ate not only fertile eggs but also fish, mutton, chicken and the like.

“Why do you abstain from non-vegetarian foods? All the objects of nature have been created by Allah for human beings to consume and so it is our right to consume them. If we do not consume them, we shall be depriving ourselves of what Allah has made for man and we shall be, in a way, declaring the animals to be useless creations,” said the teacher named Yasmeeen.

“You think animals have been created by God only to serve man or to be of use to him in one form or the other?” asked I.

“Yes, I think so. And our Holy Book also teaches us this,” said she.

“But if you study the behaviour of animals like the lion, the tiger, and the leopard, you will realize that they regard man as a creature created to serve them as their food. Each of them eats up

a man whenever it can. I remember when we lived at a village, some wild animal, perhaps a leopard, used to sneak into somebody's house and run away with the baby in the family and eat it up. When such an incident took place the whole village mourned the death of the child and cursed the man-eating animals. We were so angry with the animal that we would have killed all the man-eating animals of the world if we could. Similar must be the reaction of the animals when we take one of them, butcher it and eat it up. Don't you think so?" said I

"Can the animals think like that?" asked she.

"Take a calf away from its mother for a few hours and study how she behaves the rest of the day. It remains restless, lows frequently as if it were calling the calf, and does not eat the forage served to it. All this indicates that the mother cow does not like to lose its calf just as a human mother does not like to lose her son," said I.

"Do the animals not regard themselves as food for human beings?" asked she.

"No, they do not. On the contrary, many of them regard men as their food. In the towns of India at least mosquitoes seem to think that we human beings are nothing but casks of blood from which they can suck blood whenever they like and as much as they like. The moment they find some exposed part of a human body they try to settle on it and suck blood from it. Sometimes they suck blood so greedily that they stay there until they are hit and killed. They treat human bodies as their food. They must be thinking that man has been created in order to provide them tasteful food. This brings us to the question whether they have been created for human use or man has been created for their use or each of us exists for himself/ itself," said I.

"According to the holy *Qura'an* nature exists for man to consume and so when a man consumes non-human animals as food he does what is expected of him. Don't you see that one animal is

the food for another: a rat is eaten up by a cat, a cat is eaten up by a dog, a dog is eaten up by a leopard and so on,” said she.

“But, as I told you, the wild animals do not honour the ethics of the holy *Qura'an* and consume human animals as and when they can. Instead of regarding themselves as food for man, they regard man as their food. How can we reconcile the two facts?” asked I.

“Yes the two facts are not reconcilable. This did not come to my mind earlier. I thank you for drawing my attention to this dimension of the issue,” said she.

“This implies that every animal, human or non-human, exists for himself/itself, and, perhaps, for the Creator. The Supreme Being must have created all his creatures to remain in existence for their life-times, rather than to be killed. If human beings have a right to exist, the animals too have a right to exist. The lower animals behave instinctively and have no moral sense. But the human beings are human beings chiefly because they have a moral sense and can distinguish between what should be done and what should not be done. And just as a man is expected not to kill another man, in the same way a man is expected not to kill an animal. Just as one man helps another, in the same way man is expected to help animals living on this earth. If I am not willing to accept that I exist for the lion, the goat too has a right to claim that it does not exist for human beings and so no man has a right to kill a goat to make it his food. That is why it is unethical for a man to kill animals like cows, goats, sheep, cocks and fish for food. We should follow the rule of ‘Live and let others live’ not only with human beings but also with non-human animals,” said I.

“You do not eat even fish? Fish serves us as material for a variety of curries. What shall we eat if even fish curry is not provided to us?” asked she.

I recollected an argument given by a Muslim gentleman in India when I taught at Hapur.

“Fish is such a good food that it keeps you warm and you need nothing more than a cotton *chadar* to cover yourself even on a winter night. A friend of mine who frequently eats fish does not need even a blanket, not to talk of a quilt, during the winter season,” said the Indian Muslim at Hapur.

“Will you accept a lion’s plea that it has a right to eat human children because they are a very tasteful food?” said I trying to reject her utilitarian approach to the issue of non-vegetarianism.

“No, how can I accept that? Children are born to grow up and work for their families, their country and the whole of mankind. They are not there to gratify the hunger of lions. A lion which gives such an argument must be shot dead,” said she.

“Just as we do not like us to be treated by animals as their food, the animals too should not be regarded by human beings as their food. Ethics expects us to do unto others what we expect others to do unto us,” said I

“What shall we eat, then?” asked she.

“There are one thousand and one plants the leaves and fruits of which can be used to make curries. In this world we have God’s plenty. There is no need to kill animals to have curries. If you make a search for such plants you will find them in plenty even in Yemen. In India we have thousands of plants which provide us leaves, flowers, fruits, nuts, and seeds which serve us as tasteful food and keep us alive and well-nourished. Yet, what is relevant here is the fact that if we kill an animal and eat its flesh so that we may gratify our hunger and remain alive thereby, we are doing something that is ethically unjustifiable. Do you get the right to catch and eat fish because you can use it in making various kinds of curries? Do you mean to say you have a right to kill all those men whose skin and flesh you can sell for a handsome amount of money? Your stand may attract worldly wise people, but it is unethical and deserves rejection,” said I.

“If you hold that it is a sin to kill animals, you should also

believe that it is a sin even to cut plants and trees because plants and trees too have life, “ said she.

“The trees and plants have life in them in the sense that they get germinated, they grow, they live for some period and then they go dry. But just as we cannot say that water is a living being because it flows from one place to another just as a man goes from one place to another, we cannot call plants and trees living beings because they have no feelings and have no consciousness. A living being has feelings and has consciousness. A human being has a feeling that he is an entity. A human being is happy at times and unhappy at some other times. So do the animals like the cow, the elephant, the cat, the dog, the peacock, the snake and the mosquitoes. But the trees and plants have no feelings and no consciousness, even though the late Indian scientist Jagdish Chandra Basu says that they do have feelings,” said I.

“Why does Jagdish Chandra Basu say that plants have feelings, if they do not have them?” asked Teacher Yasmeen.

“This is an argument that meat-eaters usually advance to silence the vegetarians. They often quote the Indian scientist Jagdish Chandra Basu in support of their stand. No doubt, plants grow, live and get dried and on that ground they can be believed to have life in them. But they are different from animals as the animals have consciousness whereas the plants and trees have no consciousness at all. An animal, whether human or non-human has a soul while a plant has no soul at all. So when you cut a tree or a plant you do not kill, though when you kill an animal, whether human or non-human, you de-house a soul and thus, commit a sin. That is the reason why I believe that consuming plants and trees is not sinful while using animals as food is sinful. However, I know that convincing a meat-eater to accept that it is sinful to kill animals for food is very difficult, if not impossible,” said I.

All this time I was scolding myself for being in a company in which even vegetarianism was to be pleaded for. They say one is

known by the company one keeps. If I had been in the company of the Brahmins of north-west India there would not have occurred any situation in which vegetarianism needed to be pleaded for. No doubt, my companions in Yemen failed to make me a non-vegetarian, but the time I spent on justifying vegetarianism was definitely the time I wasted as I could have used that time in doing my work and in being productive in my field. If I had been in the company of the Brahmins of my region, we would have discussed as to which vegetarian dish was needed when. That is the reason why it is regarded as undesirable to accept the company of a meat-eater, a drunkard, or a gambler. Howsoever smart you are, you cannot escape being harmed by a bad companion in one form or the other. There is a Hindi proverb which means that if you go into a room full of black powder, howsoever smart you may be, you cannot come out of it unstained. That gives us the moral that if you want to remain unstained, do not go into a room full of black powder. I know that it is not easy to stick to this principle. Life, after all, is a very complex phenomenon and it compels us to do many things which we never intended to do.

I had to face many situations in which I had to vindicate my vegetarianism. Once when I was living in India I had a non-vegetarian friend. He used to ridicule vegetarians and portrayed non-vegetarians as persons worth-emulating. He went to the extent of saying that the butchers were peace-loving people and never quarrelled with anybody at all while the vegetarians were quarrelsome people. My view in this regard is that one who studies human life carefully will cease to be a non-vegetarian and will turn a vegetarian. I believe that we reap what we sow. I mean to say that the circumstances we have to face are the outcome of what we have done in the past. If a man has cheated somebody, some day he will find himself cheated. By that logic, if somebody has deprived a man of his son, a day will come when he will find himself deprived of his own son. So if a man keeps himself alive by eating

a goat's son, a day will come when his own son will be eaten up by some animal. The moral of the argument is that one who likes his son to be safe must not kill even an animal's son. In other words, it is in one's own interest that a man refrains from killing an animal and remains a vegetarian.

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## Chapter Six

### Yemen Captured My Heart

When I resolved to go to Yemen in 2008, I intended to stay there only for one session as I did not want to lose my job in India and to spend the rest of my life in a foreign country. But by the end of the session I resolved to extend my stay for one session more. I had begun to like Yemen, with some reservations no doubt, and I revealed my view to my friends too. Maybe it was the handsome salary that we were being paid there that had endeared Yemen to me.

When people asked me for what reasons I liked Yemen, I said that I liked Yemen chiefly because Yemen was a country where they did not play cricket and you were free from the fear of being hit by a cricket ball. In India a cricket-ball could come from you-know-not-where and break your front teeth or even your pate. In India there is no street where this game is not played and you cannot feel safe even inside your house. I told my friends I was unable to understand why the government of India not only allowed the game to be played but also spent people's hard-earned money on this nuisance. The Indian cricket players do not have civic sense enough to realize that others too have the right to keep their heads, teeth, utensils, food being cooked in their houses, and the like beyond the reach of the cricket-balls. These cricket-players of India care for nothing but their balls, runs and the money that may pour into their pockets for playing cricket and they will laugh at you if the cricket ball removes two of your front teeth. They are so rude and thick-skinned that they will not even say, "Sorry", when their ball has broken the glass of your section window. Nay, they will defend their action with remarks like, "Howsoever careful you are, one or

two shots are very likely to hit somebody's utensils and break window-panes in some houses. This cannot be helped."What is worse is that all the governments in India so far have been very deeply enamoured of this detestable game.

There were some other reasons also for my having developed a liking for Yemen: first, most of the Yemenis were very friendly in their dealings with the Indian teachers; secondly, Yemen was a country where wine-selling was not permitted and sincere efforts were being made to keep the country dry; thirdly, most of my students were warm-hearted and were very respectful; fourthly, the University authorities trusted the teachers and gave them almost as much academic freedom as they wished; fifthly, you were free to remain a vegetarian and buy from the market food-stuff of your choice; and, sixthly, you were free to pray to God the way you liked. I was told by a compatriot of mine that in the Middle East there was a country in which those who were found in the market during the Friday prayer time were punished by the police: they were sometimes taken in a police van some 30 miles or so away and left there to walk back home in case they had no money to hire a vehicle; or they were thrashed for not being in the mosque. In Yemen one was free to pray or not to pray.

As a matter of fact, all the Indian teachers working in Yemen repeatedly told people there that they loved Yemen as much as they loved their native country and that Yemen was their second home. But their reasons were different from mine. They were surprised to find me giving unusual reasons for my liking Yemen. My reason that Yemen was a lovable country for people's not playing cricket there was regarded as queer by many of them and amusing by others. On hearing this, for example, Feek said that that implied I was terribly allergic to cricket. In Yemen — I would like to add in order to gratify your curiosity — the young people like to play football. If the ball kicked by a football player hits you when you are passing by, it will not harm you much. A cricket ball

can break your head; nay, it can even cause your death. I remember that a cricket ball, which hit a boy of twelve, dislocated two of his upper set of teeth and even if he was taken to a dentist immediately after the occurrence only one of the two teeth could be replanted whole. If you have a park opposite to your house in India, a cricket ball will invariably force its entry into your drawing room smashing your window-panes and will break your china-ware or even your lap-top. What can you do if such a thing happens? You will refuse to give the players their ball for a few minutes and try to persuade the cricketers not to play in the park. They will definitely make a promise to obey you, but within minutes their ball will rush into your house again. In Yemen you are free from the fear of being hit by a cricket ball.

One of the facts which charmed me in Yemen was that my students were always ready to teach me Arabic. I had learnt the Urdu script, which is not much different from the Arabic script, when I joined my first primary school run by Dev Dutta Sharma at Charaura in India in the year 1947 (?), but since I had been out of touch with it for about sixty years I had to re-learn it in 2008. I acquired two books to learn Arabic through English. But I did not get sufficient time to study these books and depended much on the lessons I got from my students. These students volunteered to teach me Arabic without waiting for me to request them to do that. They taught me not only the Arabic alphabet but also told me the Arabic names of the vegetables, fruits and other edibles I had to buy from the market. The shopkeepers too were very cooperative and every one of them let me go round in the shop in order to find out what I wanted to buy as there were many grains, spices and the like the Arabic names of which I did not know.

One day when there was no electric current in my house to illuminate it, I went to a shopkeeper to buy a candle. I found it very hard to communicate to him the idea that I needed a candle. I knew three words namely, “candle,” “*mombatti*,” and “*shamma*”

I spoke English and employed some gestures to indicate the thing I was in need of. First the shop keeper gave me a match-box. The second time he gave me a lighter. Then I had to seek the help of a student to find out what they called a candle in Arabic.

“What is the Arabic word for ‘candle,’ Amid?” asked I.

“*Shamma*,” said he.

“Oh, I see,” said I.

The word ‘shamma’ was not a new word for me as it had been a member of my active vocabulary for a pretty long time. But I had not used it under the impression that I was supposed to use either English or Hindi while talking to people in Yemen. For me ‘shamma’ was an Urdu word. Perhaps some Urdu words like ‘*shamma*’ were a part of my less active, if not passive, vocabulary. However, it means that if I had used all the three words I had in my vocabulary I would have succeeded in communicating my meaning to the shopkeeper and would have been able to buy a candle. I cursed myself for being a reticent man and priding myself on being a man of few words. A man who does not speak out because his vocabulary is limited deserves pity, but what will you call a man who keeps his word unspoken, and undergoes humiliation of being regarded as ignorant for that reason? That means it is not always desirable for one to be a man of few words.

There were times when I was able to convey my meaning to the Arabic speakers through gestures. I remember one more incident. I was in need of a needle to do some sewing work. So I went to the shop of a general merchant opposite my flat and I told him I was in need of a sewing tool. In order to signify that I needed the tool which enables one to sew I treated my right forefinger as a sewing tool and a part of my shirt as a piece of cloth and moved my finger as if I were sewing with it. The shopkeeper showed me a bundle of thread and asked me whether I needed that bundle.

“No, no, no. I need the iron tool which is used to carry this thread behind it through the piece of cloth one is stitching,” said I.

The shop-keeper did not understand the meaning of my sentence. So I again moved my finger as if I were sewing with it. I pointed to my sewing finger to signify that I needed the tool that goes through holes in the cloth. A small boy of around fourteen was standing there. It was he who solved our problem.

“Oh, *ibra!*” said he.

And I got a needle consequently. This is how I learnt that the Arabic word for ‘needle’ was ‘*ibra*’.

One day I was in need of turmeric powder. I went to a shop where I had seen turmeric pieces in a container placed on the counter itself. I went to the shop. I went to the counter looking for the container. But that day I found the telephone of the shop-keeper stationed at that spot. I removed the telephone under the impression that the turmeric container was hidden under it. But to my utter surprise I found that the container positioned there contained something other than turmeric. I failed to bring it home to the shop-keeper that I needed turmeric powder. Then I went to another shop in which a container at the counter contained some powder of yellow colour. I recognized that it was turmeric powder. I asked the shop-keeper what its name was. He told me it was ‘*khurkhum*’. This added one more word to my Arabic vocabulary.

Ali Abdulla Saleh had been President of the country since 1980, perhaps. He appeared to have been a very popular figure as he had been winning elections all along. His pictures had been put up at prominent places in all the educational institutions. They were there on the back of the exercise books used by the students. One day I saw a very big picture of his had been put at the top of the front building of the Urba campus of the University too. I wondered why it had been put there. I was reminded of the days when Mao-Tse-Tung’s pictures were displayed on all the government buildings of China. I wondered why this was being done. Did it signify that the popularity of Ali Abdulla Saleh had reached its pinnacle and its fall was going to begin?

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## **Chapter Seven**

### **"I Am Your Son" Said Amid**

Amid was a student who had succeeded in endearing himself to both of my Indian colleagues there. He had a motor-car in which he drove my friends to some nearby village when they were in a mood to see sights or rather when he was in a mood to show them sites. First I thought he was doing selfless service. But soon I came to know that his service was not selfless. It happened like this

Both of my Indian colleagues decided to go to India in the Eid holidays. I resolved to stay put and not to spend twenty-five thousand rupees on a long journey for a one-week-long stay in India. Since I was not adequately familiar with the persons and the local market I was looking for somebody who might guide me and also act as a translator between me and the shopkeepers in the market during the Eid days. My fellow Indians told me that Amid was a dependable man. So I wanted Amid to remain in contact with me. When both these colleagues of mine left for India I was the only Indian and the only Hindu in the town. I used to go for a walk in the evening usually after dinner. The roads which I chose for my walks were usually deserted and nothing remarkable occurred during these evening walks of mine. However, one day when I was coming back from the walk, a dark skinned man, who had the features of an African, stopped me and said to me something in Arabic. I could not understand even one single word. But the gestures he was making were quite easy to decipher: he was advising me not to go for a walk on a deserted road as somebody might emerge there from somewhere and might stab me to death. I

accepted his advice and discontinued my walking for a few days.

One evening Amid came to me and said that he would be happy if he was of any use to me.

“Treat me as your son and tell me whatever you want to get from the market. I am at your disposal and you can call me any time you like,” said he.

“Thank you, Amid. At the moment I have with me all that I need,” said I.

“Since I want you to treat me as your son, I must serve you as my father. You are an old man and you need a helping hand,” said he.

“No, Amid, I am not that old. I can do my work myself,” said I.

“Sir, I would like to secure first division in the examination,” said he.

“One should try to get first class. Now-a days there is so much competition in the employment market that unless one has secured the first division, one is not likely to get a good job,” said I.

“Sir, in order to secure the first division I must get at least 79 per cent marks in your paper. If I do not secure at least 79 marks in your paper I shall not be able to get first division. You are my father and I am your son. Sir, I would like to keep you in my eyes. I shall do my best to make your stay in Yemen comfortable,” said he.

This made things crystal clear: Amid had become my son so that he might get 79 per cent marks in my paper and was able to get first class

Thus I came to know that Amid's service was not selfless and that he took us for sight-seeing in order to make us award him marks in the examination according to his liking. When I did M.A. in the nineteen sixties it was very rare for a student to get even sixty per cent marks in English. There were many occasions when for

years together nobody in the university secured first class in M.A. English. The number of first division holders at the M.A. (English) level in the whole of Agra University, to which about eighty colleges were affiliated, in those days was usually one, if any. But in Aiz University most of the students secured more than ninety percent marks. Since all my colleagues were awarding even ninety seven percent marks, I would be singled out if I awarded marks in forties.

I had to chalk out a course of action for myself in the light of all these facts. I had decided I would not be unfair or unjust in my evaluation work. However, soon I found a solution for the problem: I would give objective type questions and the questions would be the ones I had discussed in the class very well. I remembered Professor H.N.L. Sastri's dictum: "Spaced, controlled and meaningful repetition results in learning." And I resolved to act accordingly. In other words even at the age of seventy years I was constantly modifying my strategies of teaching in order to make my teaching suit the conditions prevailing in the university.

Objective type questions had come as a panacea for the Indian examining bodies, especially the Central Board for Secondary Education. So long as there were essay-type questions in the papers the pass percentage in English did not exceed forty and most of the students who were declared successful obtained marks between 33 and 40 per cent. When the Central Board of Secondary Education started asking objective type questions, hardly anybody got fewer than 97 percent marks, and 90 percent students secured 100 per cent marks. A student these days finds it difficult to write even a paragraph on a topic like 'My Ideal Teacher' even if he has secured 100 percent marks in English. In the nineteen fifties even a student getting 33 per cent marks in English wrote a six page long essay on such a topic. So I knew how to make changes in the question paper to suit the demand of the society.

I had resolved to take my teaching duties seriously. I not only studied my books hard but also tried to make my lectures

both informative and interesting. The result was that my students were all praise for me. Nay, most of them became seriously interested in learning the topics I taught them. One proof of their developing some love for learning was that they came to me with a number of queries and questions soon after my lectures almost every day. No sooner did I enter the staff room after teaching my class than about a dozen students came into the room and asked me whether I was free enough to answer their questions. And I invariably agreed to do that. This happened almost every day. One day a visitor came to the Campus to meet me. He waited for me to be unoccupied so that I was in a position to answer his questions uninterruptedly. But whenever he peeped into my room, he found me teaching students. At this he said to me, “You are always busy, Sir.”

What I could not foresee was that this practice of mine would offend at least some of my fellow teachers and they would give expression to their feelings in various ways. One day Dube ji shouted at the students saying that they had blocked even his passage to his chair. He asked them as to how he would reach his chair as the whole of the room had been occupied by them. One day he went to the extent of asking me to go to some class-room to solve the students’ problems. Another day Amar, the secretary working in the office of the Department of English, asked the students to go away so that I might avail myself of the interval to take rest before going to my next class. I wondered whether there was some other reason behind this move of hers. But I had no source to tell me what her real motive was. Maybe she had been asked by Dube ji to do that. However, this resentment of Dube ji and Amar brought to me a great relief as this freed me from the task of guiding students and gave me some time to relax or to do my own work.

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## **Chapter Eight**

### **India - A Land Where God Incarnates Himself**

“Who is your prophet?” asked Samar.

“What do you mean to say, Samar?” asked I in return.

“Our prophet is Mohammad, may peace be with him, through whom Allah sent us His messages, taught us how the universe was created, how man came to this earth and what He expects man to do. We the Muslims follow his teachings which are available to us in the form of our holy book the *Qura'an*. Who is the Prophet whose teachings the Hindus follow?” asked she.

“If we accept what the Hindus believe, the Supreme Being may send the prophets to lands other than India but in order to set things right in India He Himself comes there. He incarnates Himself as an earthly creature, usually as a human being, and sets things right. In case He is born as a human being, He is born as a child of human parents somewhere in India, lives with Indians as their fellow being and leaves his mortal remains behind when his task has been accomplished. It is He who decides when He is needed in India. It is believed that He incarnates Himself whenever the right order has been disturbed so terribly that right-minded people seem absolutely helpless and people with demonic nature have become dominant in the country,” said I.

“On what ground do you say so?” asked she.

“All this He revealed to His disciple Arjuna when He incarnated Himself as Lord Krishna. The conversation between the two has been recorded in the *Bhagwadgita*. The ways to know the facts of life are three: first, what you perceive with your five senses are accepted as facts; secondly, you learn some facts with the help of logic as on seeing the smoke you deduce the fact that

there must be fire nearby causing the smoke to rise; and, thirdly, you accept as facts the declarations in the scriptures and those made by the authority figures like the incarnations of the Supreme Being and the prophets. However the third way is adopted by those who have faith in the scriptures and the authority figures. Since different communities accept different scriptures and different authority figures, the third way is not accepted universally," said I.

"Tell me something about His ten incarnations," said Amar.

"Amar, only one of these incarnations of the Supreme Being claimed that he was the incarnation of Ishwar. All the others who were born as human beings behaved as human beings and tried to give the impression that they were just human beings. But since they performed what is beyond the capacity of a human being to perform, we declared them to be the incarnations of the Supreme Being. In my lifetime too during my early boyhood days there lived in India an unusual man named Mohandas Karma Chand Gandhi. He died when I was exactly six years old and we mourned at his death. He led a struggle against the controllers of the mighty British empire, which was so widespread that all the twenty-four hours it received sun-light at one or the other part of it and they said that the sun never set in the British empire. Gandhi not only fought this empire but also drove the British out of India and won independence for his country. And he did it without using any arms and ammunition. So there are people who regard him as an incarnation of the Supreme Being. The other ten include Matsya, Koorma, Varaha, Nrasingh, Vaaman, Parashuram, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki. Some people claim that Lord Vishnu's incarnations are twenty-four and not just ten" said I.

"So you have no holy book like the *Qura'an* to guide you on the issue as to what kind of social rules and political laws you should have in your society?" said she.

"We do have our scriptures. The foremost of them are called the Vedas. They are four in number, namely, the *Rgveda*,

the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*. These scriptures are four collections of teachings and prayers composed by a large number of sages, rather than any single person,” said I.

“In our country we make laws in the light of the teachings and principles recorded in the *Qura’an*. If some law is found to be violating some principle enshrined in the *Qura’an* it is declared null and void. So every legislative body has to accept the framework provided to us by the *qura’an*. What decides in your country whether a law is right or not?” said Samar.

“Yes, this happens in an Islamic country. As a matter of fact all Islamic countries believe that they do so. But India is a secular country and in our country no scripture is allowed to interfere in the legislative process. In India we have a number of religious groups including the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians, the Jews, the Buddhists, the Jains, the Sikhs, and the Parsees and each of them has its own scripture. So we try to keep politics and religion apart from each other. It is the constitution of our country that is the final authority on political matters. If a law is found to be violating some provision of the constitution of India the Supreme Court is empowered to declare it unconstitutional with the result that it will be declared null and void. No religious authority has any say in the matters of legislation,” said I.

“Since the constitution has been made by human beings and the legislators too are human beings, it is possible that they may make wrong laws or laws which violate ethical principles because man is fallible and commits not only mistakes but also blunders. To err is human. How do you ensure that your legislators make only right laws?” said Samar.

“Yes, man is fallible and can commit both mistakes and blunders. And since legislators too are human beings they can commit mistakes. Nay, they do commit them. Even the father of the nation of India, Mahatma Gandhi, admitted that he had committed Himalayan blunders in his life-time. But there is no way

out. Human affairs have to be controlled only by human beings. In the days of monarchy, the monarch alone took all the decisions about the state. In a democratic country the decisions are taken by various bodies collectively. It is believed that if a decision is taken by a body, it is likely to be a well-considered decision and is not much likely to be wrong because it is the fruit of a group's collective wisdom, rather than the wisdom of one single individual. This practice is the outcome of the understanding that a group is likely to commit mistakes less than an individual," said I.

"Don't you think that depending on the Word of Allah is better than depending on the collective wisdom of human beings, because a group too consists of only human beings and a human being can definitely commit errors?" said she.

"My answer is 'Yes' as well as 'No'. In theory I accept your proposition. But if we turn to the facts of life I have to disagree with you. You know that even the prophets were human beings and they too were not above human limitations. So what they taught may not always be ethically justifiable. What is written in the scriptures was uttered by human beings. And human beings have human weaknesses: they tend to err, they tend to distort, they tend to forget and they have all human limitations. There is no foolproof way to find out what God wills or likes," said I.

"No, no, it is not so. What our prophet taught came to him from the Supreme Being and so all his teachings are absolutely right and not even a word in them is to be questioned," said Samar.

"It is a matter of faith, Samar. For you the declarations in the *Qura'an* are to be accepted as truths. For me the declarations in the *Gita* are to be accepted as truths. For a Christian the declarations in the *Bible* are to be accepted as truths. But one who employs exclusively the scientific method to find truths does not accept our approach. You are a believer and believe that what Prophet Muhammad taught was the message to man from the Supreme Being. But how can you prove that all Mohammad's

teachings came from the Supreme Being?” asked I.

“Our prophet declared that. And we believe him. We are not non-believers. There were many non-believers in Mecca and Madina in Mohammad’s life-time. But most of them had to become believers. Can we distrust our prophet? Never,” said she.

“I do not want you to disbelieve or distrust your prophet. I simply say that there is no objective proof to support your claim that it was the Supreme Being who was sending the verses of the *Qura’an* to Prophet Mohammad. Those who believe the prophet Hazrat Mohammad accept this statement of his. But these days we are living in the age of rationalism. If somebody insists on accepting only objective proofs, you have no argument to advance in support of your point,” said I, though I knew my words must be hurting her sentiments

“What do you mean?” asked she.

“I mean to say whether there is any objective proof in support of the view that the *Qura’an* is a collection of exclusively those messages and teachings that were conveyed to prophet Mohammad by the Supreme Being?” said I.

I felt that some people associated with me were making conscious and persistent efforts to convince me that Islam was an acceptable religion. I shall mention just two of them. Khiam was a student of mine. She gave me a copy of the *Qura’an* one day. It was an English translation of the book. I accepted her gift without any hitch, though I knew I did not have time to read it. Actually I had read the *Qura’an* in its English version long before in 1980’s when I was in India. One day Khiam came to me and asked me whether I was a Muslim.

“No, Khiam, I am not a Muslim. I am a Hindu,” said I.

“Why Sir, why are you not a Muslim?” said she.

“I am a Hindu. I am a Hindu by birth, Khiam. I am a born Hindu and I find no reason why I should not continue to be a Hindu. I like both the metaphysics and the morality of Hinduism. It means

I am a Hindu also by conviction,” replied I.

Holood was a fellow teacher of mine. She gave me half a dozen booklets. One of them was about the prophet Hazrat Mohammad. In this book an attempt has been made to vindicate the stand that Mohammad was really a prophet and what he told people came not from his mind but from the Supreme Being. The author of the book argues that Mohammad’s descriptions of the embryo in the womb at several stages of pregnancy closely resemble those given by modern medical scientists. The author asks as to how Mohammad had that knowledge if he was not a prophet and messages were not coming to him from the Supreme Being, as he was an illiterate man and the medical science of those days did not have this information about the embryo.

Holood also gave me a Hindi booklet. In this booklet the author draws attention to the caste system of the Hindu society and advances the view that in the Hindu community the Brahmins have been exploiting the outcastes and have been very unjust to them. I read the book and told Holood that the author had misrepresented facts and had done injustice to the Brahmins of India.

“This man says that the Brahmins are very cunning people. I would like to tell you that I am a Brahmin. You have been observing my ways for so many years. Do you think I am a cunning man?” said I to Holood.

“I have not read it as I do not know Hindi,” said she.

“But I have told you what it contains,” said I.

“You are absolutely trustworthy and fully dependable. If all the Brahmins are like you, they are a very gentle and noble community,” said she.

“The fact of the matter is that the Brahmins are being subjected to injustice these days as about fifty percent government jobs have been reserved for the candidates from the backward and scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes. For the remaining fifty

percent posts there are competitions open to all the candidates. Thus these days the people belonging to the scheduled and the backward castes, and the scheduled tribes are the privileged sections of society. People from these sections of society are favoured in several other ways too. There are constituencies from which persons exclusively of these categories can be elected legislators and become members of the law-making bodies in the states and also in the Centre. All the students from the scheduled castes are given scholarships, irrespective of their merit,” said I

Aiman, a neighbour of mine, also often talked about Islam and its tenets. He came to my house at least once a week and I went to his whenever I was unable to make my computer do my bidding.

‘ “The *Qura’an* has a claim to be regarded as the Word of God better than the *Bible*,” asserted he.

“On what ground do you say so?” asked I.

“The messages included in the *Qura’an* were dictated by our prophet Mohammad himself as soon as he received each of them. So there is no possibility of any kind of distortion in any of the messages and they are there in the holy book in their original forms. But the messages included in the *Bible* were collected several hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus. It is very difficult to preserve an oral utterance undistorted for such a long time. Isn’t it?” asked he.

“Yes, I agree,” said I.

Thus Aiman accepted both Jesus and Mohammad to be the prophets or the messengers of the Supreme Being. He regarded the *Qura’an* as a genuine record of Muhammad’s utterances but he was not willing to accept the Bible as the genuine record of Jesus’ utterances.

It is, no doubt, a fact that there are several versions of the Bible and they differ from one another considerably. Even the four scholars appointed by King James the First of England failed to

agree on any single version of the New Testament and the versions of all the four were included in the King's version of 1611 A.D. That is the reason why the New Testament has four sections namely, St. Luke, St. Mark, St. Matthew and St. John. So it is impossible to decide exactly as to what message Jesus had given to mankind.

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## Chapter Nine

### The Hindu Caste System

One day I was teaching my Level One class a short story written by Rabindra Nath Tagore. This story is an attack on the Hindu caste system. In this story a man tricks a Brahmin boy into marrying a Kayastha girl without letting the boy's father or the boy know that the girl is a Kayastha by caste. Later on when the father comes to know the caste of his daughter-in-law, he orders his son to turn her out. But the boy rises in rebellion against his father and declares that he is not going to turn his wife out and accepts banishment from the father's house as the price of his rebellion.

In order to make my students understand the story adequately, I explained to them the *varna vyavastha* of the Hindu society. According to this system the Hindu society has been divided into four broad classes, namely, the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaishyas*, and the *Shudras* and each of these classes comprises many castes and sub-castes. The system is being preserved especially by the practice that marriages are rarely permitted outside the caste: a *Brahmin* boy will marry only a *Brahmin* girl, a *Rajpoot* boy will marry only a *Rajpoot* girl, a *Vaishya* boy will marry only a *Vaishya* girl, and a *shudra* boy will marry exclusively a *shudra* girl. And one who marries outside his or her caste may be declared an outcaste. I am aware of the fact that this rule is not always observed and there are inter-caste marriages too. But in many families the inter-caste marriages are not tolerated and cause even murders.

I was trying to explain things in terms of the experiences of the learners. Since all my students were Muslims and had no idea of the caste system of the Hindu society, it was essential to

explain the caste system to them. I asked the students whether in their society too there were groups of this kind. Some students said that there were some divisions of the kind. But one of them (I shall call him Khalid) said that there was nothing like that in their community and that all of them were Muslims. He asserted that there were no castes in the Muslim community and that there were no restrictions of caste or sub-caste in the marital field.

“We are all Muslims and we have no castes or sub-castes in our community,” said Khalid.

I felt Khalid was suggesting that as a community the Muslims were better knit and organized than the Hindus as they had given equal status to all the members of their community. The Hindus are usually blamed for making distinctions between the members of the community as some castes are regarded as high while the others are regarded as low.

“Is it possible for a shoe-maker’s daughter to be able to marry a cleric’s son?” asked I.

“Yes, sir,” said he.

“Is it possible for a shoemaker’s son to be able to marry a cleric’s daughter?” asked I.

“Yes, sir.” said he.

“I mean to ask you whether such marriages usually take place,” said I.

“Yes, yes. Such marriages too are quite common,” said Khalid.

“No, sir. Such marriages are not possible,” said one of the women students.

Since my question had fetched two contradictory responses, it was not easy for me to grasp the truth. I reflected on these two answers and deduced that in the Muslim community there were no castes like those in the Hindu community, but there existed nothing like equality in the community and the idea of high and low definitely existed there as they prided themselves on being the

Qureshis, the Saiyads, the Khans and the like while the rest of the Muslims were regarded as ordinary mortals. And these titles they gained for having been born in particular families. Was not this system another edition of the Hindu caste system? I think I committed a mistake in formulating my question. I should have asked whether it was possible for an Ansari boy to get married to a Saiyad girl.

In a caste-ridden society it is your birth that decides your status in society, irrespective of your intelligence, intellectual achievements and capabilities. For example, if a society is caste-ridden the son of a *kshatriya* will become a warrior whether he possesses bravery or not, whether he is strong enough to fight or not, and the son of a *kumbhkar* will become a maker of pitchers and other clay pots even if he is very strong and valiant. The caste system in India is crumbling and now the caste restrictions in the field of occupations have been largely removed with the result that many *kshatriyas* have become traders, many *vaishyas* have become soldiers, many Brahmins have joined the army and many valmikis have become teachers.

This also reminds me of the fact that the Muslims of Yemen did not mind eating from one and the same plate. Nay, all the persons present on an occasion tried to dine from the same plate. I have seen all the persons working in a shop eating their lunch from the same plate. Maybe this gives a boost to the idea of the Muslim brotherhood and makes them realize that they are the fellow members of one and the same community.

So far as my views on the question of eating are concerned I stand for exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness. That means I prefer the Hindu practice of not sharing one's food-plate with anybody at all and everybody's eating from an independent plate. I accept the view that lies embodied in Robert Frost's poem 'Mending Wall', namely, "Strong fences make good neighbours". Moreover, the practice of everybody dining from an independent

plate is, perhaps, more hygienic than its alternative as this enables one to escape falling a victim to contagious diseases or the diseases that can go through eating from a common plate. This practice, after all, keeps people at an arm's length from each other.

Maybe this is one of the reasons why the Hindus have not been able to organize themselves as closely as the Muslims have been. I gladly accept that the Hindus are not as closely united as the Muslims are. But hygienic considerations are not irrelevant and should not be neglected. Diseases are obstinate enemies of life and must be kept at a mile's length if that is possible. One cannot be over-cautious in this respect. Once you are in the grip of a disease, it is not easy to come out of it. Many of the diseases are deadly and once life leaves your body, you cannot get it back. So, one has to make one's best efforts to maintain one's health. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult for one to keep oneself free from ailments. The human body is so frail that it is attacked by ailments quite often. That is why it is said that the human body is a house of ailments. So even if one takes extra care to escape falling ill, one is not unjustified in doing that. The feeling of brotherhood can be spread in other fields; eating and drinking should not be brought into its purview.

Moreover, I cannot forget that the Muslim community too has always remained divided in factions and they have been fighting one another for ages: the Shias fight the Sunnis, the Ahamadiyas fight the non-Ahamadiyas, and the Sufis fight the non-Sufis. Nay, the Muslims fought each other in order to get the throne: Ibrahim Lodi was challenged by Babar, Humayun was challenged by Sher Shah Suri, Jalal Uddeen Khilji was killed by his own nephew and son-in-law Alauddeen Khilji, Shah Jahan was dethroned and imprisoned by his own son Aurangzeb, and Humayun was pestered by his own half-brothers during his reign in India. Brothers are expected to help each other as one's two arms do.

So when I told my students that the Hindus comprised

four broad sections, namely the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaishyas*, and the *Shudras*, a woman student asked me to which caste I belonged.

“I am a *Brahmin* both by birth and by profession as I am a Sharma and a Professor. All Sharmas are *Brahmins*. And since I am a Professor and belong to the class of the intellectuals, I am a *Brahmin* by profession too,” said I.

“What about Amitabh Bachchan? Is he too a *Brahmin*?” asked another woman student.

Amitabh Bachchan was the Indian film actor whose name almost every student of Yemen knew and about whom almost every student wanted to know much. For the youths of Yemen India was a land of Amitabh Bachchan, as for the old people it was a land of Gandhi and Nehru.

“No, Amitabh Bachchan is not a *Brahmin*. He is a *Kayastha* by caste. However, he is a very good actor, as you all know. His father Harivansh Rai Bachchan was a teacher of English at Allahabad University for several years and wrote poetry in Hindi,” said I.

The Hindu caste system is a practice against which many famous writers of India have written articles, poems and dramas. Several attempts have been made to break it. Inter-caste marriages too are taking place off and on and they are the proofs of the fact that the edifice of the caste system of the Hindu community is not as rigid now as it used to be. There also come to light dissensions within every caste. But the caste system still prevails in India and seems to have become unbreakable. Tagore’s attack on the caste system has not harmed it much. There are occasions when the members of a particular caste raise demands collectively and achieve gains for the caste as a whole. Sometimes it appears that this system does not let Indians become one unified country. However, within the caste it acts as a cementing force and even strangers are seen helping one another because they are the members of one and the

same caste. There are occasions when people forget caste barriers and stand for a cause irrespective of their castes. Rabindranath Tagore was a Brahmin but in his writings he attacks Brahmins and presents them in a shadowy light.

Those were the days when, as I have said earlier, Ali Abdulla Sale was the President of the Republic of Yemen. By and large there was peace in the country but occasionally there were reports that disturbance had been caused by the Houthis. One day there was a report in the paper *The Yemen Times* that the Houthis attacked some trucks carrying gas cylinders and captured them. That was, at least, one proof of the fact that there were dissensions in the Yemeni community and the idea of the Muslim brotherhood had not been able to keep the people of Yemen tied together. Why were the Houthis fighting the non-Houthis if they had the feeling of brotherhood for all Muslims in their hearts?

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## Chapter Ten

### The Work Permit and the Residence Visa

One day I went to the Work Permit Office at Aiz to get a work permit. I found Fuad, the Work Permit Officer, to be a warm hearted gentle fellow who treated me in a friendly manner. He was one of the few Yemenis who spoke English fluently. Our friendly relations made it possible for us to talk about not only the tasks in hand but also our experiences abroad. Fuad was a humorous man who cracked jokes quite frequently.

The timings of the offices of the government in Yemen were 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. So I reached the office at 8:00 a. m. sharp. Fuad was there climbing up the stairs to reach his room on the third (or the fourth?) floor. He told me that I was too early and that I should not expect anything to be done there before 10:00 a.m. He advised me to return home at the moment and to reach his office at 10:00 a.m. He assured me that he would issue me the Work Permit within ten minutes. So I left the office premises to spend two hours in the market and check my e-mail on the internet. I was back in his office at 10:00 a.m.

In India your application is entertained if it has been written either in English or in the regional language of your state like Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil, Bangla and Marathi. But in Yemen it is entertained only if it is written in Arabic. Since I did not know Arabic much, I was not in a position to write my application in Arabic. Fuad wanted to help me as he knew my problem. But since he was quite busy at that time he asked Saeed to help me. Saeed had been a student of Poona University and, consequently, had a soft heart for Indians. So he filled the application form in Arabic gladly. Then Fuad asked

me to go to the hospital and get from there a certificate to the effect that I was not HIV positive. They charged \$ 40 from me for that. I paid the money but I asked Fuad whether an old man of seventy too was required to get the certificate.

“You are right, Dr. Sharma. We are ashamed. Here I write an application on your behalf, sign it and take it to my boss in the third room and get his permission. If he permits, you will not be required to get the certificate from the hospital,” said Fuad.

“Okay,” said I.

I took the paper to Fuad’s boss. He was gracious enough to sign it instantly and I was exempted from getting the HIV certificate from the hospital. However, Fuad did not issue the Work Permit instantly. He made me wait for it for several hours. He told me he was trying to contact the University authorities too in the regard. I was exempted from getting the HIV certificate, no doubt, but they charged the fee for that even then.

When we parted, Fuad assured me that he would be glad to help me in case I needed anything for my personal use.

“Please keep coming to me. My chief complaint against the Indian professors is that they come to me only once a year for the work permit and forget me soon after it has been issued. I would be glad to help you even elsewhere. I am your younger brother and I’ll be happy to regard you as my elder brother,” said Fuad.

“I thank you very much for the Work Permit and even more for these warm feelings,” said I.

The next step was one of getting the Residence Visa from the Immigration Office of Aiz. Here many officials were very greedy and did nothing unless their palms were greased. For the printed application form the office superintendent charged one thousand Yemeni Rials though officially it was to be sold only for five hundred Rials as the instruction printed on it indicated. Then the man registering the immigrants sent me to the Security official to get his

signature. There was no column in the prescribed form for his signature, but the man in charge of the registration said that his permission too was needed. The Security Official charged three thousand Rials and put his signature on the back of the applicant's photograph on getting the money. The man who issued the printed visa form charged one thousand Rials. The prescribed visa fee of 21000 Rials was to be paid to the government. They issued a receipt only for this amount. The extra money they charged was meant for their own pockets.

However, if they were paid the money each demanded, they were quite cooperative and finished the whole work within an hour or so. But they became quite uncooperative if their palms were not greased. Once when I went to the Passport office to get the Residence Visa, one of the officials told me very crudely that he would charge five thousand Rials for giving his consent to my getting a Residence visa that day, but if the money was not paid he would take five days to accord his permission. This is how I was fleeced there. I did not like to be fleeced like this but I did not know what I could do to escape being fleeced. Did I commit a crime in getting myself fleeced like this?

In India they say that giving bribes is as much an offence as taking bribes. Perhaps they say this because many people give bribes to get illegitimate benefits. That kind of giving a bribe is an offence and must be regarded as a crime. But when a man is forced by an official to give money to get his dues, he deserves pity rather than punishment. I needed the Residence Visa because the Government of Yemen had made it obligatory for every Indian living in Yemen to have it. I had to grease the palms of four persons to get that visa from the Passport Office of Aiz, as they refused to sign my application until and unless I paid them money. In what sense was I an offender? In India too, many officials do not sign your papers until and unless you grease their palms. Will you punish the man who has been compelled to grease the official's palm to get his

due?

I shall narrate an anecdote here. Once I was invited by the Education Department of Uttar Pradesh in India to inspect a college not far from Hapur. I went to the college by bus and paid Rs. eighteen as bus fare. In order to get this small amount reimbursed I was required to get my bill passed first by the Inspector of Schools of Bulandshahar, and then by the Treasury Officer of Ghaziabad, then by the sub-treasury Officer of Hapur and then the manager of the Hapur branch of the State Bank of India. In order to get the bill passed by the Treasury Officer I personally went to Ghaziabad. I had to spend more than eighteen rupees on the journey. But the clerk in the treasury charged five rupees from me to get the payment permitted by the Treasury Officer.

However, I also noted that some of these officials in the Passport Office of Aiz did not charge any money at all and did their work honestly in the normal course. I wondered why they had not joined the group of those who openly fleeced the applicants. Were there some unpleasant personal experiences which had made them different from the bribe-takers? I tried to console myself with the idea that there existed in the office some officials who signed the papers gratis. May Om help them! I also noted that the head of the Immigration Office never asked for any bribe and put his signature on the visa readily. May Om help him too! Whenever I felt annoyed to find so many people forcing me to grease their palms, I tried to have a positive attitude on the issue and consoled myself with the view that there existed in every office at least some officials who refrained from taking bribes. How horrible would have been the condition of those offices if everyone had been charging money for his signature!

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## Chapter Eleven

### Population Policy

Yemen is a country different from India also in the sense that nobody tries there to keep his family small. In India a Hindu normally tries to keep his family small and to have not more than two children. In the middle nineteen fifties the government of India persuaded people to have not more than three children. Then they reduced the number to two. Many a family has only one child and they do not want to add to this number. In Yemen they try to make their families large. Amid told me that in Yemen usually a man tried to have twelve to fifteen children.

“How many sons and daughters are there in your family?” asked I

“Ours is a small family as my father has only five children,” said Amid. “But other families in Yemen are not that small. They try to have big families and have at least a dozen children,” said Amid.

There was a Level Four student of mine. She said her father had twenty-one children from five wives.

“How is it that he had five wives? Islam allows a man to have, so far as my knowledge goes, not more than four wives,” asked I.

“At no time did my father have more than four wives. One of his wives was bad, so he divorced her and got another to fill the slot vacated by the divorce. This is how he married five girls but at no time did he have more than four wives. So he did not violate the Islamic rule of not having more than four wives,” said she.

“So you are twenty-one children in one family. Is that so?” asked I.

“Yes sir,” said she.

“Are you able to remember the names of all of them?” asked I.

“I am, Sir,” said she.

And she uttered twenty names without any gaps. It is not possible for me to recollect them and reproduce them here.

I wondered whether the concept of faithfulness crossed the minds of the men who got four wives. If a man has four wives, it is obvious he is not faithful to any one woman. But still the husband in this case expected his wife to be faithful to him as he divorced his “bad” wife. I feel faithfulness is mutual: if A expects B to be faithful to him, A himself should be faithful to B.

One day when I went for a walk, the *sheikh* of a neighbouring village joined me and started talking to me. I have forgotten his name, but I shall call him Kasim.

“How many children have you?” asked Kasim.

“Three. The eldest and the youngest of them are the sons and the middle one is a daughter. All the three are married. I have two grandsons and two granddaughters,” said I.

“You have only three children? Why only three? Even in England and America one likes to have at least four to five children,” said Kasim.

“In our community in India a man likes to have at the most three children. Most of them are satisfied on having two children. Nay, there are people who do not want to have even the second child. When I was married in the year 1957 A.D. they propagated the idea of having two to three children. But now one child family has become almost a norm,” said I.

“Is it so?” asked Kasim.

“Yes, Kasim. But by the way how many children have you?” said I.

“I have ten children,” uttered Kasim.

Teacher Mohammad Salam had two wives. His father also

had had two wives. Muhammad Salam told me that the total members in his family were sixty. He told me he often forgot the names of some younger members of the family. He said that in many a case the nephew was older than the uncle. I did not ask him to tell me the names of the members of his family.

Fatima was another student of mine. She told me that she was not able to do well in the tests because she was over-burdened with domestic work as she had to cook in the morning and did not get enough time to study her books. When I asked her how many members she had in her family, she replied that they were thirty. Preparing food for thirty people at one oven every day is not an easy task. One who does that will not be able to focus attention on anything else. That must have been the reason why Fatima did not fare well in her examinations.

Fatima told me that two new members were going to arrive to join the family within a period of two months. I asked her whether two of her brothers or nephews were going to be married soon.

“No, Sir. Two of my sisters-in-law are in the family way and in either case the delivery is soon due,” said Fatima.

When one of Fatima’s sisters-in-law gave birth to a male child, Fatima invited me and my wife to attend the function held to celebrate the occasion. I agreed to attend the function. Fatima sent Ahalam, a neighbour of mine, to give company to my wife. Ahalam came to our house and started discussing Hinduism.

“Whom do you worship? Durga?” asked Ahalam.

“Durga is worshipped by a large number of persons in India. But I worship Om. As a matter of fact the Supreme Being is one but different persons address him in different ways. I call Him Om, some people call him Brahman, some people call him Ishwar while some others call Him Bhagwan. He has been given many other names too,” said I.

“What about Krishna,” asked Ahalam.

“Krishna was a king who ruled the western part of India.

He succeeded in crushing many villains. Many people worship Him too,” said I.

All such remarks of Ahalam made it evident that she had acquired some information about the Hindu religion. From where did she get this information? May be she had read some book on Hinduism.

My wife and I accompanied Ahalam to Fatima’s house. Ahalam took my wife inside her house where the ladies had assembled and I was taken into a room where men folk had assembled. They were chewing *quaat* and drinking some cold drink. I congratulated Fatima’s brother for having been blessed with one more son. They offered both the *quaat* and the cold drink to me too. But since I had heard that the *quaat* is an intoxicating chew, I requested them to permit me not to eat or drink anything, and they did that. Fatima made me promise that I would attend a similar function two months later when another member was expected to join the family.

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## **Chapter Twelve**

### **Help Poured in from Several Directions**

A large number of persons in the town of Urba were willing to help me in solving my day-to-day problems as I encountered many of them in the market and in the university. In many cases this help came unsolicited and gratis. This made me feel grateful to the country as a whole. One day I met a young man in the market when I was on my way back home. The man was able to speak English fluently. If I correctly remember he was working as an engineer in some distant city and was on leave for a month or so. He said he would be willing to help me in the market and would spend some time in my company in case I felt lonely. I have forgotten his name, so I shall call him Farooq.

“How many times do you pray to God, Sir,” asked Farooq.

“I pray to God daily, at least once, in the morning. Sometimes I pray in the evening too. But I am not regular in praying in the evening,” said I.

“Why do you not pray five times a day? How can a man escape committing sins unless he prays five times a day?” said he.

“It is your will power that keeps you away from committing sinful deeds. Until and unless you have a strong will power you cannot escape committing sins. Temptations in this world are very attractive and it is only your will power that enables you to resist them,” said I.

“It is in order to strengthen your will power that you need to pray five times a day,” said he.

“I think praying twice a day is more than enough. Life has been given to us to work and make achievements. And it is essential

for one to devote all one's energies to the task one has undertaken. I am a professor and in order to do my work well, I have to read a lot. A professor of mine used to say that a professor must read at least fifty pages per day. Reading fifty pages every day is not easy. If I do not read at least fifty pages every day I shall not be able to keep my knowledge of my subject up-to-date. Since I have to read fifty pages every day I have to avoid doing whatever I can. And so I believe praying to God once a day is enough. Secondly, I also feel that unless one devotes all one's energies to doing one's tasks, one cannot make remarkable accomplishments in any field," said I.

"Criminals do not pray even once a day," said Farooq.

"There are criminals who pray with religious regularity and yet they do not refrain from committing crimes. Do you think there is some kind of correlation between one's praying to God and one's refraining from committing sins," said I.

"Yes, definitely there is a correlation between praying and refraining from committing sins," said he.

"Why do you associate one's praying to God to one's keeping away from sins? One can pray and still be indulging in committing sins. Likewise, one can be virtuous in one's ways without praying to God at all," said I.

"No, Sir. Here I beg to differ. One cannot be virtuous unless one prays to Allah at short intervals. Sir, Satan tries to tempt a man to commit sins as and when he is not on his guard. And a man is on his guard when he is praying to God. When a man is not praying to God, his mind is likely to become the Devil's workshop and he is likely to commit sinful deeds. I admit that one cannot pray all the twenty-four hours. But it is easy to pray every sixth hour when one is awake," said he.

"There is no fundamental difference between you and me: you want a man to pray every sixth hour, I want him to pray every twelfth hour. You seem to believe that a prayer helps a man for six

hours while I maintain that it helps him for twelve hours. Both of us are of the view that a man needs to pray in order to be able to live well,” said I

“Yes, but what I am saying is based on the teachings of our Prophet, your stand is your personal one,” said Farooq.

“Don’t you think praying and keeping away from sinful activities are two different exercises and one doing one of them may not do the other at all,” said I.

“No, doctor, it is not so. Your prayers always keep you away from sinful activities,” said he.

“As a matter of fact one prays to God in order to seek forgiveness for the sins one has committed. One who is virtuous in one’s ways will feel no need to pray. Moreover, when one prays one only begs. Why should one beg five times a day? Or rather, why should one beg even once a day? God has given man muscles and brains which can be used to produce, to communicate, to go to the desired place to judge what is ethical and what is not, and to solve his other problems. A self-respectful man will like to depend on his own efforts to get what he wants to have. He will be happy to have only what he deserves. Begging, no doubt, many times enables one to get many of the things one needs, but it is not the best way to get them. One who makes efforts to produce, move, sell, buy, dig, and grow in order to get the desired things adopts a way much more desirable than the one who gets them by begging,” said I.

“I do not agree with you on this issue. We pray to God not only to ask for forgiveness but also to get strength to do our work and to realize our goals. I believe that it is essential for a man to pray five times a day to escape committing sins. Unless you pray five times a day you will not escape committing sins because Satan is very active and when he finds a little chink, he will rush in and will tempt you to commit some sin”, said he.

I think this exchange of views made no change either in

Farooq's behaviour or in my behaviour. I continued to pray not more than two times a day. I never met Farooq thereafter. So I am not sure whether there was any change in his behaviour or not.

Many persons of this town liked me and tried to come close to me. I realized this when I found that many of them invited me to dine with them. Abdul, a colleague of mine, was one such man; Najeeb, another colleague, was another. Some students too tried hard to make me dine with them. One of these students was Amid, the other was Abdul of Nasema. But I did not accept anybody's invitation. I wanted to remain a vegetarian out and out. Nay, I wanted to remain above suspicion. If I had eaten the food prepared by somebody else in that country of flesh-eaters, it would not have remained possible for me to convince myself that I had eaten nothing non-vegetarian. So I decided that I would eat nothing that was not cooked in my own kitchen. I did drink fruit juice in the market, no doubt. But I think there was no non-vegetarian item that could have been added to it. I also bought roasted maize grains and roasted pea grains off and on. If I was out of station, I remained contented with fruits and raw vegetables like bananas, melons, mangoes, grapes, pomegranates, carrots and roasted peanuts as they were available in the markets in plenty. So I am sure I was able to keep away from every non-vegetarian food in Yemen. I thank God for the strength He gave me to stick to my resolution.

Some of these friends of mine felt offended when I refused to accept their invitations. But I refused to budge from my stand. I know that many of the non-vegetarians try to make you eat meat and innovatively play tricks in order to make you do that. I remember that once during my college days my room-mate Gajju made me drink a cup of milk with yolk in it. The milk had been purchased by him, the eggs had been purchased by him and he did not expect any payment from me. Yet he made me drink a cupful of milk so that he was able to laugh at me later saying, "You have eaten yolk and you cannot claim any more that you are a strict vegetarian."

Just as the drunkards try to make you a drunkard, the gamblers try to make you a gambler and thieves try to make you a thief, in the same way the non-vegetarians try to make you a non-vegetarian. I fail to understand this practice of the gamblers, drunkards and flesh-eaters. This is highly undesirable on the part of these people. That is the reason why people shun the company of such people. I remember how some school-mates of mine who used to smoke made me smoke with them and, thus, made me do what my parents wanted me not to do. So I would suggest that one who refrains from gambling, drinking alcohol, and flesh-eating should keep away from the company of gamblers, drunkards and flesh-eaters.

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## **Chapter Thirteen**

### **Non-Dualism Versus Dualism**

One day I was teaching my students of Level Four R.W. Emerson's poem 'Brahma'. Since the poem is an embodiment of the philosophy of non-dualism, I decided to explain to them this philosophy first.

“The existence of the universe is a proof of the fact that there exists its creator whom we call Brahma, or Om, or Allah, or God, or the Supreme Being, as nothing comes into existence unless it has been created, and that if something has been created, there must have existed its creator. Since we have accepted that the universe was created we have to accept that there must have been a time when there existed no universe, or, rather, nothing but He. And when He undertook the task of creating, He must have had no matter or stuff at His command to shape into the universe. If we accept that matter had been created earlier by some Being other than the Supreme Being, then we accept that there exist two creators, namely the creator of the matter and the creator of the universe. If we do so the idea that the universe was created by the Supreme Being stands rejected. So we have to accept that the Supreme Being alone is the creator and that He alone has created both the matter and the beings. Now the question is as to whence He got the matter to shape into the sun, the other stars, the earth, and the other heavenly bodies. Obviously there are two possibilities: first, He created the universe out of Himself or He created it out of nothing. So He must be a creator different from a human creator like a carpenter because a human carpenter in our world does not create wood but only gives a piece of wood the desired shape,

while the creator of the universe created even the matter which has been given the forms of the sun, the moon, the stars, and the planets. I further added that since at the point of time, when the Creator thought of creating the universe, there existed nothing but Himself He must have changed only Himself into the universe, in which we have not only human beings and other beings but also mute insensate things, because, as we know, nothing, that is a vacuum, cannot be shaped into anything at all,” explained I.

Some students asked me to restate my assertion.

“A human potter gives only shapes to the clay. He does not create the clay. The clay has already been created for him. The Creator of the universe had nothing but Himself to give shape to as there existed nothing but He at that point of time. So He must have taken not only consciousness but also matter from Himself. The philosophy which accepts this line of argument is called non-dualism. In other words, non-dualists believe that this universe is a manifestation of the Supreme Being Himself, as He is the source of all that has been created,” said I.

“Sir, He must have created the universe out of nothing,” said one of my students. His name was Talal Haza, if my memory is not failing me.

“Talal, those who believe that the universe was created out of nothing and that it is not the manifestation of the Supreme Being are dualists and their philosophy has been called dualism,” said I.

“Which of the two views do you accept, sir?” asked Talal Haza.

“Ice can be changed into water and water can be changed into vapour. A lump of ice can be changed into ice-powder. But if you have no substance to shape, what will you give shape to? Your nothing will remain only nothing. You cannot change nothing into something. So I believe that the Supreme Being created the universe out of Himself. That signifies that I am a non-dualist,” said I.

“Man cannot create anything out of nothing, no doubt, sir,

but, as our Holy Qura'an tells us, Allah can. He can create anything out of nothing. And He created the whole universe out of nothing," said he.

"We are trying to understand things within the framework of the rules which prevail in the universe here. In this universe nothing can be created out of nothing. If some substance exists, it can, no doubt, be reshaped and can be changed into some other thing. But if you have at your disposal nothing at all what will you give shape to? Nothing comes out of nothing. Thus the line of argument accepted by the non-dualists to explain the creation of the universe sounds to be acceptable. We have to apply reason and logic in accordance with what we find happening in this universe. If we refuse to accept the restrictions of the rules of nature, we are in a world of imagination, not of facts. In that case our assertions will not be substantiated by the facts prevailing in the universe," said I.

"But, Sir, what applies to human beings does not apply to Allah. For instance, man is mortal, while Allah is not. If we argue that since every human being, nay every being, is mortal, the Supreme Being too is mortal, we shall find ourselves on the wrong track. No doubt, man cannot create anything out of nothing but Allah can, as our prophet teaches us," said Talal.

"I agree with you only partly. In Islam they have accepted the philosophy of dualism as they believe that the universe is not Allah and that Allah is not the universe. But when we try to know the answers to the metaphysical questions with the help of reason and logic we have to take the help of the rules prevailing in nature. If we make assertions in violation of the rules of nature, we are likely to make assertions which are likely to be contradicted by the facts of the universe and they will be deemed unacceptable on the ground that they are in violation of the realities of the universe. If one is permitted to make an assertion which does not hold water in this universe, one can make even illogical and unreasonable claims about the Supreme Being. Those claims can be accepted on the

basis of faith but they do not remain acceptable in the light provided to us by our reason. At the moment we are trying to understand a fact with the help of reason. If somebody does not give me anything and asks me to create a cigarette, I will simply have to say that I cannot do so,” said I.

“Sir, I fail to understand what you are trying to prove,” said Talal.

“O. K. Let me give an example. Suppose I want to know how I came into existence (as I had come into existence much before I first became conscious of my existence), my five senses do not help me as none of them has any reliable information with it. So I turn to other human beings’ coming into existence. I know that they came into existence when they were born. This fact makes me come to the conclusion that I too must have been born, though I do not remember myself being born. Thus, a fact of the universe has given me information about myself. This is exactly how we try to understand incidents which we cannot perceive with our senses,” said I.

“That is quite clear, Sir,” said Talal.

“In the field of science we trust only our senses and accept exclusively what our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and sense of touch reveal to us. For example, we accept that gold is a metal of yellow colour because our eyes give us that piece of information, but scientists refuse to believe in the existence of the soul because on dissecting a body they are able to perceive with their five senses nothing like the soul inside it. But in philosophy we go a step ahead and accept what our reason enables us to know. My senses do not reveal to me anything when I ask them how I came into existence as I do not remember that I was born. But my reason reveals to me that I must have come into existence just as other human beings have and so I come to the conclusion that I must have been born just as all other human beings have been,” said I.

“But, sir, we accept what our holy book the Qura’an teaches

us and believe that Allah is all-powerful and can do anything and everything. And since He is all-powerful, He can create anything out of nothing. That is why there is no need to imagine that He must have changed Himself into the universe,” said Talal.

“Yes, Talal, this is the approach in the field of religion as there what has been taught by prophets and what lies enshrined in sacred books is accepted on faith. But philosophers refuse to accept an assertion unless it is acceptable to reason. There are many assertions which are accepted in religions but reason refuses to accept them,” said I.

“Can you illustrate your statement with an example, sir?” asked Talal.

“Yes. Islam accepts that Allah is omnipotent and that He is absolutely good and yet He allowed Satan not only to come into existence but also to continue to live and tempt man to become vicious. But human reason finds a contradiction in these assertions of the *Qura'an* and raises the objection that if Satan came into existence and continues to live against the wishes of Allah, Allah is not all-powerful, and if Allah can make Satan cease to exist and still He allows Satan to exist and indulge in diabolical activities, Allah is not good....”said I.

“Don't say anything against my Allah, sir, for God's sake,” said Essam, another student in the class. “Leave my Allah alone, sir; if you cannot praise Him, do not malign Him, for God's sake,” added he.

When Esam said so, he must have had in his mind the fact that I was a Hindu and not a Muslim. I am not a Muslim and I pray to Om, not Allah. But are 'Allah' and 'Om' not two of the several names of the same Supreme Being? I think He is as much mine as Esam's. After all He is the creator of everybody in the universe and so He is everybody's Father.

I was stunned to hear Essam's sentence. I was simply trying to explain to him and his class-mates how philosophers draw

conclusions and make assertions.

“Oh, Essam, why do you feel offended? I am not maligning Allah. I am simply explaining how we use our reason to argue views out in philosophy and why many assertions of religion are not accepted in philosophy. I do not say that human reason is always a safe guide or that it can give us answers to all our questions but it is a guide which people tend to trust,” said I.

“Sir, we want you to continue,” said Gehad, another student of mine.

“However, I would like to add that I cannot explain why many a person in the world resembles the Devil a great deal and has nothing like divinity in his character or behaviour or capability,” said I.

“Sir, what do you mean? You have broken the whole edifice of non-dualism by saying this. If a man is behaving like the Devil, he cannot be regarded as having any divinity in him,” said he.

“Yes, non-dualism is acceptable only in theory, not in practice. In practice we have to be on our guard and analyse a man’s character thoroughly so that we may not fall victims to his diabolic designs,” said I.

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## Chapter Fourteen

### The Hindu Scriptures

The University of Aiz had three campuses in the town of Aiz and one in the town of Urba. It had some campuses in some other towns too, I was told. I was posted at Urba. For my work permit and residence visa I had to go to Aiz. When I boarded the university bus to Aiz, a lady, who perhaps taught Computer Science, (I shall call her Bilquees) began to talk to me. She did not know English and was speaking Arabic all the time and I was speaking English. But Mohammad, a student of Level One, was good enough to help us by functioning as a translator.

“Are you a Muslim, Dr. Sharma?” asked Bilquees.

“No, I am not a Muslim. I am a Hindu. We regard the Vedas as our sacred books,” replied I.

“Can you tell me something about Islam?” asked Bilquees.

“You know Islam much better than I do,” said I. This answer must have pleased her a great deal as it did me.

“Who is your God?” asked she.

“I call Him Om. He is also called Ishwar in our language. Some people call Him Bhagwan too. He has been given thousands of names in our language. In English we call Him God, in Arabic we call Him Allah, in Persian we call him Khuda,” said I.

“No, no, no. The Supreme Being has only one name, namely Allah. The other names must be the names of other Beings. The Supreme Being is known as only Allah. There is no Allah other than Allah, and Mohammad was His messenger,” said she.

“These are the differences of languages: what is called ‘milk’ in English is called ‘*haleeb*’ in Arabic, ‘*doodh*’ in Hindi, ‘*paley*’ in

Tamil, and '*dugdh*' in Sanskrit. You use different words keeping in mind which language your hearer can understand. So whether you say '*haleeb*' or 'milk' or '*doodh*' or '*paley*', you refer to one and the same liquid. Likewise, whether you say 'God', or you say 'Allah' or you say '*Ishwar*' or you say 'Om' or you say 'Khuda', you are referring to one and the same Supreme Being. Aren't you?" said I.

"No, no, no; this is not so. And it is this that I am trying to bring home to you," said she.

"The Supreme Being turns His ear to you only when you address Him as 'Allah'. He does not turn His ear to you if you call Him 'God'. I take an example to illustrate my point. I shall turn my attention to you only when you address me as 'Bilquees' If you address me as 'Bushra' I shall not turn my ear to you at all as I am not Bushra. So the Supreme Being has to be called Allah, in case you want Him to turn to you," added she.

"Well, madam, the Supreme Being must be omniscient, if He is the Supreme Being. And if He is omniscient, He must know not only what we articulate but also what we intend to say through our words. In other words He knows what our intentions are and no one can cheat or mislead Him. So He not only listens to us but also knows the meaning of our words and also knows our intentions behind our utterances. So do not suspect His capability to understand. He misunderstands nothing at all. How can an omniscient being misunderstand anything?" said I.

Salah was a teacher of Accountancy. He was a man of amiable temperament. I developed friendly relations with him. Another plus point of his was his proficiency in English language. So we were able to share our experiences with each other. He too frequently travelled to Aiz by the university bus. And on the way we were able to talk on various issues. Salah was very fond of chewing *quaat*. He loved it so much that he tried to persuade me also to start chewing it. I asked him whether it was an intoxicating chew. He said that it was so in the sense that it made the addicts

spend money on it even in a situation in which they had money just enough to buy vegetables for their kitchens. However, he added, that *quaat*-chewing did not affect a man's normal functioning, as a taxi driver went on driving his taxi even after he had started chewing *quaat* and a shopkeeper went on doing his shop-keeping even when he was engaged in *quaat*-chewing.

Salah offered me a few leaves of *quaat* and asked me to chew them. I did not want to chew them but could not say that I would not chew them because I was a vegetarian as these were the leaves of a plant. I accepted the leaves as a matter of courtesy but I decided to ponder over the problem before I put the leaves into my mouth. I kept the leaves in my fist and looked at them not knowing how to get rid of them. Salah then remarked that the leaves were to be chewed, not to be simply looked at. Well then I put the leaves in my mouth and ate them up.

Salah and his friends wanted to know whether India was still being ruled solely by the Brahmins. I told them that it was not so. I told them that the first President of India Rajendra Prasad was not a Brahmin, three of the Indian Presidents, namely, Zakir Husein, Faqruddin Ali Ahamad, and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam were Muslims, Gyani Zail Singh was a Sikh, K.R. Narayanan came from the Valmiki caste (the caste of the scavengers), and both Neelam Sanjiv Reddy and Mrs. Pratibha Devi Singh Patil were non-Brahmins. However I told them that five Presidents of India, namely Dr. Radhakrishnan, V.V. Giri, Shankar Dayal Sharma, Venkat Raman and Pranab Mukherji were Brahmins by caste. They also asked me whether inter-caste marriages were permitted in India and I said that they were. However, I added that I stood for marriages within the caste

“Why do you stand for marriages within the caste,” asked one of them.

“The members of a caste inside a region have nearly identical food habits. But the habits of the members of a different caste are invariably different. So if there is an inter-caste marriage,

the husband and the wife will find it difficult to share the same kitchen. That is why I would not support inter-caste marriages,” said I.

“Is that so? Will you explain your stand?” said he.

“Yes, I shall give strong illustrations in support of my view. The Brahmins of the north-west plains of India are invariably vegetarians and abstain from eating even onion and garlic as these vegetables have repulsive smells. But the scavengers of this region are non-vegetarians and cannot do without the meat of pigs whenever there is a community dinner. Suppose a boy from one community marries a girl from another community, they will have to have separate kitchens. One can change one’s dressing habits, but changing eating habits is very difficult. A vegetarian Brahmin will prefer dying to eating meat,” said I.

I had in mind the story of a Kumauni girl who was a non-vegetarian like any other Kumauni. She was a student and lived in the hilly part of her state. In the summer vacation she went to Lucknow where her maternal uncle, a Pandey, worked as a police Sub Inspector. On shifting to the plains this family of Pandey had ceased to be non-vegetarian. This Kumauni girl, a Joshi, waited for about a week to get the dishes of her taste. But when there was no sign of meat in the kitchen for one whole week, she wrote a letter to her father that she was being starved by her maternal uncle and that she would not stay with him anymore. Her father was stunned to read this sentence of his daughter and immediately rushed to Lucknow. When he came to know his daughter’s problem in Pandey’s house, he laughed loudly and decided to take her back to the hills.

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## **Chapter Fifteen**

### **He Forced Me to Bribe Him**

In the session 2008-09 the university was going to close for summer on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2009. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> of July when I was in a position to start making preparations for my homeward journey. I had finished my teaching work as well as my evaluation work. I returned all the books of the library and got the 'no-dues' certificate signed by the heads of all the relevant sections. Then I reached the administrative section of the university at Aiz to get papers for the exit-and-re-entry visa as well as for the air ticket to India. Ansoor the dealing official, who knew no English at all, was delivering letters for the air tickets to the teachers from foreign countries. He handed over all the necessary letters to both Dube and Indra. When it was my turn he said he had nothing for me.

"Where is my letter to Yemenia Airways for the air-ticket to India?" asked I.

"Sana'a," said he.

"Sana'a? What do you mean?" asked I.

He said something in Arabic. I knew little Arabic and was not able to understand what he was saying. My Indian colleagues who usually acted as translators for me in such situations had melted into thin air. So I approached Feef and asked him why Ansoor had refused to give me the letter for the ticket to India. I was asking for this air ticket in accordance with provisions of the stipulation between the University and me. So I believed that it was a part of the obligations of the university to issue me the air ticket for my annual vacation trip to India. Feef talked to Ansoor and then told me that according

to Ansoor the permission to issue me the air ticket had not come from Sana'a and that the fault was mine.

“You did not come last week to give Ansoor the copies of your passport. So Ansoor says he was not able to send your papers to Sana'a. Now, he says, you will have to go to Sana'a to get the letter to Yemenia,” said he.

“Nobody informed me that I was expected to come here and give Ansoor the copies of my passport. I received neither a written nor an oral message to that effect. How could I know that they were needed?” asked I.

“Both Dube and Kumar came here last week and gave Ansoor the copies of their passports. You should have come with them to submit the copies of your passport,” said Feef.

“But I did not receive any message to that effect. How could I know that I was supposed to come here and submit the copies of my passport? Did Ansoor send me any message to that effect?” asked I again.

“How did Kumar and Dube come to know of that?” asked Feef.

“A question for a question is not an answer, Feef. I can answer questions about my actions and reactions. How can I know how Dube and Kumar got some message from Ansoor, if they at all did? I know only this much that I did not receive any message to the effect that I was supposed now to submit some copies of my passport here. I would like to add that Ansoor took copies of my passport earlier several times. As a matter of fact whenever I came to this office and happened to meet Ansoor, he asked for my passport and xeroxed each of its pages,” said I.

At this he became silent and turned to go as if his task was over. But how could I let him go as I needed a solution to my problem? Feef was my only hope as he alone knew English there and, consequently, he was the only person to whom I was able to communicate my queries, questions and grievances. If Feef had

left me I would have been lost in a company where everybody, barring me, knew only Arabic.

“If the copies of my passport are needed, Feef, take them now and give me the letter to the Manager of the Yemenia Airways for the ticket to India,” said I.

“Permission for the air ticket comes from Sana’a. If you give the copies of the passport today, Ansoor will send them to Sana’a and when the permission comes from there, he will give you the letter to the Yemenia Airways for the air ticket,” said he.

“It may take a month. But I have my flight on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July. I need the ticket latest by the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> of July,” said I.

I gave Ansoor the copies of my passport with the hope that he would send the papers to Sana’a at the earliest. It was my first chance to get from the University office and the Passport office papers for my journey back home. So I was a bit nervous. And since I was the only Indian teacher that had been denied by Ansoor the letter to the Yamania office for the ticket, I felt a little upset too. So long as one is a part of a group, one makes efforts to solve the problem along with the fellow members of the group, but when one alone is facing a problem, one, is likely to feel nervous, as one cannot share one's problem with anybody at all. Perhaps I was a little angry too. Nobody seemed to have time or patience to listen to me. I contacted Dr. Abdul, the Dean of our Faculty. I also contacted another Indian friend named Dr. Nag. But neither of them gave me any categorical assurance. Then I phoned to Dubeji and asked him what offence I had committed and why the letter for the air-ticket had been denied to me.

“You will have to persuade exclusively Ansoor to give you the letter for the air-ticket. Ansoor has all the relevant powers in his hand and unless he agrees to help you, you will not get the ticket. He charges from a foreign teacher four-to-five thousand Rials every year. In order to persuade him to help you, you have to give him

money. There is no other way,” said Dube ji.

I was in a foreign country and I felt it was futile to resent the ways of the people there. I accepted Dr. Dube’s advice, and the next day I again went to Ansoor. I had already paid him an amount of one thousand Rials. This time I paid him an amount of five hundred Rials more and requested him to help me get the letter for the air ticket. He accepted the money and I asked him whether the previous day he had sent to Sana’a the letter about the air ticket for me. He told me he would send it that day. It means my efforts of the previous day had borne no fruit.

When I met him the third day, I expected him to give me at least an encouraging reply. But he said something in Arabic coldly and asked me to meet Feef. I failed to understand as to why he was still in a mood not to co-operate. Well, I met Feef and sought his advice. Feef told me that there were a few other foreign teachers who had not been able to get letters for air tickets. Thus he advised me to join that group. And I did. And with their cooperation I got the ticket. But Ansoor did not do anything positive to enable me to get the ticket. I failed to understand why he had not done anything in my favour even though he had accepted the money I had given to him. In the normal course one who accepts your money does something to help you and one who does not want to help you does not accept your money. In other words, Ansoor was a man who took your money and still, if the amount was not adequate from his point of view, did not do anything to benefit you.

Ansoor was quite innovative in finding ways and means to make you grease his palm. Many times he made you pay him money but still did nothing for you. But he tried to charge money whenever you handed over a paper to him or he handed over a paper to you.

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## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **Ishwar and Devatas**

Aiman was an English graduate looking for a job as a University teacher. Since I was the Chairman of the Department of English then (i.e. in 2010-11), he approached me to find out whether there existed any vacancy of a teacher in the Department. Since there was no vacancy in the Department, I told him that at that moment we were not going to recruit any new teacher. But my answer did not satisfy him. Aiman also met the students of the university and learnt from them that some classes were not being held and some courses were not being taught. So he came to me again and told me that some courses in some classes were not being taught and that he would teach those courses in case he was appointed.

“Aiman, as I have told you, there is no vacancy in the Department and every course has been allotted to some teacher. If the classes are not being held it must be so because the teachers teaching those courses are on some kind of leave, not excluding the French leave, and are not taking their classes. I would like them to take their classes regularly. And I shall try to persuade them to do that,” said I.

Aiman too was curious to know things about India. He asked me many questions about Indians’ way of thinking. He also asked me what I thought of Islam.

“You know Islam better than I. I expect you to enlighten me on Islam. I do not think I can add anything to your understanding of Islam. You must have read the Qura’an quite intensively and you have been practising this religion for about two dozen years. So

you should tell me what Islam is. No doubt, I have read the Qura'an twice and one sentence of the book has given me great strength," said I.

"Which sentence?" asked he.

"Its English translation is: 'Try to please none else but God.' Whenever 'powerful' people ask me to do something unfair, this sentence comes to my mind and helps me prevent myself from doing anything unfair or finding lame excuses," said I.

"I have heard that you worship cows and regard the cow as God," said he.

"We are thankful to the cow as we get milk and bullocks and many other useful things from this animal. Our being 'worshippers of the cow' simply means that we are respectful to the cow as we are thankful to it for the manifold benefits we owe to it. We do not regard the cow as the Supreme Being. It is the poverty of the English language that has led people to misunderstand the Hindus. In our language we have the word '*Ishwar*' for the Supreme Being and the word '*devata*' for benefactors. Nobody says that the cow is *Ishwar*. We describe cow as a mother and the abode of all the 330 million *devatas*. For us this simply means that cow is a benefactor as we owe to it much of our nutritive food, several medicines, and good agriculture. In English language there exists only one word, namely 'God/god' for both '*Ishwar*' and '*devata*' and they distinguish the two by using 'God' for '*Ishwar*' and 'god' for '*devata*' but in spoken English the distinction is blurred and they have developed the wrong notion that the Hindus believe the cow to be God and that according to the Hindus there exist 330 million Gods," said I.

"The cow is an animal, much below the level of man. How can it be regarded as God?" said he.

"I have already explained that the Hindus regard the cow as a mother not as '*Ishwar*'. I have also explained that the word 'benefactor' is more close to the sense that we want to convey

through the word '*devata*' than the word 'God/god' is. We call every benefactor a *devata*. For example, we regard the sun as a *devata* because this star gives us light and heat; we regard the rain too as a *devata* because it gives us water for our fields, domestic work and the like. We regard the moon also as a *devata* because it gives us light on most of the nights. That makes it clear that the word '*devata*' is used for a benefactor not for God," said I.

"I was told the Hindus regard the cow as God," said he.

"People jump to conclusions without understanding the facts," said I

"Yes, that causes misunderstanding and that leads to misinterpretations, I believe," said he.

"We the Hindus also believe that in this life of ours people have to suffer for their misdeeds and are rewarded for their virtuous deeds. And since the cow is a very useful and gentle domestic animal, one who is good to it, we believe, earns spiritual merit and one who is bad to it earns spiritual demerit. That is also the reason why we are respectful to the cow."

Kholood told me that Bilquees, one of the queens of Yemen in the ancient days, was a worshipper of the Sun. The Hindus too worship the Sun and pay the *arghya* to the Sun soon after they have washed themselves.

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## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **I Mastered Cooking**

I had resolved quite early in life that I would remain a vegetarian. I had made that resolution chiefly because my parents were strict vegetarians like most orthodox Brahmins of north-west India. Nay, they did not eat even onion and garlic as the two vegetables are believed to be *tamasik* and because the smell of either of them is repulsive. So when I went to Yemen, I resolved that I was not going to make any change in my eating habits. And since I could ensure that my food was strictly vegetarian only if I cooked it myself, I resolved not to hire a cook, but to become a cook for myself. No doubt, I was not very proficient in cooking, but I was able to cook tolerably well. I did not hire even an assistant. As a matter of fact, most Indian teachers living in Yemen then cooked for themselves. They were not happy with the task but they did it themselves and none hired a cook. My neighbour Indra usually complained that he was being made to do a woman's work and waste his talent of writing and teaching on cooking. One day when he came to me and expressed his resentment, I tried to persuade him not to make complaints like that.

“My energies are being wasted on cooking and my talent of writing is lying unemployed. I do not know what I should do to alter the situation and make myself more useful,” said Indra.

“I have in mind a Principal, Dr. A. N. Singh. When I was getting Rs. 14,000 per month, he was getting Rs. 1,00,000 per month. One day when I came to know that he cooked his food himself, I asked him whether he cooked his food himself, he said that he did and that the food that he cooked was very tasteful. He

also assured me that he was going to invite me to his residence some day to make me taste the food he would cook and appreciate his cooking skill. So, dear Indra, cook your food with that spirit. If you do that, the food you cook will be more nourishing. Do not regard cooking as a burden. After all you cook for yourself, not for others. If your body needs food, it is your responsibility to arrange it. Why do you resent arranging food for yourself? Rather you should take delight in doing it just as Dr. A. N. Singh did,” said I.

“You must have read in your class of Economics much about, what has come to be known as, the division of labour. An intelligent man spends most of his time and energies on doing the work that pays him well and leaves less paid or unpaid work for less talented people to do for money. That is the way a society makes progress and becomes more prosperous and more civilized. If every man does his work himself, our progress will be replaced by regress and man will go back to the primitive stage,” said Indra.

“One who is versatile is definitely better than the one who has kept himself confined to one single skill. Shakespeare calls Hotspur a parrot because Hotspur keeps himself confined to only fighting. And this soldier is at last defeated in the battlefield by Prince Henry who has had varied experiences in his life, said I.

“One who learns many skills becomes a Jack of many trades but master of none. If you are a Jack of many trades, you are not able to shine in any field and you remain a mediocre in every skill. If you are the master of one skill, you shine in that field. It is this shine that makes life successful,” said Indra.

“The idea of division of labour is a very good idea, no doubt, but the idea of self-reliance is equally good. The idea of the division of labour has been put into practice in our society, but still a man has to do a variety of works. You cannot entrust to others every work other than your professional work. So the less you depend on others, the better it is. The moment you approach somebody for your work, you expose yourself to his desire to

exploit and cheat you. Man is always trying to take advantage of the situation in hand. The moment a cook comes to know that you cannot do without him, he will increase his wages umpteen times,” said I.

I was arguing like that because I had acquired the skill of cooking by that time and had been cooking for years then. I recollected that Swami Bhakti Hridaya Bon had tried to persuade me to learn cooking when in 1965 I was working as a lecturer in English at the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Vrindaban. Swami ji was the Rector of the Institute and tried to solve our personal problems too. He knew that I was living there without my family. So one day he asked me where I dined.

“I go to a hotel in the market as my wife has not yet come to Vrindaban,” said I.

“Is the food there to your taste?” asked he.

“Yes, it is okay,” said I.

“It means you have no taste for eating,” said Swami ji.

“Does dining in a hotel mean that?” asked I.

“Yes, one who has a taste of his own cannot relish the food provided in the hotels as the cooks in the hotels keep in mind nobody’s taste and prepare vegetable curries with nobody in their minds. If your mother or your wife cooks for you, she keeps in mind which vegetable you like, how much salt you would like to have in it, how spicy you would like it to be, which cooking oil you like, which pickle you like to have, which chutney you would like, and so on,” said Swami ji.

“Since my wife is not here, I have no choice: I must dine in some hotel or starve,” said I.

“No, there is definitely a choice: learn cooking and cook for yourself. If you do that, much of the time that you lose in going to the hotel twice a day will be saved and you will get vegetable curries of your taste,” said Swami ji.

“And if you buy a pressure cooker, you will be able to

cook your curry in just four to five minutes,” said Dr. Maheshwari, the Principal of the Institute.

“A curry can be prepared in four minutes? My mother needs at least half an hour to cook any of the pulses,” said I.

“Buy a pressure cooker for her too. Have you seen a pressure cooker?” asked Principal Maheshwari.

“No, I haven’t. What is this pressure cooker?” said I.

“It is a cooking vessel in which the steam is not allowed to escape uninterrupted but is controlled and is made to do cooking speedily. It is a very useful vessel. It is becoming increasingly popular and will soon reach every kitchen. It shortens cooking time considerably and also preserves the nourishing qualities of the vegetables,” said Principal Maheshwari.

“Is that so?” asked I.

“Yes, it is so. The dealer will give you a chart too. They have made a chart to tell you how much time the cooker takes to cook which vegetable curry. For example, the gourd curry can be cooked only in two-to-three minutes, potato curry takes five minutes, rice takes five minutes, the pulses take fifteen minutes to cook,” said Dr. Maheshwari.

“That will make cooking a very easy task,” said I.

“That is why I am asking you to buy a pressure cooker and to start cooking for yourself, as Swami ji is advising you to do,” said Principal Maheshwari.

By the time I reached Yemen I had stopped trusting people in the matters of money and food. My experience has been that people can tell monstrous lies when money or food is at stake. One becomes as submissive as an earthworm when one needs money, but when one is required to pay, one becomes as cruel as Nero. I have been cheated on the matters of both money and food by very dependable people. Once I was given a cupful of milk by a room-mate of mine with the remark that it was pure milk having no egg in it. I drank this milk with the belief that it contained nothing

objectionable. The man knew that I was strictly vegetarian. Later on a common friend revealed to me that the man had mashed yolk in it. Many dependable people and even institutions chose not to give me my money. Prakash Pathak borrowed from me eight hundred and fifty rupees while Anand Singh Negi borrowed from me eight hundred rupees but neither has returned my money to this day. So when I resolved to go to Yemen I resolved to depend for my food solely on my own kitchen. This resolution of mine put me in tight corners a number of times but I always came out with flying colours. I shall narrate an incident of this kind.

One day I was on my way back home from the University. Since the university car had not come that day I was going on foot. A car being driven towards the town stopped by my side and I heard the Dean of our Faculty Abdul Qavi Husaini inviting me to board the car. I boarded the car gladly with the idea that I would reach my home comfortably. The car stopped just at the entrance of the market and all of us alighted from it. When I tried to bid good bye to the Dean and to take the road to my residence, he caught me by my hand and invited me to accompany him. I agreed, though I did not know to which place he was going. However, in a few minutes we reached a restaurant and he invited me to dine with him and his friends. I knew I was the only vegetarian in the group. I also knew I was not going to eat in that non-vegetarian restaurant. I also knew I would not like to hurt the feelings of my Dean. But I did not know how to reconcile these irreconcilable do's and withdraw from the group.

“Sir, my eating habits are different from those of others and I shall not be able to relish anything here. Therefore, please, excuse me and permit me to bid good- bye to you,” said I.

“No, no. there are a variety of preparations here, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian ones. Choose any of them you like. This preparation will suit you, I think. Take this one,” said he pointing to a pudding-like thing in a round deep plate.

“No Sir, I shall not be able to relish any of them. So please excuse me. I am very thankful to you for the invitation but since my eating habits are a bit peculiar, I shall not find here anything to my taste,” said I.

He tried to persuade me again and instructed the manager of the restaurant to serve to me only vegetarian dishes, but I was bent upon not dining there at all. At last, he saluted me with folded hands and permitted me to leave the restaurant. I heaved a sincere sigh of relief the moment I was out of the restaurant. I thanked God for this escape!

Abdul Qavi was hurt by my not having dined with him. The fact came to light a few days later when in his office he offered to me a bunch of flowers with the words , “Here is a bunch of flowers, Dr. Sharma. Smell these flowers, as you neither eat nor drink with us.”

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## **Chapter Eighteen**

### **Our Cow-Worship in their Eyes**

Fuad, whom I have mentioned earlier, was a warm-hearted man and, as I have observed earlier was a man with whom I had developed friendly relations. I had to go to this official in the Work Permit office of Aiz. I had to go to him every year soon after joining my duties in order to get the work permit for the year. One pleasant thing about him was that he was a jolly fellow and loved to crack jokes. Another good thing about him was that he spoke English fluently. He was an extensively travelled man and had represented Yemen in a number of international meets in his country as well as overseas. In this Work Permit office there were at least two clerks whose palms you had to grease in order to get your work done. But Fuad was an upright man. He took delight in talking to you and befriending you and sometimes took two or three days to issue you the permit.

“Dr. Sharma, one day I happened to be at a construction site in a town of my country where the leaves of paper bearing the blue-print of the building were lying on a table. The engineer left the table unprotected to accompany me when I went to have a look at the actual construction work being done by the masons. He started explaining his construction plans to me. A stray cow came there from somewhere and finding the blue-print of the building unprotected moved towards it. Fearing that it would eat the leaves of paper up I rushed towards the table to frighten the cow off. But the Indian workers working there instantly intervened and asked me not to hurt the cow. The cow ate up the whole blue-print, but

those Indian labourers neither allowed me to save the leaves of paper nor did they themselves do anything in the direction. What was the point in not protecting those valuable leaves of paper from that stray cow? I fail to understand. But Dr. Sharma, your countrymen behaved like that and left me to wonder why they did that,” said he.

I did not know whether any such incident had actually taken place or the whole of it had been created by Fuad to attack the Hindus’ taking care of the cows. But I did not like to remain silent on hearing the question.

“Mr. Fuad, we the Hindus are a community most members of which are thankful by temperament. If somebody renders help to us, we remember the fact and remain grateful to him for that. We not only know but also keep in mind the fact that our agriculture depends to a great extent on our bovine live-stock and so we are respectful to cows and try our best to express our gratitude to them. However, I accept that there was no reason why the leaves of paper containing the blueprint should not have been protected by giving the cow proper forage to eat,” said I.

I wonder why during my seven year long stay in Yemen nobody asked me why the Hindus worshipped idols or made images of those whom they worshipped. I remember that in the year 1965 when I was teaching at Vrindavana, I used to go to at least one temple everyday. I also went to the Man Singh Temple. I was told there that the Muslim invaders had broken not only the main idol there but also the face of each of the small images of Krishna and Radha carved on the pillars and the walls. These images must have been thousands in number and those who broke them must have spent a lot of labour in breaking the faces of these images. What did they gain by breaking the images?

I believe an image in a temple is at least as useful as a map of the world in a Geography class-room. When a teacher of Geography shows the map to his students and tells them that it is

the world, he is trying to give his students a broad idea of the shapes of the continents and oceans on the earth. Everybody knows that the map is not the world, but the map is needed to give the students an idea of the shapes of the countries, continents and oceans and the locations of cities, rivers and mountains. In the same way, if a preacher uses an image of Lord Vishnu to give his disciples an idea of what kind of person Lord Vishnu was and what his remarkable accomplishments were, he has not done any misdeed. He has used the image to make it easy for his disciples to grasp what kind of person Lord Vishnu was as an image is a concrete thing and has an appeal to the senses of sight and touch. But if he uses no image and uses only words to do his job, his listeners may not be able to focus their attention on the lecture and much that he talks about may remain outside their grasp. So if a preacher uses images and idols while preaching he is likely to succeed in conveying his views in an interesting manner. That makes it clear that the idols and images in temples are not useless and that it is not a sin to use them in sermons.

One may ask as to why the Hindus worship an idol as God Himself if the idol is being treated only as a symbol of God. The question is not irrelevant and deserves to be answered. Most of the Hindus are sentimental people. Since an idol is regarded as a symbol of God, we treat the symbol too with respect. Thus far it is all right. But in the case of the sentimental people their respect takes the form of devotion and they begin to worship the idol. I have seen women touching the feet of the actors playing the roles of Rama, Sita, and Lakshman. These women know that the persons whose feet they are touching are not Ram, Sita and Lakshman, but only actors playing the parts of Ram, Sita and Lakshman. But their sentimental temperament makes them touch the feet of the actors and treat them as real Ram, Sita and Lakshman. This is an example of what S. T. Coleridge describes as “the willing suspension of disbelief.”

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**Chapter Nineteen**  
**"This is Yemen, Not India "Said His Pet Student"**

It was a sunny afternoon of June 2009. I was in my flat taking rest when I heard Indra, the then next door neighbour of mine, shouting at somebody who was equally loud in his shouts. Just out of curiosity I opened my door to see what was happening. I found Indra shouting at his student Queeb.

“How dare you ask me why I have not awarded you 100% marks? Does anybody award 100% marks in English? In India even an extraordinarily brilliant student gets 60% marks in English with difficulty. How can I award you 100% marks in English?” asked Indra.

“But this is Yemen, not India. If my answers are correct, I must get 100 % marks. Why can I not be awarded 100 % marks? You refuse to give 100 % marks only because this is not done in India? This is no argument,” asked Queeb.

“What is the matter, Dr. Indra?” asked I.

“He has secured 80 % marks in my paper, but he says he should have been awarded 100 % marks in this paper. How can it be done? After all it is not Mathematics. In India even extraordinarily brilliant students find it difficult to secure 60 % marks in English. In Mathematics every brilliant student, nay, even a good student, gets 100 per cent marks, no doubt. But who gets 100 % marks in English? He wants me to award him 100 % marks in the paper of Fiction,” said Indra.

“But how does he know he has been awarded 80 % marks in your paper? The result has not been declared so far. How did a

confidential piece of information reach him?” asked I.

On hearing my question Indra’s face turned pale, and Queeb started creeping downstairs. In a few seconds Queeb reached the ground floor and left the house.

“Who revealed to him this confidential piece of information? Not many of us have started even evaluating their answer books. But this student knows even the marks he has obtained. This is strange!” said I.

“This boy came to me and I thought he would feel happy if I told him his score in my paper. I thought he would be delighted to know he had secured 80 % marks,” said Indra

“So you are the culprit. Why did you commit the mistake of revealing to him a confidential piece of information?” said I.

“I thought he would be delighted to learn he had been awarded eighty percent marks But he began to ask me why he had not been given 100 % marks. When I told him nobody was awarded 100 % marks in English in India, he said that we were living in Yemen, not in India,” said Indra.

“So it was your fault. Why did you reveal a confidential piece of information to him? Nobody has a right to declare a part of the result until the whole of it has been declared,” said I.

“Yes, I realize my mistake now. You are right. I should not have disclosed a confidential matter to a student,” said Indra.

As a matter of fact it is essential for an evaluator to know that he has no right to under-rate or over-rate a student. An evaluator is expected to inform the University exactly where the examinee stands so that on the basis of the percentage of his marks the society may assign him a position. If an evaluator under-rates a student, he will be doing injustice to the student as he will be depriving the student of the opportunity to get in his society the high place he deserves. At the same time he will be depriving the society of a proficient person who can do his work with proficiency. On the other hand if he over-rates a person, he will be causing harm to the

society as the society will give to this student a place which he does not deserve.

I knew Indra was not fair in his evaluation work. I knew he favoured the wards of influential persons. One day in my presence he asked the son of a University official to write his roll number at the end of his answers in the answer book. When I asked him whether he would over-rate that student, he said that it was to be done in every country of the Middle-East if one wanted to survive there. I also came to know later on that often he was quite careless in evaluating answer books and committed blunders. He seemed to be “surviving” there because he had been able to endear himself to influential persons by over-rating their wards. However, it was in February 2011 that there burst out an agitation against the then President of the Republic of Yemen Ali Abdulla Saleh: they were demanding his resignation. By the word ‘they’ I mean all the opposition parties. And they were being supported by a section of the army under the command of General Ahmar, a man whose father was the Sheikh of the tribe to which Ali Abdulla Saleh belonged. Since both of them belonged to the same tribe, people described the fight as the fight between two cousins. They likened the fight to the war of Mahabharata which had been fought in India in the *dwapar* period between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who were cousins. Ali Abdullah Saleh succeeded in suppressing the rebellion temporarily.

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## **Chapter Twenty**

### **They Praised Aurangzeb Not Akbar**

One day when I was going to Aiz by the University bus Salah began to talk about the Mughal emperors of India.

“Babur or Babar was the first Mughal emperor of India while Bahadur Shah Zafar was the last one. Of them Akbar, the grandson of Babar, was the most successful Mughal ruler as besides enjoying the support of the Muslims he succeeded to a great extent in getting the support of the Hindus, especially the Rajputs, too. Aurangzeb, the great-grandson of Akbar, tried to Islamize India ruthlessly. He is regarded as the person who dug the grave of the Mughal Empire. Aurangzeb got the throne of Delhi by killing his three brothers and imprisoning his father Emperor Shahjahan. So he is considered a very bad man,” said I.

“But he was a good administrator. On that count he deserves to be appreciated,” said Salah.

“A man who kills his own brothers and imprisons his father in order to get the throne cannot be regarded as a person deserving appreciation,” said I.

“That part of Aurangzeb has nothing to do with us. For these misdeeds his family may regard him as a very bad son and brother. Nay, they may even condemn him. We are concerned with his political activities and his performance as a ruler. That side of his personality was definitely appreciable,” said Salah.

Aurangzeb tried to Islamize India so ruthlessly that he murdered all those whom he regarded as impediments between

him and his goal. He beheaded Teg Bahadur Singh the ninth *guru* of the Sikhs because the latter had refused to embrace Islam. This great grandson of Akbar did not allow even Guru Govind Singh, the tenth *guru* of the Sikhs, to lead an apolitical life devoted to teaching his disciples and tried to crush him with the result that the *guru* had to make the Sikhs a warrior community. The tenth *guru* lost two of his sons in the battlefield in his war against Aurangzeb, and a governor working under Aurangzeb got two other sons of the Guru made parts of a wall. Aurangzeb also got a number of Hindu temples demolished. All these actions of his must have been acclaimed by the upholders of Islam. And for all such anti-Hindu activities the proponents of Islam must have admired him as a ruler. I wondered whether Salah was admiring Aurangzeb for such misdeeds of his. I cannot convince myself that Salah was not aware of Aurangzeb's ruthless anti-Hindu measures.

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## **Chapter Twenty-One**

### **The Sole Option**

As the Chairman of the Department of English I was responsible also for the proper conduct of the examination and timely declaration of the results. The examination was to be conducted with the help of my fellow teachers working in the Department. As a matter of fact the Rector of the University had sent a circular to the effect that it was imperative for every teacher to be present in the University on each day of the examination in the concerned Department.

I notified the duties of the teachers of the Department and expected the teachers to comply with the instructions. But only A'ath and Ahima turned up to do their supervision duties. Dr. Indra had left for India, Feeq had left for Sana'a, Keena was taking care of her baby, Da too was taking care of her baby, Masan was busy at home, Quees was nowhere in sight and Queeb was preparing himself for the Accountancy examination. I sent a letter to the Dean informing him that such and such teachers had not been doing their supervisory duties in the examination. At this Queeb started coming, not regularly though. I entrusted the task of supervising the examination too to myself. By the grace of God no unhappy incident occurred during the examinations and they were over.

Then there began the work of preparing the results. The work was to be done by the demonstrators working in the Department. They were expected to prepare awards lists, post the marks and assign the divisions. There were three demonstrators in the Department, namely Ahima, A'ath and Queeb. There was a secretary too in the Department, named Sama. These four decided

on their own that each one of them would prepare the result of one Level. But the Controller of the examinations intervened and issued orders that the task of preparing the result was not to be entrusted to a Secretary.

When the semester-break was over and the University reopened, I had only one week to get the results prepared. A'ad started preparing the results of one Level, Ahima started preparing the results of another Level. Queeb went on absenting himself day after day without giving me or the Dean any information. There was a rumour that he had gone to Turkey and that he would stay there for at least a month. So the results of two Levels remained unheeded to. I was not in a position to prepare the results as they were to be prepared in Arabic and my knowledge of Arabic at that time was meagre.

I informed the Controller of the examinations that I needed some substitute of Queeb or his permission to assign the work to Sama the Secretary working in the Department. He did not permit me to assign the work to Sama. Nor did he give me a substitute for Queeb. In a week or so A'ad completed the results of Level Four. Ahima prepared the results of Level Three, one of the four classes, and stopped coming as she had been permitted by the Dean to have complete rest at home and not to come to the University for an indefinite period of time. So I was left with A'ad alone to prepare the results.

I took stock of the situation: A'ad had been coming to the Department as punctually as I had been since the first day of examinations and had been doing his work quite sincerely; six teachers had been enjoying French leave for almost two months, and two of the demonstrators too had joined the group. Had I any moral right to ask A'ad to work faster? I think I had not. So I left him to do his work at his own pace. I knew the work was not going to be completed by the last date fixed for the purpose. But I was helpless.

The deadline ended. Nay, two more weeks were over. But the results of Level One and Level Two were not yet ready. The students, naturally enough, were getting restive. They approached me to find out when their results were going to be declared. I did not know the answer to the question. In a state of nervousness I wrote another letter to the Controller to give me the substitutes of the two demonstrators. He not only did not give me any substitute but also pressurized the authorities to give the post of Chairman to somebody else. I do not know whether he suggested some name too. So it was he who was one of the persons playing politics and wanted me to be removed from the chair of the chairman of the Department. I went to the Vice Dean of the Faculty to explain why the results were being delayed. He did not show any sympathies and impatiently asked me not to become impatient. Nay, he added that Queeb was coming the following week.

Two more weeks passed but the results of Level One and Level Two remained undeclared. Queeb was still in Turkey and Ahima was having complete rest at home. A'ath alone was seen in the examination room struggling with the cross lists. It was 10:00 a.m. that day when I heard the students shouting:

*La ilah illilla, Mohammad il rasool Allah*

*La ilah illilla, Mohammad il rasool Allah.*

The noise was coming closer and closer. I wondered what it was about. Sam told me the students were coming towards my room and that it was a demonstration against my not having declared the results of Level One and Level Two. I reached the door of the room. Four of the students were dancing thumping the ground with regular loud beats and the rest of the students were repeating the slogans in a chorus.

*La ilah illilla, Mohammad il rasool Allah*

*La ilah illilla, Mohammad il rasool Allah.*

A'ath translated these slogans for me into English. However, I did not regard it as an attack on Hinduism or an upholding of Islam

against Hinduism. I said to myself that they were chanting the *kalma* because they wanted to say something in order to create noise. A delegation of these students headed by Riham came to me. Riham was a student of Level One. She wanted to know why the results had not been declared by that time and exactly when they were going to be declared. I revealed to her all the facts I knew. Did I satisfy her? I think I did. But it was a fact that I had not been able to declare the results even on that day and I did not know when Queeb was coming back from Turkey. I realized, belatedly no doubt, that the sole option before me was to resign as Chairman of the Department. But I did not resign. Consequently, I came to know that some efforts were being made to get me removed from the post of the head of the Department. One of them was being made by Hesham. He was suggesting to students that it was I who had not been able to get the results prepared on time and that I was responsible for the delay in the declaration of their results.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

### **Truth Protects Everybody**

One day I received one official letter and one oral instruction. The official letter bore the signature of Awi, the Assistant Rector, asking me whether at the moment the Department of English stood in need of a Demonstrator. The oral instruction which the messenger conveyed to me was again from Awi: I was expected to talk to Dr. Awi on the phone.

That year I was working as Chairman of the Department of English at the University of Urba. I was trying to serve the University as faithfully as was possible for me to do. And I believed everybody there was happy with me. Even though the Department was not under-staffed, there were some outsiders teaching some of the courses in the Department. Most of them were working with the hope that they would be “accommodated” in the Department as teachers sooner or later. Some of them were doing so patiently while the rest were impatient to be accommodated.

I came to know somehow that a letter had been sent by one of the Ministers in the Central government asking the Rector to consider Ahar for appointment as a Demonstrator in case there was a vacancy in the Department of English. Obviously it was not an order but a suggestion. But at the same time it could be interpreted as a command to the Rector. Much depended on how the Rector interpreted the letter. I tried to speculate as to what the Rector would do, but I did not know much about him and, so, did not succeed in guessing out what was going to happen.

I opened Dr. Awi’s letter and found that it was a query and I was being asked through it whether there existed any vacancy of

a Demonstrator in the Department of English. I deduced instantly that this letter had been written to me in the context of the Minister's letter which I have mentioned earlier. Thus the ball of Ahar's appointment, I found, was in my court. Everybody knew that there existed no vacancy in the Department of English in our Faculty. The Rector's office had conveyed this to Ahar in clear terms a number of times. The Assistant Rector had asserted this forcefully when my predecessor had tried to get Ahar appointed. But in the backdrop of the Minister's letter they began to shirk from taking the responsibility on their shoulders. And they had shifted the responsibility to commit, positively or negatively, to me. I asked myself what I would do. I wondered whether I had the courage to speak the truth. And I said I had. So I told myself that I was not going to tell a lie whatever might be the consequences. In compliance with Dr. Awi's oral message I phoned to him soon afterwards.

"Good morning, sir. I have been asked by Ahar to phone to you. What can I do for you?" asked I.

"I am very glad to talk to you. How are you Dr. Sharma? Are you O.K.," said he.

"I am O.K. sir," said I.

"I have written a letter to you asking you whether there is a vacancy of a demonstrator in your Department. Please send a reply that helps Ahar," said he.

That meant he wanted me to write to him that there did exist a vacancy of a demonstrator in the Department of English. This posed a problem for me to tackle: if I stated that there existed no vacancy in the Department, I would be stating a fact truthfully but I would be offending Awi, the Assistant Rector; if I stated that there did exist a vacancy, I would be pleasing Awi, the Assistant Rector, but I would be telling a lie and would be offending the Supreme Being. I wanted to help Ahar but I did not relish the idea of helping someone at the cost of truth. I did not want to offend Dr. Awi too. So I thought over the issue hard for one full day. At last I

got enlightened when I got the idea that truth helps each and everybody irrespective of time and place and that my stating the fact truthfully would help not only Ahar, but also the Assistant Rector, the Rector and the Minister. Therefore I resolved to act according to the dictates of my conscience: I resolved that in order to help Ahar I would state the fact as it was.

I drafted the reply to the Assistant Rector's letter writing in absolutely unambiguous terms that there existed no vacancy of a demonstrator in the Department of English of the Urba Campus of Aiz University so far as my knowledge went. I sent the letter to the Assistant Rector through a messenger who showed the letter to Ahar before delivering it to the addressee.

Awi must have felt offended as I did not receive any phone call from him for weeks after this. Ahar began to treat me as an enemy as in her eyes my letter had brought the whole edifice of her dreams to the ground. I tried to persuade Ahar that in my letter I had only stated a fact and that it was not possible for me to cheat the head of the university by giving a false statement.

"But in each the other Departments of the University there are a host of demonstrators," said she.

"But that does not mean that there exists a vacancy of a demonstrator in the Department of English in this Faculty," said I.

There was no action against me in that session. But soon after the next session had begun one day Eid brought to me a letter. He told me that Arim, the Dean of the faculty, had sent it to me. Eid translated the letter into English orally and told me that the Dean had thanked me for having worked as Chairman of the Department of English for two years and that I was being relieved as Chairman of the Department with immediate effect. I left the chair of the Chairman then and there and went to the library to do some reading. The action was not unanticipated. But I had no regrets.

After a gap of about two years one day I came to know that Ahar had been appointed a demonstrator in the Department of English. And that she had joined her duties.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### My Encounter with Two Robbers

It was the second (or the third ?) day of the month of Ramadan in July 2013. I left my house in Aiz at about 10:00 a.m. as I wanted to go to Urba at my earliest. There was nobody on the part of the Wadi-al-Quadi road I was able to see and none of the shops was open. It was calm and quiet as if the town had been deserted and every house had been left unoccupied. For about fifteen minutes I was the only pedestrian on the road of Wadi-al-Quadi. When I was not far from the taxi-stand a small mini-bus moving towards the stand stopped beside me and the driver invited me to board it. I said I was going just to the Urba taxi stand and that I would like to walk.

“Urba. *Tal tal* (= I am going to Urba. Get in),” said the driver.

“Urba?” asked I.

“*Aiwa* (= Yes),” said he.

“*Kam floos* (= How much money will you charge)?” asked I.

“*kham*s (=Five),” said he.

The shared-taxi fare from Aiz to Urba in those days was one thousand Yemeni Rials. And prices usually rose during the month of Ramadan. So I thought he was demanding five thousand Rials.

“*Kham*s *alf*? *La la* (= Five thousand? No, no). This is too much,” said I.

“*Mian* (hundred),” said one of the two persons occupying the back seat.

Since the man was demanding just half of the prevalent fare, I

agreed to board the vehicle. I took the seat beside the driver himself very happily.

When the vehicle was still on the Wadi-al-quadi road and the main road was about one hundred yards away, one of the two passengers asked the driver to stop the vehicle and when the vehicle stopped, he alighted from it. When he was down on the road, he showed the driver a thousand Rial note saying that he did not have a fifty Rial note. He was standing at my window. The driver turned to me and asked me if I had the change for the one thousand Rial note.

“*Sarf moghood?* “(=Do you have the change?), asked he.

I tried to recollect whether I had the change. It took me a few seconds to bring to my mind which kinds of notes I had. I had only two one-thousand-Rial notes and one or two one-hundred-Rial notes. So I said I did not have the change. The driver refused to believe me and asked me to show him my purse. I did that. Immediately he took the whole money from my purse and started looking for money in my bag. I did not like it and tried to open the window and alight from the vehicle. But the man standing outside did not let me open it. Nay, the driver thrust his hands into my pockets too and took out even my mobile phone.

It was at this point that I realized that he had robbed me of the whole of my money and my mobile phone too. I also realized that he had been pretending to search for the change for the one-thousand-Rial note and that actually they were a gang of robbers. I wanted to shout for help but there was nobody on the road for me to shout for. I also realized that if I shouted for help in English or in Hindi, nobody would understand my meaning and I did not know what to say in Arabic as in those days I had very meagre knowledge of Arabic.

On the spur of the moment I laughed as loudly as I could in that state and said, “ *Saddiq, sarf mush moghood* (= Friend,

actually I do not have the change ).” I saw that the driver was still holding all my notes including the two one thousand Rial notes in his hand. I took them from his hand and hurriedly put them into my bag and turned to the window. This time I succeeded in opening the window and alighted from the vehicle. I had forgotten all about my mobile phone by this time and tried to move as swiftly as I could. It was the driver who asked me loudly to collect from him my mobile phone. And I did. When I looked back after a few seconds the man standing at the window had re-boarded the vehicle and the vehicle was taking an about-turn. This made it clear that he was a part of the gang and had only pretended to be paying the fare to the driver at the end of his journey. Since the vehicle had taken an about turn, it was clear that the driver was not driving it to Urba though he had stated that earlier.

I am of the opinion that this driver let me have my money back because he had seen that the money I had at that time was just enough for one trip to Turba. He appeared to have been considerate enough not to rob me of what I was immediately in need of. After all he was not as bad as are the people who have robbed me of even those possessions which I was in immediate need of.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

### **"It is in Your Interest to Learn Arabic"**

It was the month of September. The year was 2011. I went to Fuad to get my work permit for the session of 2011-12. I decided to be jolly like Fuad and entered his office pretending to be a stranger.

“I am Sharma from Urba. Would you please issue me my Work Permit for the current session,” said I.

“Oh, I do not know you at all as we are meeting today for the first time and we are absolute strangers. How can I recognize a stranger when he comes to me for the first time?” said he and began to laugh loudly.

My colleague Madan of the Department of Mathematics was sitting beside him and the two were talking in Arabic as Arabic was the mother tongue of either of them. Fuad gave me the application form and asked me to fill it up. But since my knowledge of Arabic was very meagre I needed the help of some Arabic knowing man to fill it up. Fuad understood my difficulty.

“Dr. Sharma, you should have acquired adequate proficiency in Arabic by now. One needs only three months to learn a new language in case one is living with the native speakers of that language. How long have you been living in Yemen? Ten years?” asked he.

“No, no I have been living here for only three years. But you are right. I should have acquired adequate proficiency in Arabic by now. I reprimand myself on my lethargy. I shall try to cast it off now and will try to learn Arabic too as I have learnt many other things here. I am sorry I am learning Arabic very slowly,” said I.

Madan said something to Fuad and Fuad nodded in

response. I was not able to decipher what they had said to each other.

“How much Arabic have you learnt, Dr. Sharma?” asked Fuad.

“Oh, I know a number of words of Arabic: I know *haleeb* (=milk), *mhei* (=water), *batata* (=potato), *tamata* (=tomato), *badinga* (=brinjal), *roti* (=rusk), *bartkul* (=orange), *asal* (=honey), *shammam* (= musk melon),...” said I.

“That means you have learnt words which help you survive here in an Arabic-speaking country,” said Fuad.

“Nay, I also know Arabic numbers: *wahid, ithnen, talatha, arba, khams, seeta, saba, thamanian, tissa, asara* (= one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten),” said I.

“Oh good; anything more?” said he.

“Yes, I also know *ashreen, talatheen, arabine, khamseen, sitteen, sabaen, mian, alph* (=twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, hundred, thousand),” said I.

“O.K. Can you speak a sentence of Arabic?” asked he. Madan said something to Fuad again.

“Why not? I can speak two: *kaif halaq? Kilo tamata kum floos?* (How are you? How much money will you charge for one kilogram tomato?).

Madan stood up and left the room.

“Dr. Sharma, it is in your interest that you learn Arabic because unless you have learnt Arabic, you cannot understand what people say about you and what they intend to do against you. Don’t you think it is in your interest that you should know what people are saying to each other about you?” said Fuad.

“Yes, it is very essential for me to know that,” said I.

“Madan is your colleague. Isn’t he?” said he.

“Yes he is” said I.

“Do you know what he was saying to me about you in Arabic?” asked Fuad.

“I do not as I do not understand Arabic much. But I would like to know,” said I.

“He was saying that Sharma is a minister in his own country and that the Hindu ministers do not speak Arabic because they believe Arabic will defile their tongues,” said he.

“But this is not so,” said I.

“Yes, it was for this reason that I made you speak Arabic sentences in his presence,” said he.

I was of the opinion that Madan was a man of very pleasant temperament and was very happy with me. I had phoned to him a number of times just out of courtesy. I did not imagine that he had a heart full of venom against me and that he was instigating people against the Hindus. Thus I realized that I was a very poor judge of character and did not have much insight into human nature.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

### **How to Choose a Spouse?**

“Which of the two practices provides us an easy solution of the problem of finding a match for one’s son or daughter?” asked Samar.

I had told Samar that a Hindu father followed the practice of choosing a bridegroom for his daughter from a clan other than his own but from his own caste, and that in many cases the task was not easy. And she had told me that in accordance with an established practice among the Muslims a girl usually married her cousin, that is, the son of her father’s brother or the son of her father’s sister or the son of her mother’s sister. By ‘two practices’ she meant the Hindu practice of a father’s choosing a bridegroom for his daughter from a clan different from his own but from his own caste and the Muslim practice of one’s usually marrying one’s cousin.

Hers was a rhetorical question as it is obvious that one can easily persuade one’s nephew/ niece to agree to accept a proposal of marriage. She wanted me to say that the Muslim practice was better than the Hindu practice.

“If ease is the chief consideration, a boy should marry his sister and a girl should marry her brother,” I wanted to say. But I didn’t.

“If one marries a person from one’s own clan and has children, it will become a case of in-breeding and in such cases the community has to taste the ill-effects of in-breeding,” said I.

“What are they?” asked she.

“In-breeding results in the deterioration of the next generation. They say that in-breeding causes both physical and mental deterioration of the children born of such a marriage. It is said that in such cases children are not healthy and suffer from various diseases,” said I.

“This you are saying on the basis of some experiment you have made or on the basis of simply hearsay?” said she.

“I have not made any experiments. I am saying this because I have heard people in my country saying so. This view is held not only by the orthodox Hindus but also by the medical scientists of the West,” said I.

“On the basis of my observation I can say that the Muslims even today are very good soldiers, very good speakers, very good administrators, very good scholars, very good poets and writers,” said she.

“In Shakespeare’s play *Othello* Othello the Moor is a matchless warrior and the ruler of the country has no substitute of his. Asadulla Ghalib, the Urdu poet of India, wrote poetry in Urdu and his verses are read and quoted frequently even today. Mohammad Iqbal’s patriotic poems endeared him even to the Hindus of India. Hindi poetry was enriched by many Muslim poets including Amir Khusro, Raskhaan and Abdur-Rahim Khanekhana. India made several Muslims including Zakir Hussain, Faqrudin Ali Ahmad and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Presidents of the country. Mahatma Gandhi took the help of Zakir Hussain to implement his ideas on Basic Education. This means that the Muslim community has produced a host of prominent persons in every field. So what you call in-breeding has done no harm to the community as a whole,” added she.

“Moreover, the practice of permitting a man to have four wives serves a very good purpose.” It was Ahma who spoke these words.

“What is that purpose?” asked I.

“It is better to have four legitimate wives than having an unlimited number of illegitimate wives called girl-friends. If a man has four wives, the number of his wives will remain confined to four and the man’s conjugal life will be free from suspicion, distrust and jealousy. But if a man is allowed to have girl-friends, as several communities do, he may have half a dozen or even more of them with the result that his conjugal relations will be marred by suspicion, jealousy and distrust,” added Ahma.

“In India we do not have the practice of having girl-friends. If a man gets a girl-friend he does so secretly and when the fact comes to light, people do all they can to dissuade him from indulging in the practice. The practice of having girl-friends has been prohibited by both social rules and law of the land. There have been cases when a girl who has become somebody’s mistress before her marriage is likely to be killed by her own father, or, if the father has died, by her brother,” said I.

“I thought there prevailed the practice of having girl-friends even in India,” said she.

“No, it doesn’t so far as the Hindu community is concerned. On the practice of marriage the Hindus regard Ram and Sita as their ideals,” said I.

“What does that mean?” asked Ahma.

“Ram and Sita were the persons who refused to marry the second time even when either of them encountered situations in which there was a lot of pressure to marry the second time. When Ram, a prince, was banished by his father and was left with no property, not even a house to live in, and was spending his days in the forest, a very rich king kidnapped his wife Sita from his hut and not only entreated her to marry him but also tried to terrorize her into marrying him. An ordinary woman must have become the rich king’s wife with the excuse that she married him in a state of helplessness. But Sita declared that none other than Ram could be her husband. Don’t you think in such a situation a money-loving

woman would have even divorced Ram and would have been glad to marry the rich king? Don't you think so?" said I.

"Yes, many women do not like to face hardships. They will always opt for ease, comfort, and even luxury first. Principles are the last thing they care for," said Ahma.

"But Sita did not shun the hardships. For her faithfulness to her husband was more important than ease, comforts and luxuries of life," said I.

"Yes, that kind of thinking is very rare and deserves to be revered," said Ahma.

"Likewise, when Rama became king of Ayodhya and was single after he had banished Sita, he was pressurized a great deal to get another wife so that he might be able to perform the *ashwamedh yajnya*, as this *yajna* is performed jointly by a husband and his wife, but he refused to get another wife and said that none else but Sita could be his wife. Nay, in order to perform the *yajnya* he got an image of Sita made and used the image as the substitute of Sita. For him too faithfulness to his spouse was an inviolable value. That was why he honoured this value as much as the requirement of a ritual," said I.

"If my husband, in case I marry, gets another wife, I'll kill him," said Ahma.

"Yes, I like the spirit behind your thinking. It is this spirit that prevails in the Hindu community of India. I believe that since a husband wants his wife to have no second husband, he himself should never think of getting a second wife. Morality expects me to do unto others as I want others to do unto me," said I.

Now somebody may say that that there existed in India the practices of both polygamy and polyandry. They may give the example of King Dashratha to support the practice of polygamy and the example of queen Dropadi to justify the practice of polyandry. Yes, King Dashratha had three wives, namely, Kaushalya, Kekeyi, and Sumitra, and from them he had four sons,

namely Ram, Lakshman, Bharata, and Shatrughna. But on account of this fact Ram had to spend fourteen years in the forest where his wife was kidnapped and he had to gather an army and fight a war in order to regain her. Ram had to suffer so much chiefly because his step-mother Kekeyi wanted her son Bharata, and not Ram, to inherit the throne of Ayodhya. It must have been in the light of this experience that Ram rejected the practice of polygamy and refused to get a second wife even when he was single after Sita had been banished and he remained single thereafter. The question of a Hindu's having girl-friends does not arise at all. It was from the story of Dashratha that the Hindu thinkers deduced the rule that the practice of having two or more wives was unsound and ceased to favour it. Now a days too if a man gets a second wife, his fellow Hindus look down upon him as a doer of an ethically unjustifiable deed. I have in mind a fellow teacher of mine named Shyam. He had a wife and a son when he chose to marry a student of his. He was a famous political figure of the district at that time. But his second marriage caused his political death and he was denied a ticket by his party to contest the election for the membership of even the Legislative Assembly of the state.

The practice of polyandry has never found favour with the Hindus. Those practising it are looked down upon. Dropadi became the wife of five men by a mistake of Kunti and this mistake in the long run caused the war of Mahabharata. Now-a-days no Hindu can think of a woman having several husbands. A widow gets another husband in many cases, no doubt, but no married Hindu woman whose husband is alive will get another husband.

I believe that the rules of the *dharma* are still in the process of being discovered and for that human experiences and their outcomes have been being studied constantly since the dawn of civilization in the plains of the Ganga and the Sindhu. The Hindus have been modifying their basic ethical findings with the result that there is dynamism in the Hindu ethical system. No doubt, these

days widows and widowers are permitted to marry, but in the cultured families a marriage is regarded as a sacrament and everlasting. For example, the first Prime Minister of independent India Jawahar Lal Nehru lost his wife when he was about fifty, but he chose to remain single after that. His daughter Indira Gandhi lost her husband quite early but she chose to remain single thereafter. Even her two daughters-in-law Sonia Gandhi and Menaka Gandhi lost their husbands quite early, but neither of them chose to marry again and each remained single after the death of her husband.

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## Chapter Twenty-Six

### "I am a Nabati, a Vegetarian"

There were a number of hotels and restaurants in Urba but I resolved to cook my food myself. There were several reasons behind this resolution of mine. The most important of them was that being a strict vegetarian I could dine in a hotel or restaurant only if they cooked there exclusively vegetarian food. And there existed no hotel or restaurant of that kind in the whole of the town. I know I spent a lot of my time on cooking and kept myself away from academic work for several hours every day. But there was no way out. So long as I was in India living alone, I usually approached a *vaishnava* hotel for my meals and was able to devote most of my time and energies to academic pursuits. In India there are *vaishnava* hotels in every town and usually in plenty. That was one of the reasons why I wanted myself to be back in India. I believed that in India I would be able to do much more work in the academic field than I was doing there in Yemen. Money I was definitely earning, but money is only a means in life, the end of my life, I have resolved, is academic work.

I have met a number of men who tried to justify non-vegetarianism on one ground or the other. Most of them try to prove that animal flesh is more nourishing than vegetarian food

“Non-vegetarian diet is much more nutritious than vegetarian diet. If you do not eat non-vegetarian food, you will not get animal protein which our body needs. Vegetables can give you only plant protein, they cannot give you animal protein. And without animal protein your body must remain deficient and this deficiency will tell upon your health and will adversely affect your longevity,” said Aziz Ahmad, a colleague of mine at Hapur.

I was a novice on the issue of nutrition and so I started regarding Aziz Ahmad's view as a gospel truth. Nay, one day I went to the extent of quoting him in the presence of Mahendra Kumar Sharma, a senior doctor. Mahendra Kumar had a different opinion on the issue.

"Protein is protein whatever be its source. You may get it from pulses or you may get it from some animal's flesh. The source does not make any difference in the quality of protein. It is wrong to say that there are two kinds of protein, namely animal protein and vegetation protein. There is nothing like animal protein or vegetation protein. It is simple protein. And pulses are a very rich source of protein. So the view that vegetarians do not get adequate amount of protein because they do not eat flesh is wrong," said Mahendra Kumar Sharma.

This is how I found Aziz Ahamad's argument standing on a false ground based on a fallacy. There was a Muslim friend of his and he too gave arguments in support of non-vegetarian foods.

"There is a friend of mine in Mumbai. He usually eats fish with the result that he does not need a quilt even in the month of December though at that time we need heavy quilts and cotton-stuffed *gaddas*. That proves that non-vegetarian foods are much more nutritious than the vegetarian ones and we should prefer them to the vegetarian ones, if we want ourselves to be well-nourished" said he.

"Picking your neighbour's pocket will definitely enable you to have money when you have no money in your pocket. Should you pick your neighbour's pocket, when you have no money in your pocket?" asked I.

"What do you mean?" asked he.

"Your argument amounts to this that when you need money you should pick anybody's pocket you like. My meaning is that man is a moral animal. He should do only what is also morally justifiable. Lower animals care only for gains. They will eat when

they are hungry whether the forage belongs to the master or not. But a man should take exclusively what belongs to him. If he takes what does not belong to him, he will be committing theft and will be regarded as a thief. If I keep myself alive by killing an animal and eating its flesh I am not doing a morally justifiable act. If you are magnanimous you would like to give your flesh to a hungry animal to keep it alive. Robbing an animal of its life in order to keep yourself alive or to make yourself stronger is demonic animalism. It has nothing ethical about it. Rather it is highly immoral to do that,” said I.

People may say that animals have been made by God for man to use and man makes animals serve him. No doubt, man makes animals serve him as he uses bullocks to pull his cart and to plough his fields, he uses the horse to carry him from one place to another, he uses donkeys to carry luggage from one place to another, he uses goats, buffaloes and cows to give him milk but to these animals he gives forage and roof to remain protected from rain and sun. So if he makes animals serve him, he also does something for animals in return. On this ground man’s making animals serve him is not immoral. But killing an animal for food cannot be justified on ethical grounds because in doing so one deprives an animal of its life in order to keep oneself alive and/ or well-nourished, though one has not given life to it. If you have not given life to it, you have no right to deprive it of its life.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

### **"I Want You to Embrace Islam" Said She**

“Sir, I wish you to have eternal happiness,” said Ubna.

“I heartily thank you for that wish, Ubna” said I.

I was grateful to that lady student of mine for this wish of hers. In this world you rarely find people who wish you well. Most men are either inimical or indifferent to you. There exist a host of people who are knowingly trying to cause trouble to you in one form or the other. And they are doing so perhaps only because you exist. It appears that their malignity is motiveless. One of my neighbours is a man of that kind. So are some members of his family. He instigates others too to cause problems to me so that my life does not remain smooth. Many people are envious of your achievements and try to create troubles for you simply because you have achieved what they have failed to achieve. Some people try to create problems for you because you are not working for them gratis. For example, a neighbour became hostile towards me because one day when I was busy preparing my lecture I said to one of his wards that I was busy and refused to teach him then, though I had been teaching him for a long period of time gratis.

‘ Then there are diseases which visit you whenever they like. One day you are suffering from toothache, the second day you are facing a fit of asthma and the third day your toe is broken in an accident. Moreover, the world is full of cheats who try to misguide you or to pick your pocket. Sometimes your income is inadequate or the source of income is non-functional. Sometimes you have to face financial crunches and you do not know how to arrange money even for essentials. Then there are natural calamities which cause problems to people en masse. How can one be happy in a life full

of such hardships? But this lady student of mine wished me to have eternal happiness! How gracious she was!

“Ubna, I am quite happy with the things as they are in my life as God has been quite good to me. I was fortunate to have been born in a family in which education was valued highly with the result I was sent to schools and colleges and, consequently, have become a university professor. People try to go overseas too so that they may meet people of other countries. I am fortunate enough even to get that opportunity as I am working as a professor in a foreign country. In the field of education the highest academic post is the post of the professor. I became a professor about twenty years ago and am working as a professor even now. I was Head of the Department of English for eleven years in India and have worked in that capacity for two years here. I was also the Director of the Nainital Campus of Kumaun University for about five years. I have been blessed with two sons and one daughter all of whom are well-placed. My elder son is a professor, the younger son is a manager in a multi-national company manufacturing medicines, and my daughter is the Head of the Department in a college of Education. I have also been blessed with two grandsons and two granddaughters. Very few people are as fortunate as I am. I thank God again and again for being so kind to me,” said I.

“Sir, we want you to be happy not only during your lifetime, but also hereafter,” said she.

“I thank you heartily for that wish of yours, but tell me how it can be realized,” said I.

“One can depend on one’s own efforts for happiness during one’s life-time. And I believe in your life you have achieved all that you wanted to achieve. But in order to be happy hereafter one has to be a Muslim because on the Day of Judgment our prophet helps only Muslims and ensures that all of them are sent to *ganna* (=heaven). If one has not adopted Islam our prophet does not help him on that day and it is likely that in spite of your noble ways and

views you are not sent to *ganna*,” said she.

“So you want me to adopt Islam,” asked I.

“Yes, I do. And I want you to do so because that is the only way you can ensure that you are happy both here and hereafter,” said she.

“I am quite happy to know that. But do you believe there physically exist *ganna* and *dozakh* (=hell)?” asked I.

“Yes, I do. Our holy *Qur-an* is an unchallengeable proof of the fact. *Ganna* is a place where there is absolute happiness,” said she.

“There a man has seventy-two virgin girls at his disposal to share bed with him.” This sentence was uttered by Holood.

“I thought these statements were not to be taken in their literal senses, Holood. No doubt, many people are attracted towards carnal pleasures, but decent people shun them. One who wants to behave in an ethically acceptable way must remain faithful to one’s wife just as he expects his wife to remain faithful to him. So happiness must be based on ethics. Unethical happiness is sinful,” said I.

“The *Jannat* is the place where a man is provided with every kind of pleasure and he needs nothing more. He also has sixty-eight boys at his disposal to provide him happiness,” said Holood.

“If something is bad for a man in this life, it must be bad for him in the *Jannat* too. After all the *Jannat* is a place where there exists perfect happiness. In this world no wife likes her husband to be faithless to her just as no man likes his wife to be faithless to him. It means that the best situation is the one in which both the husband and the wife are faithful to each other. If this is what we want here, this we must have in *Jannat*. If the *hoors* of the *Jannat* are like the women of this world they too must be having the feeling of jealousy and each of them must feel offended to find her man faithless to her. If a man has seventy-two girls at his disposal he will

not be faithful to any of them,” said I.

“We, the women of the Arab world, accept the state of sharing a husband. When a man has four wives, he is shared by all the four,” said Ubna.

“Yes they are very tolerant, much more tolerant than their counterparts in the other parts of the world. But are they happy with the practice? I mean to say that no male human being is that tolerant and will never like the idea of sharing his wife with another,” said I.

“Our Prophet married nine women,” said Ubna.

“Don’t you think it is better to be faithful to one’s wife? As every man wants his wife to be faithful to him, in the same way a wife wants her husband to be faithful to her. There are a number of stories and poems in which the husband is shocked to find his wife faithless to him or the wife is sad to find her husband faithless to her. Such stories and poems we have in both English and Hindi,” said I.

“If my husband, in case I marry, gets another wife I will kill him.” This sentence of Asma uttered by her a few months before, when she was an unmarried lady, was there in my mind when I made this remark. However, I did not quote her. Nor did I refer to this sentence of hers.

“No, the Prophet married eleven women.” This sentence was spoken by Holood.

“We know nothing about the feelings of those wives of his. We have no source to find out how the wives of Mohammad thought about his practice of a man's having many wives. Even if all of them were happy with his marriages, we have to have some honour for the feelings of women in general. A girl does not like to marry a man who already has a wife. We have one more dimension of the problem: we have to keep in mind the upbringing of the children of the family. In India there have been written many a story in which the step mother ill-treats her step-child and causes problems to

him/ her. If the practice of having many wives causes problems to the children in the family, the practice deserves rejection,” said I.

“Marriages are meant to enable people to have children and to bring them up properly so that the human race may continue to exist. A marriage is only one event of life. It is not the aim of life. There are other heights to be attained in life. One should try to reach the heights and one can do so chiefly by making the best possible use of one’s talents. It is the use of the talents that can enable one to make a significant contribution to the progress of mankind. Only by making proper use of your talent you can do something for which people will remember you even after you die,” said I.

“Don’t you think, my Sir, that a good marriage can enable you to reach lofty heights, while a bad marriage can blunt all your talents,” said Ubna.

“You are right, Ubna. If a man’s wife does not cooperate with him or is not capable of cooperating with him, all his talents may be blunted and his life may bring him no remarkable achievement at all. On the other hand, if a man has a wife who cooperates with him and renders adequate help, he can make brilliant use of his talents and attain greatness. That is, perhaps, the reason why they say that there is always a woman behind the achievements of every successful man I am aware of the role a wife plays in a man’s life,” said I.

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight Yasmeen's Interest in Hinduism

My student Yasmeen came to me one day as soon as my lecture was over and I was leaving the class-room and pointing to my wrist-thread asked me what it was.

“Oh, this is my thread bracelet! You wear a gold bracelet while I am wearing a cotton thread bracelet,” said I with a smile on my face.

“Sir, the practice of wearing a wrist thread does not exist in Yemen. This is the first time when I have seen a red thread tied round a wrist. So I am curious to know what it is and why it is worn,” asked Yasmeen.

“When a Hindu prays to God under the guidance of a priest, he ties a red (or yellow) thread round the priest’s wrist and the priest ties a red (or yellow) thread round his disciple’s wrist. These threads signify that the priest has accepted the man as his disciple while the disciple has accepted the priest as his teacher” said I.

Yasmeen usually came out with questions of this sort. The way she asked questions made it clear that she was trying to know those things and did not mean to decry them. This fact signifies that she was curious about the ways of Indians especially those of the Hindus as many of them were quite different from those of the Muslims. I noted some of the differences.

While praying to Ishwar (=God) a Hindu usually sits cross-legged on a straw mat before the idol or picture of his deity, folds his hands before his chest and chants some *mantra*, a verse from one or the other of the four Vedas. But there is no rigid rule in this regard. There are also people who put their hands on their knees. Some people bow down on the ground touching it with eight of

their limbs including the forehead. Thus there is a lot of diversity. And none of these diverse ways is questioned. But this is not so with the Muslims. While praying to God they keep standing for some time, then they kneel, then they touch the ground with their foreheads and again come to the kneeling posture. All the Muslims pray in this way and they follow the system of postures without any change at all. The prayer in every case is one and the same and there is no deviation from it. If efforts are made to make some change, they are discouraged. In other words the Muslim ways are characterized by uniformity.

There is a basic difference between the Islamic and the Hindu stands on the institution of marriage. For a Muslim a marriage is a social contract and can be broken like any other social relationship. But for the Hindus marriage is a sacrament and lasts till death. No doubt, now law permits divorces but the orthodox Hindus regard a marriage as inviolable and unbreakable. Nay, there are Hindus who hope it to go on even after death for six lives more.

A boy named Murshed came to me another day and asked me whether I had with me Gautama Buddha's book called *Dhamma Pada*. I said I had the book in my personal library at Hapur in India and that I had not brought it to Yemen. But I was surprised to find him curious about Gautama Buddha and his views. How did he know the name of this book? He must have read something about Gautama Buddha and there he must have come across the name of the book. Perhaps some verse from *Dhamma Pada* had been quoted in some piece of writing and that must have motivated Murshed to get the book and read it. I was reminded of the fact that the *talibans* of Afghanistan had broken even the images of Gautama Buddha just a year or so before. I know there is little common between Islam and Buddhism as Buddhism tries to make people compassionate, while Islam trains its followers to become aggressive. Once when I asked Ahar which animal would be

sacrificed on the occasion of Eiduljuha, she said that the decision would be taken by her father and that it was he who killed the animal on the occasion of Eid every year. I believe that this practice of sacrificing animals on the occasion of Eid makes people regard killing as a routine act having nothing unnatural about it. I remember that one day Amid's cousin and brother-in-law showed to me his knife with some red spots on it and said with pride that the red spots on the blade of the knife were dried drops of fresh blood signifying thereby that that very day he had killed some animal.

Buddha focused his attention on morality and tried to make people accept his ethical values. He kept himself away from metaphysical speculations. Islam, on the other hand, is concerned with both metaphysics and ethics. In Buddhism one is expected to make efforts to reach a spiritual level higher than the one at which common people are standing. In Islam there has been made no such effort. It appears that in Islam the ways of common people have been vindicated.

However, the queries of my students Yasmeen and Morshed indicated that in Yemen there were some people who were interested in, at least, knowing something about some non-Islamic religions. At least some of them knew that there had been advanced religious views different from Islam. This was a good sign from the academic point of view and indicated the fact that at least some Yemeni Muslims were keeping the doors and windows of their minds open. Curiosity is a very laudable ingredient of a scholar's personality and one who possesses it is likely, in the long run, to become versatile in his store of knowledge and to develop a broad vision of life. If intensive study gives one rich rewards, extensive study too does not remain unrewarded.

Another person to talk to me about Hinduism was a lady named Wafa. She was a very fine lady in the sense that she did her work sincerely and, unlike Ansoor, did not expect any undue return for her work. One day when I was waiting in her office she asked

me who my God was.

“Who is your God: the elephant, the monkey or the cow?” asked she.

Her naming these three animals made it clear that she had some knowledge of the Hindu practices. For her Lord Ganesh was an elephant, and Hanuman was a monkey. And since the cow is regarded as a mother by the Hindus, she included this animal in the list of the Hindu *devatas*.

“God does not change from man to man. He is one and He is everybody’s God. He is called by different names by different persons. For you He is Allah, for me He is Ishwar, for a Persian-speaking Muslim He is Khuda, for a Shaivite He is Shiva, and for a Vedantin He is Brahma or Brahman,” said I.

“By what name do you call Him?” asked Wafa.

“I like to call Him *Om*. I call Him *Ishwar* too. Sometimes I also call him *Bhagwan*,” said I.

“You have so many names for one God? We have only one name for Him: Allah,” said she.

“Yes, there is one fundamental difference between Islam and Hinduism: you love uniformity, we love diversity. You have only one name for Him, namely Allah, we have *crores* of names for Him and people are free to coin even new names. One *Crore* is equal to ten million, you know. You have only one way of praying to Him, we pray to Him the way we like. As a matter of fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that every Hindu prays to Him in his own way and that no two persons pray to Him in the same way: one man folds his hands and keeps them before his chest; another refuses to fold hands but puts each of them on his knees; one lights an earthen lamp with ghee to oil it, another uses firewood to create a bonfire; one chants one *mantra* while another chants another *mantra* from the *Vedas*,” said I.

“Do you worship the elephant?” asked Wafa.

“No, nobody worships the elephant, Wafa. Perhaps by

the elephant you mean the elephant-headed lord named Lord Ganesh,” said I

“I have seen the picture of a Hindu god having the head of the elephant,” said she.

“Yes, I understand. You mean Lord Ganesh. Lord Ganesh, the son of Lord Shiva was very learned and a very fast writer. So those who desire to attain learning and desire to work in the field of writing invoke his aid to reach their goal. We believe that when a person dies, it is only his body that dies and that the soul simply goes into another body and starts another life as, we believe, the soul is immortal. We believe that the souls of the persons who have died still exist and we invoke them to come to our aid,” said I.

“What about the monkey? Do you regard the monkey as your God?” asked Wafa.

“The monkey-faced man is Hanuman. He was the son of Pawan and Anjana. He was a very mighty man and at the same time very learned. He was the head of Lord Rama’s army in the war between Rama and Ravana. So those who aspire to have physical might invoke his aid to become strong and brave,” said I.

“Is that so?” asked Wafa.

“Yes, Wafa. Moreover, the Hindus are well aware of the role of the objects of nature in sustaining human life on the earth. That is why they try to protect these objects of nature with care. And in order to highlight the importance of the objects of nature they personify many of them and even build temples in which they install those personified objects as deities,” said I.

“It is interesting,” said she.

“I shall give some examples to illustrate the fact. The Ganga is a river which flows through the northern part of India. It rises in the Himalayas and brings waters from there and takes them to the Ganga Sagar in the Bay of Bengal. The plains in the northern part of India owe their fertility to the Ganga and its tributaries. The Ganga provides us water for irrigation purposes, for people’s domestic

needs and also for the maintenance of domestic animals. The Hindus have personified it as a mother and not only call the Ganga 'Ganga Maiya' (=Mother Ganga) but also build temples in which her image is installed as a deity. There is a temple of Ganga Maiya on the bank of the Ganga at Hardwar at Har-ki-Peri. We have such temples at some other places too. This respectful treatment has been given to several other rivers like the Narmada and the Godavari," said I.

"This is done only to rivers?" asked Wafa.

"No, this is done to every object of nature in case it is found doing good to man. Let us take another object of nature, namely, the sun. It gives us light and heat and makes life possible on the earth. As a matter of fact we depend on the sun to such an extent that if the sun had not been there, there would have been no life on the earth. So we personify the sun also and make temples in which Surya(the sun) is worshipped as the deity. For example we have a very big sun temple at Konarka in Odisha. Nay we have also stories in which the sun is a character and plays various roles, and Shani (Saturn) is treated as his son. In these stories the father Surya (the sun) is not happy with his son Shani (the Saturn). Likewise, we personify the Moon as Chandrama and have stories about him. We have personified the earth itself as Dharati Mata and have composed stories in which she is a character. We have personified even the land of India as Bharat Mata: the Himalayas form her head adorned with a crown, the cape of Kumari forms her feet which are being washed by the waters of the Indian ocean," said I.

"Why do you do this? Why do you not treat them just as lifeless objects of nature?" said Wafa.

"We do it because we as a race are poetic by nature. Like poets we try to describe things in such a way that they begin to have an aesthetic appeal," said I.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

### **His Efforts to Force Me to Bribe Him Profusely**

By degrees the officials working in the Rector's office at Aiz were growing less and less cooperative in their dealings with us and started causing more and more hurdles in our path year by year. And the number of persons who wanted their palms to be greased also increased. In the year 2008-09 I greased the palm of only one official in the Rector's office and three persons in the Immigration office. But in the year 2013-14 I had to grease the palms of about a dozen.

I was posted at Urba but for my salary I had to go to Aiz because, as the University people explained, there was no international bank at Urba and there existed many, including the Tadaman Islamic International Bank, at Aiz. Since we were paid salary in U.S. dollars, only an international bank was in a position to pay us our salaries. For the Work Permit, the Residence Visa, the annual contract, the renewal of the contract, the Exit-and-Re-entry Visa, the reservation of the flight, and the flight ticket also we had to go to Aiz. And for each one of these things one had to go from pillar to post a number of times. Consequently I had to shuttle between Urba and Aiz almost every week. All this was an annoying distraction from academic work. But there was no way out.

I would like to give a few details of the whole thing. Soon after joining my duties at the start of the session, I had to go to Aiz to submit my joining report in original. It was handed over to Ansoor. He had to be paid one thousand Yemeni Rials for '*quat*'. Wasn't it strange that the *quat* he bought was chewed by him but the money for it was paid by me and other foreign professors.

Then I had to go to Aiz to apply for the Work Permit. The application for the Work Permit was sent to the concerned officer at Ana'a by the Public Relations Officer of the University. The Public Relations Officer was to be reminded several times to write to the representative of the university at Ana'a to get the Work Permit from the Work Permit Officer. Some of the persons manning the Public Relations Office were very decent. But there were also people who knew nothing of decency. One of these officials wanted me to pay him at least one thousand Rials whenever I met him. There were also times when he accepted the money but did nothing in return.

“Wait for a fortnight,” said the official in the Public Relations Office usually when I went to him to find out whether my Work Permit had come.

And this occurred not once but half a dozen times. And by the time I got my Work Permit, the last date to get the Residence Visa was over and I had to pay a handsome amount of money as the penalty for my late approaching the Immigration Office. The palms of the officials were to be greased additionally.

Trips were made to Aiz also to get the Service Contract prepared and then to collect its copy after it had been completed. The Contract was first signed by the teacher. Then it was signed by the Rector of the University. When it had been signed by both of us I had to go to Aiz to collect one of its copies. Ansoor the man who had been entrusted with the responsibility of handing it over to the foreign teachers actually sold it to the teacher concerned for at least one thousand Rials. He devised novel ways to charge money from the foreign teachers. One year he made each of the foreign teachers sign the Agreement paper four times. For all these trips we the teachers had to pay money from our pockets.

Our salary was paid to us in four instalments. The first of them was given soon after the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, the second soon after the 31<sup>st</sup> day of March, the third soon after the 30<sup>th</sup> of June

and the fourth soon after the 12<sup>th</sup> of July. It could be delayed indefinitely. Neither the University nor the Bank informed us that the salary had been sent to the bank. In order to find that out we had to depend on our own sources. And these sources did not always give authentic information. There were also times when I went to Aiz to get money from the Bank under the impression that the salary had been sent to it, but on reaching there I was told that the bank needed one day or two days more to make necessary entries in individual accounts before allowing withdrawals from them.

In India we say that giving bribes is as immoral as taking them. But I do not agree with this approach. The man who is compelled to give a bribe for a legitimate action is a victim of the offence that the person holding power commits. He is not an offender, I think. Rather he is a victim and he deserves to be pitied, rather than to be punished because he has been compelled to deprive himself of what belongs to him. It is he who has been exploited; he has exploited none. Regarding him as an offender is just like regarding the victim of a murderous act as an offender. It is the murderer who commits an offence, not the person who has failed to protect himself. In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* it is Macbeth who is an offender, as it is he who kills Duncan, not Duncan whom Macbeth kills. If you regard a victim to be an offender, you will have to regard King Duncan to be an offender.

Though I had to grease the palm of many an official at Aiz, I was not happy with this practice and tried to avoid obliging these officials. I did not mind paying one thousand Rials when I was given the Appointment Letter. But paying one thousand Rials every time when a paper was handed over by either of the parties was too much. I did not like the practice to go on. So I tried to refrain from greasing the clerks' palms whenever I could.

One day in the year 2013-14 Ansoor came to me and asked me to pay him one thousand Rials. He had handed over to me a copy of the Service Contract signed by the Rector of the

University. Why did he ask for money for this document? Was he selling a University document to me? I found no justification behind his demand and so I turned it down. This offended him and he went away sulkily. I knew he would do something more serious to make me pay him though I did not know exactly what he was going to do. A hostile man can do anything to gratify his desire to take revenge.

When I went to the Rector's office the next time, Ansoor asked me to resubmit the copies of my degrees duly authenticated by the Governorate of Aiz. I said that I had already submitted the copies of my degrees duly authenticated by the Governorate of Aiz.

"You submitted the Xeroxed copies of the degrees, but I want you to submit their scanned copies. The Xeroxed copies are black-and-white, but the scanned copies have all the colours of the original degrees," said he.

"The copies I submitted have been authenticated by the Governorate of Aiz and they have been accepted by the University. So for me this chapter is closed. I am not going to get them re-authenticated. Technologies go on changing. The documents cannot be changed along with them. Does a government change its documents when a new technology replaces an old one? No government in the whole world has so far declared Xeroxed copies unacceptable. So I am not going to get the copies of my degrees re-authenticated whatever be the consequences." said I.

"You will have to resubmit them," said Ansoor.

"I'll prefer going back to India instead," said I.

The dialogue was heard by at least two fellow Indian teachers, Dr. Nagesh and Dr. Om. I did not expect them to intervene. But they did not remain silent spectators.

"A vehicle runs only when it has been provided petrol to consume, Sharma ji," said Dr. Nagesh.

"He says you will have to go to Ana'a now," informed Om

after he had had an exchange of whispers with Ansoor.

Nagesh, thus, was clearly siding with Ansoor. Om, on the other hand, gave the impression that he was neutral. But his whispering something to Ansoor made it clear that he was covertly siding with Ansoor.

When I went to Aiz the next time after a week or so, Ansoor brought to me a piece of paper with something written on it in Arabic and asked me to sign it.

“What is this?” asked I.

“This is an undertaking that you will bring your degrees from India when you go there, and submit their authenticated copies before the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2014,” said Ansoor.

“Why should I give this undertaking? I have not assured you of anything of this kind? Why have you brought to me this paper?” said I.

“Now you are required simply to put your signature on this paper,” said Ansoor.

“But why should I do that? Have you given me anything in writing? I shall give you nothing in writing until you give me in writing what you want me to do,” said I.

“If you do not give this undertaking, your salary will not be released,” said Ansoor.

“Put all this in black and white and then give it to me,” said I.

This non-plussed Ansoor and he had to sound a retreat. And for me the chapter stood closed.

But it was not so for Ansoor. He persisted in shooting his arrows at me. The next week the Head of the Urba Campus of the university received a letter signed by the Vice Rector (Academic affairs), Aiz University, if I have been able to translate it correctly, to the following effect:

“Dr. Brahma Dutta Sharma, an Indian national, who is working as a Professor of English at the Urba Campus of the

University, refused to submit his Ph. D. degree when he was asked to do that. I would like him to be advised to submit his Ph. D. degree without any further delay so that his salary may be released.”

A copy of this letter was handed over to me too. I read it. I wondered whether my nationality had been mentioned in the letter to highlight the fact that I was a foreigner and, so, a person to be treated as an antagonist. Ahmad Rubasi, the Head of the Urba Campus read the letter when I handed it over to him and asked me where my degrees were. I said that I had left them at home in India. He said that the Vice Rector wanted to see my Ph. D. degree and that I should go to Aiz and show it to him. I assured him that I would do that.

When I was back from India with my degrees of Ph.D. and D. Lit., I went to Dr. Abdur Rahaman Sabri, the Vice Rector taking care of the Academic Affairs. I was also carrying with me a copy of his letter mentioned above.

“Sir, this is my original Ph. D. degree. I am not only a Ph. D. but also a D. Lit. And this is my original D. Lit. degree,” said I to him.

“The Ph. D. degree is a doctoral degree and the D. Lit. degree is the post-doctoral degree in Indian Universities,” added I.

“That is very good. But why are you showing these degrees to me? You must have submitted their copies when you joined your duties here,” said Dr. Sabri.

“Yes Sir, I did. But I am showing them to you in compliance with this letter of yours,” said I and put the letter bearing his signature on his table.

It appeared to me that Dr. Sabri knew nothing about the letter. Ansoor must have prepared the letter on Dr. Sabri’s behalf and must have tricked Dr. Sabri into signing it along with a host of other letters without letting him know the contents and the context of the letter. Dr. Sabri did cast his glance at the letter for a second

or so but he did not talk about it or refer to it at all. He asked me to give him the copies of both these degrees of mine. He wrote some remark on each of them in Arabic and sent them to the clerk concerned. I thought the drama had finally reached its end and the matter stood solved. I came back to Urba.

When I went back to the Rector's office the next week, Beel Madi, the Secretary General (Registrar?) of the university asked me to give my original Ph. D. degree along with its scanned copy to Ansoor. He was shouting at me when he said so though formerly he had been consistently sympathetic towards me.

"I have already shown my Ph. D. degree to the Vice Rector and have also submitted its copy in his office," said I.

"The Ministry of Finance is not satisfied with that. They are asking for the original degree and it has to be sent to them," said Ansoor.

Why did Ansoor intervene? I failed to understand that. I was talking to Beel Madi, not to Ansoor.

"They want to have the original degree. All the Indian professors have given their Ph. D. degrees to us. Only your degree is not with us. So give it to us tomorrow otherwise your salary will not be paid," said Beel Madi.

"I will not give my original degrees to anybody at all though I can show it to whomsoever you like. What will I do if I give my degree to somebody and it is lost? In my country nobody asks for the original degrees. They see the original degrees at the time of the interview and ask for only their copies for record or further reference," said I.

"If you do not give us your original Ph.D. degree, we shall not give you your salary," said Beel Madi.

I said to myself that history was going to repeat itself as earlier too a few institutions had made me work but refused to pay. I recollected my service of Kumaun University: the University made me work as the Director of one of its Campuses for about five

years but did not pay me even one rupee as the allowance for that work. They had paid money for directing the Campus to my predecessor and also to the predecessor's predecessor. But they did not pay any money to me for this work. Many students of mine made me teach them outside the class privately, but paid me nothing at all for that work. Did they think I needed no money? Did they think I needed no food? So Aiz University also was going to do to me what these others had done. The fault must be with me or my stars, not with them, I felt.

“Okay, then give me the letter to the Immigration officer so that I may get my exit visa from him and go back to India,” said I.

“We shall give you nothing at all,” said the Secretary General.

What else was left to be said to or heard from the Secretary General? Was he not crossing the boundary and trespassing into the territory of the Rector of the University? Was this threat genuine or fake? But I did not say so to him. I knew that no Indian colleague of mine had submitted his original Ph. D. degree. At least one of them, namely Nagesh, was present in the room when that statement had been made by Madi. But he chose to keep mum and, thus, to side with the Secretary General. In most of the cases of this kind people tend to side with the person-in-power as the person-in-power can oblige them while the person-not-in-power cannot. Very few persons have the courage to side with the just. However, I knew I did not need anybody's help in this fight. I knew my stand was absolutely right. So I did not even try to seek anybody's help.

There was tenseness in the situation. But I was bent upon sticking to my stand and not to surrender. Ansoor and Feef left the room. Now there were left three persons: Madi, I and a stranger who took upon himself the task of translating my utterances in Arabic and Madi's utterances into English. For a minute or two there was silence. It was Madi who broke the silence.

“Do one thing, then. Bring the original degree and show it to me. Also bring with it its scanned copy. I shall return the degree

to you tomorrow itself after I have talked to the officials in the Finance Ministry. I'll say to them that I have seen the original degree and they will believe me because they trust me. Then you can take your degree back to Urba," said Madi.

"Okay, this much I shall do," said I to Madi.

And this I did. And the matter came to its end. Why Madi had relented I do not know to this day. However, I felt that his hostility, if it was there, was not as deep as that of Ansoor.

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## **Chapter Thirty**

### **They Were Studying Me Closely**

One day when I went to a new class, I introduced myself as a teacher from India. I also told my students my name.

“My name is Brahma Dutta Sharma,” said I.

“Pardon, Sir,” said some of my students.

So I wrote my name on the board. Then I pronounced it at slow speed so that every syllable was clear to them.

“What is the meaning of these words, Sir?” asked three to four students at the same time.

“The word ‘Brahma’ means ‘the Supreme Being’ and the word ‘Dutta’ means ‘given by’ or ‘a gift’. So the word ‘Brahma dutta’ means ‘a gift from God’. ‘Sharma’ is my surname as I am a Brahmin. I do not know what this word means. The Brahmins of India usually use the word ‘Sharma’ as a surname. So the whole of my name means ‘A Brahmin who is a gift from God’. Perhaps my parents were very happy when I was born, as I am their eldest child, and expressed their gratitude to God by giving me this name,” said I.

But after a month or so I noticed that they had shortened my name to ‘Sharma’ and since I was the only Sharma on the staff of the Campus, there was no possibility of any confusion in identifying whom they meant when they used the word for me. Those who tried to mention my first name too mentioned only ‘Brahma’ and ignored ‘Dutta’. So to most people there I was ‘Sharma’ and to some intimate persons I was ‘Brahma Sharma’. Some of them tried to find in Arabic a counterpart of ‘Brahma Sharma’. I came to know of it when one day my fellow teachers Abdul and Nageeb told me that my name resembled the name of

one of their Prophets, namely, 'Ibrahim' which in English was pronounced as 'Abraham'. They wanted to know whether my name had something to do with the name of their prophet Ibrahim or Abraham. Perhaps they were speculating that the word 'Ibrahim' had become 'Brahma' in India. I told them that it was not so.

"The word 'Brahma' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'the Supreme Being'.

One day when I was sitting at the gate of my house in Aiz in the evening in a vacant mood in order to relieve myself of the strains caused by the trials and tribulations of the day I was joined by my compatriots Amar and Om. I had been looking at the passersby vacantly. But when these friends of mine arrived we started talking about the day-to-day problems we had been facing. Om tried to agree with me but Amar maintained a tacit silence on many of my observations. Then there arrived a neighbour of ours. I have forgotten his name. So I shall call him Ismail. He was very friendly in his attitude and readily helped us whenever he was available. He knew no English and we knew little Arabic. We were uttering sentences but for communication we depended more on our gestures than on our words. Since we had been only chatting we did not regard his coming to us as an intervention.

"Do you know *kalma*?" asked Ismail.

"Yes, we do. It runs like this: '*la ilahillilla Mohammadil rasool Allah*'. Is it okay?" said I.

Ismail raised his thumb to express his approval just as the people in the Middle-East do. The expression on his face gave the impression that he was very happy with me at my having recited the *kalma*. Then he turned to Amar and asked him the same question.

"Yes, I know the *kalma*. It runs like this: "*la ilaha illilla Mohammadil rasool Allah*.' Okay?" said Amar.

Ismail was genuinely glad. But he did not want to leave the world half- conquered. So he turned to Om and asked him if he

knew the *kalma* and was able to recite it. Om said he did know the *kalma* but he was not going to recite it. Ismail had the expression of anger on his face and again asked Om to recite the *kalma*. But Om was adamant. He said he would not recite it at all. Ismail made one more attempt but when he found Om firm, he cast a sneering glance at Om and left us.

There was a young man of about twenty-five studying, perhaps, Mathematics. I shall call him Razzak. He came to me many times and tried to develop friendly relations with me. He used English while talking to me, as I did not know Arabic much, but his proficiency in English was so meagre that I found it difficult to understand what he wanted to convey to me. One day he came to me and asked me whether I was a Muslim.

“No, I am not a Muslim. I am a Hindu by religion,” said I.

“Do you know the *kalma*?” asked Razzak.

“Yes, I do. It runs like this: ‘*la ilah illilla Mohammadil rasool Allah*’” said I.

“Are you a Muslim?” asked he.

I wondered whether he meant to ask me whether I had not become a Muslim even after I had recited the *kalma*.

“No, I am a Hindu, not a Muslim,” answered I.

The expression on his face gave the impression that he did not expect this answer from me. But I wondered why he expected me to give a different kind of answer and what that answer was. I had given him no indication that I would be giving a different kind of answer. However, he seemed to be trying again to make me say what he wanted me to say.

“Do you know the *Kalma*?” asked he.

“Yes, I do. I have already told you so. And I can recite it again. It runs like this: “*la ilah illilla Mohammadill rasool Allah*”.

“So, are you a Muslim?” asked he.

“No, I am not a Muslim; I am a Hindu and I have already told you so,” said I.

Again the expression on his face gave the impression that he had been disappointed on hearing my sentence and that he had expected me to have given a different kind of answer. I felt there was a break of communication between us. He had not been able to say what he wanted to communicate to me and I had failed to grasp what he intended to say to me. If I had acquired proficiency in Arabic, I could have understood his meaning better and our friendship could have flowered.

I wondered whether such occurrences were parts of their attempt to assimilate me into the Yemeni society and/ or to make me adopt Islam

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## **Chapter Thirty-One**

### **Bombardment Began on the 26th of March 2015**

In September 2014 the Houthis, most of whom were Shia Muslims living chiefly in Sa'ada, captured Sana'a though the Sunni President of the country Abdurabbo Mansur Hadi continued to stay in the Presidential Palace till January 2015 as President of the country. They had already captured Amran. The Houthis were being led by Abdul Malik Houthi. I asked Ayman Abdulla, my neighbour, on the 12<sup>th</sup> (or the 13<sup>th</sup>?) of March 2015 whether the Houthis were a tribe or some political party.

“The Houthis say that they are Muslims but actually they are not true Muslims. They are Shias and they are being helped by Iran, which is a Shia dominated country. Even their way of worshipping Allah is different from ours,” said Ayman Abdulla.

Thus Ayman failed to answer my question and this made it clear to me that Ayman Abdulla did not know why the Houthis were called Houthis. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2015 I asked Mansur Muqbel why the Houthis were called Houthis. He held the view that the Houthis were called Houthis because they belonged to the region called Houth. He explained to me that ‘-ee’ was a suffix in Arabic and it meant ‘one belonging to’. He gave examples to illustrate the fact: the word ‘Yemeni’ means ‘one belonging to Yemen’, the word ‘Hindi’ means ‘one belonging to Hind’, and the word ‘Masree’ means ‘one belonging to Masra’. I was familiar with this suffix as it exists in Hindi and Urdu too: ‘Moradabadi’ means ‘one belonging to Moradabad’ and ‘Jahangirabadi’ means ‘one belonging to Jahangirabad’.

It was in the year 2014 that there were held general elections for the Parliament of India. People were of the opinion that no

single party would be able to get a clear majority and that they would be having a hung parliament. But when the results were declared, they were delighted to find that the Bhartiya Janta Party had won more than two thirds of the seats. It was regarded as the victory of the upholders of the Hindu ideology. The BJP had contested the elections under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the then Chief Minister of Gujrat, one of the states of India. When Narendra Modi was sworn in Prime Minister of India, many Muslim countries of the Middle East felt upset. Mansoor Muqbil , a University employee, one day came to me and asked me as to what changes were going to take place in India during the tenure of Narendra Modi.

“What changes do you expect India to have now?” asked he.

“What do you mean?” asked I.

“Since Modi does not like Islam, he may pursue anti-Muslim policies both at home and abroad,” said Mansoor Muqbil.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2015 the Houthis captured Taiz too, at least partly. They had already captured Amaran, Hudeida, and Ibb. However, wherever they went in the southern part of Yemen they had to face crowds demonstrating against their action. For example, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March there was a big demonstration against the Houthis in the city of Taiz. The demonstrators braved the Houthi soldiers and, as the rumour went, lost about a dozen persons in firing. At Turba too there was a demonstration against the Houthis and three persons were shot dead on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2015. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2015 it was reported that Abdurabbo Hadi had left Aden for some unidentified destination as the Houthis had announced a reward of \$ 1,00,000 to one who handed over Hadi to them. I felt that the Houthis had finally defeated Hadi and were the masters of Yemen and were going to be its rulers for some time at least.

But that very day that is on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2015 in the

afternoon King Sulman of Saudi Arabia told newsmen, as per the TV report that the Saudi troops were being moved to the southern border of the country to stop the Houthis' anticipated entry into Saudi Arabia. I felt that it was an excuse to attack the Houthis as I was of the opinion that there was no reason why the Houthis would open another front until they had consolidated their position in Yemen. The Americans had already closed their embassy in Sana'a and had evacuated Yemen declaring it to be an insecure country. The governments of Britain and France also had closed their embassies in Sana'a. All these developments had been widely publicized by the media. This resulted in creating panic and I received repeated phone calls from my brother Shri Dutta, my sons Susheel and Ajaya, and my grandson Kapilanjana asking me to leave for India at the earliest. However, I thought the war they anticipated was still far. But I was wrong as on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March early in the morning I learnt that Saudi Arabia and its nine coalition partners including Katar, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan, with logistic support from the U.S.A., had started air-strikes on the Houthis in both Sana'a and Aden on the night between the 25<sup>th</sup> March and the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2015. About seventy-five Indians living in Yemen left for India via Djibuti on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March itself. Many of the Indian teachers working in different universities of Yemen also resolved to leave Yemen at the earliest. They tried to seek the help of the Indian embassy in Sana'a. Dr. Amarnath Jha informed me that the efforts were bearing fruit and that I should be ready to leave for India at a very short notice. He told me that since the airport of Sana'a had been attacked and had been rendered inoperative and the airport of Aden too had been closed we would have to fly from some other airport. I was not ready for this hasty departure from Yemen. But an emergency was an emergency and it had to be faced as one.

I too contacted the embassy of India in Yemen at Sana'a and I was informed that they were waiting for the decision of the

Government of India on the issue. Actually the embassy did not reveal to me that seventy-five Indians had already been sent to Djibuti in an aeroplane of Yemenia Airways. I learnt this from Dr. Dar. It was on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March that I learnt from my son Susheel in India that the government of India had resolved to send a ship to evacuate the Indian nationals living in Yemen. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March I learnt that the government of India had sent two ships from Cochin to Yemen for the evacuation of the Indians living there. My brother Shri Dutta, my sons Susheel and Ajaya, and my grandson Kapilanjana were repeatedly asking me to leave Yemen for India at the earliest. Madhu Sudan Tripathi was apprising me quite regularly as to what the Government of India was doing to evacuate the Indians living in Yemen. But I was not in a mood to leave Yemen so soon. Urba was a small town quite calm and I expected that neither of the two parties would think of bombarding Urba. So even if the Government of the U.S.A. had declared Yemen an insecure country, I regarded Urba as an absolutely secure place for me and I was staying in Urba even on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2015. Indra too held this opinion and said that our first concern was our safety and that we would be able to keep ourselves safe if we simply stayed indoors.

Early in the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April Susheel told me that Indian newspapers feared that Indians living in Yemen might be taken hostages as the Indians living in Iraq had been in the year 2014. He also told me that an Indian ship had reached Yemen to evacuate the Indians. I consulted Amar Nath Jha and Indra as to what we could do in that situation. Neither of them was in a mood to leave Yemen before getting his salary. I had not received my salary of November, December, January, February and March. I had conveyed this even to the Rector of the University, and he had taken my report quite seriously. But the Secretary General said that the University was waiting for the money to come from the Central Government of Yemen.

I contacted the Embassy of India in Sana'a and asked Dil

Bagh Singh whether any arrangements of evacuation had been made by the Embassy. He told me that a ship had reached Hudeida and I should try to catch it that very day. He asked me how much time I would need to reach Hudeida, I told him that I would take at least six hours to reach there. At this he said that in that case I would not be able to catch the ship. However, he also told me that another ship was scheduled to reach Aden on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April. If I made efforts I would catch it. But the hitch was that fighting was going on in Aden and dead bodies were reported to be lying uncared for even on the roads. This gave me an excuse not to try to catch the 4<sup>th</sup> of April ship. The fact remains that I too did not want to leave Yemen without taking my salary. However, by the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 many of the lion-hearted Indian teachers found their courage exhausted and that night they resolved to leave for India at the earliest, at least, as they believed, temporarily. I was told by Amar Nath Jha that the last rescue aeroplane of India would leave Sana'a on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April and that Dar was leaving on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April itself. I was also told that 50,000 soldiers were coming to Yemen from Pakistan for ground operation against the Houthis. There was no time to verify the veracity of the rumour. However, later I learnt that Saudi Arabia had, no doubt, requested Pakistan to send 50,000 soldiers to Yemen to join the Coalition forces, but the Parliament of Pakistan resolved not to send any soldier to participate in this war and to remain neutral in this civil war of Yemen

In this fight in Yemen the main players were Abdurabbo Mansoor Hadi on the one side and Abdul Malik Houthi and Ali Abdulla Saleh on the other. All the three of them were Muslims. Both Abdurabbo Hadi and Ali Abdulla Saleh were the members of the same political party, and the two had had friendly relations during the tenure of Ali Abdulla Saleh as the President of the country as Abdurabbo Hadi was the Vice President of the country then. I mean the period lasting till 2011-12. If there existed anything like the Muslim brotherhood why were the two trying to get each other

killed in 2015?

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 both Indra and I too resolved to leave Yemen and to try to catch the 9<sup>th</sup> April flight or, if possible, some earlier flight from Sana'a. So on that day Indra and I started making efforts to seek the permission of the university authorities to leave for India. It was on this day that I was informed that each one of the Indian teachers was going to be paid only fifteen days' salary as an advance against his salary.

First we approached Dr. Ahmad Rubasi, the Assistant Rector, and apprised him of our decision to avail ourselves of the evacuation plan and efforts of the Government of India. He lost his calm to hear it and asked us as to why we had resolved to leave Yemen all of a sudden in spite of the fact that there was no possibility of either side's bombarding Urba.

"I would like you to stay for about a month more, so that you are able to deliver eight lectures (=24 hours) in each of the courses you are teaching. Then you may give examination to your students, finish the evaluation work and leave for India carefree," said Ahmad.

"That was our original plan and we would have done exactly that if there had begun no bombardment, but since cities are being bombarded here and even the civilian casualties are there, we have to take care of our lives. Moreover, the Government of India wants us to evacuate Yemen at the earliest and the last Indian evacuation plane will fly from Sana'a on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April. Yemenia planes have stopped their operations and both Sana'a and Aden airports have stopped functioning. If we do not catch any of the evacuation flights, we shall be entrapped here, perhaps, forever," said Indra.

"But there is no bombardment in this town of ours," said Ahmad.

"Yes, there is no bombardment here so far. But nobody can guarantee that both the sides will honour their present stand and that neither of them will bombard it even in future," said we.

“Is the Government of India forcing you to leave Yemen?” said Ahamad.

“No, the Government of India is not forcing us, but the problem is that when there starts a full scale war—may God forbid that—how shall we survive here without wheat-flour, vegetables and water as the non-availability or, at least, the scarcity of petroleum will create these and many other similar problems,” said Indra.

“In that case I am here to provide you with all these things,” said Dr. Rubasi.

“And after the 9<sup>th</sup> of April even the government of India is not going to help us as we shall be staying here against the advisory of our government. Neither of us wants to leave Yemen. We are conscious of our moral responsibility of conducting examinations and to see to it that our students get their degrees on time. But bombs are bombs. How can we ignore the fact that several towns of Yemen have been subjected to heavy bombardment? I am in full sympathy with the people of Yemen. As a matter of fact my heart weeps at the conditions prevailing in Yemen. But what can my weeping do in face of bombardment?” said Indra.

“At the moment we are applying only for a month’s leave. If the situation normalizes in this period we shall come back and resume our duties here,” said I.

At this Rubasi agreed to permit us to approach the Rector for his advising the Immigration Officer to issue to either of us an Exit-and Re-entry Visa. Our resolution to leave for India at such a short notice disturbed our students terribly and a crowd of them came into my room to request us if we could postpone our plan to leave for India. But how could we do that?

I had to leave behind one suit case, all my utensils, many of my files, many of my books, many containers containing food items, my pressure cooker, many medicines that I was using and the like as I was supposed to carry with me luggage weighing not more than ten kg. I was under the impression that I would be back in a

few months' time.

We reached Aiz on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 in order to try to get our salaries and to obtain the Exit-and-Re-entry visa from the immigration officer. We still believed that the university authorities would sincerely try to give us our salaries. I spent all the working hours in the university office that day and had no time to go to the Immigration Officer as I hoped that I would be able to get my salary in case I got the papers signed by the Financial Manager. I also gave one thousand Rials to a clerk to approach the officials in the Accounts Section and to persuade them to give their nods to the university's giving me fifteen days' salary as advance.

We were five Indians serving the University as teachers of English, two as Professors and three as Assistant Professors. All of us were making efforts to get from the University office the necessary papers to get the Exit-and-Re-entry visa and our salaries, if possible, and leave for India at the earliest. But we were divided into three groups and these groups usually did not reveal their plans to one another. In spite of my best efforts I was not able to get any money on that day. Nor was any other of the five. I did not get time even to get my Exit-and-Re-entry visa. But three of us had succeeded in getting the visas. So Maish, one of us, left for Hodeida that very day without giving us any clue into what he was doing and why. Perhaps he thought that if he revealed to us his plans he might become a victim of bombardment along with us or our company would make it difficult for him to find a seat in the plane to India. Perhaps he wanted to escape death all alone. Perhaps he feared that if we entered Noah's arc, he would be left outside and drown in the sea. On reaching Hodeida he must have boarded the Indian evacuation ship to Djibuti and from there the Indian evacuation plane to Mumbai.

Dr. Jha told me in the evening of the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, when I contacted him on the phone, that he and his companion Nagesh would be leaving for Sana'a by the first Raha bus at seven in the

morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> of April as they had collected their visas and would not be making any more efforts to get their salaries. They too thought, perhaps, that the city was going to be bombarded that very day and that all those who were going to be left behind were going to be killed. I asked myself whether death had reached so close to us. Sana'a had been facing air raids since the 26<sup>th</sup> of March itself. Was it not unwise on their part, I wondered, to go to Sana'a on that day? Their panic made us also panicky. We too wanted to catch the same bus, but we were helpless as we had not been able to get our exit-and-re-entry visas. I cursed myself for being too dull-headed not to have foreseen what these three companions of ours had. But the fear of calamity failed to make any cleave between Indra and me. However, I resolved to take leadership in my hand the next day and to be up and doing in the true sense of the phrase.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 both of us approached the Immigration office first and got the Exit-and-Re-entry visas by about 10:30 A.M. That day the university authorities advanced to either of us an amount a little less than a month's salary. And Indra and I were ready to leave for Sana'a to get our boarding passes for the 8<sup>th</sup> April evacuation flight. There was at least one person trying to reap advantages out of our state of panic. I shall call him Masroo. He offered to accompany us in a taxi to Sana'a in case we gave him 60,000 Rials. When I declined the offer, he came down to 50,000 Rials and then to 40,000 Rials. Indra was impatient and was in a mood to pay even 50,000 Rials to reach Sana'a that day. The routine taxi fare to Sana'a in a shared taxi was only three thousand Rials per passenger. We tried to catch another Raha bus and succeeded in the attempt. We were required to pay, if I correctly remember, four thousand Rials each and we left for Sana'a at about 2:30 p.m.

It was still the 7<sup>th</sup> of April when we reached Sana'a at about 10:30 p.m. The embassy people had advised us to reach the embassy office latest by 5 p.m. There was darkness all around as

no shop was open. However, a few taxis were available to take us to our destination. We did not go to the Embassy and spent the night in a hotel. However, we informed Dilbagh Singh that we had reached Sana'a and he instructed us to reach the airport at about 7:00 a. m. next day and told us that the boarding passes would be issued to us there itself. Throughout the night there were intermittent sounds of firing but there was no air raid. Thank God! We had been informed that on the former nights air raids began at midnight and continued up to 5 A.M.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April we were at the airport of Sana'a at 6:30 a.m. trying to catch the earliest flight to India. Amarnath Jha and Nagesh too were standing in the queue as they had not been able to get the boarding passes the previous day. The airport was terribly crowded but each of the four of us succeeded in getting the boarding pass and we succeeded in catching the first Air India flight from Sana'a to Djibuti. General V.K. Singh, the then Minister of State, External Affairs, Government of India was gracious enough to be there on the plane to monitor the evacuation work. He gently reprimanded us for not having taken the necessary steps to leave Yemen earlier.

The Air India plane took us to Djibuti so that we might reach the land where we were at least out of the bombardment-prone territory. An Air Force plane took us from Djibuti to India where first it landed at Cochin and then at Mumbai. It was the early morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 when the plane reached Mumbai. Thus after just about a month's gap I was again at Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport Mumbai. On being back on the Indian soil I heaved a sigh of relief. At the airport we found a number of newsmen waiting for us. They asked us to describe the situation prevailing in Yemen. One of us was a Shia Muslim from Karnataka. He was very vocal and while describing what he had seen in Sana'a he said that what was happening in Yemen was not a fight between the Shias and the Sunnies. He said it was nothing

short of a full-fledged attack by Saudi Arabia on Yemen.

I rejoined my family on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April and thanked Om for His grace which had brought me back safe to my home-land. Now I was sure my mortal remains on my death were not going to be buried under pebbles in Yemen. I was sure they would be burnt to ashes and the ashes would be taken by the waters of the Ganga into the Ganga Sagar and then into the Bay of Bengal.

However, every one of the four thousand Indians leaving Yemen was not as lucky as I. As per the newspapers' report at least one Indian named Manjeet Singh of Chhattesgarh had been shot dead at Aden when he was on his way to India via Djibuti. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 the Embassy of India too was declared closed and the people running it left for India bag and baggage.

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## About the Author

Professor Brahma Dutta Sharma, the writer of this novel, worked as Professor of English at the Turba Campus of Taiz University in the Republic of Yemen from 2008 to 2015. For about eleven years he worked as Professor and Head, Department of English, Kumaun University Nainital in India. During this period he was also the Director of the D.S. B. Campus of the University for about five years. Dr. Sharma is a D. Lit. of Meerut University (now Chaudhary Charan Singh University) Meerut. He was awarded the degree of Ph.D. on his thesis on the American novelist John Updike and the degree of D. Lit on his thesis on the Beat Writers. Dr. Sharma has authored five books: one on John Updike, another on the Beat writers, yet another on the contemporary Indian English novelists (co-author Dr. Susheel Kumar Sharma), the fourth on the British authors and the fifth on the American authors. He is the author of seventy research articles covering a wide range on authors including Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Bernard Shaw, Alexander Pope, Tulsidas, Keshav Das, Amritlal Nagar, Laxmi Narain Mishra, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar and Mahadevi Verma.

Dr. Sharma was born in the district of Bulandshahr in the state of Uttar Pradesh. But he has chosen to become a permanent resident of Hapur. He writes poems and short stories in both English and Hindi and some of them have been published in magazines and anthologies. He also has a short story collection, *A Partition and Other Stories*, two short collections of his poems are *The Dancing Straws* and *neerav kone se* (Hindi) and *bharat ke swatantrta sangram ka itihās* (Hindi) to his credit.



*"In Hindu thought, the concept of family includes not only one's immediate blood relatives but also the rest of society, one's nation and progressively the whole world. Besides, the Hindus feel the presence of God in both the living and the non-living entities that exist in this world and beyond. Therefore, there is a sense of belonging to and integrity with all of them in a Hindu's mind. People from different religious sects and other civilizations are not able to understand and appreciate this aspect of our feeling and thought. There is a need to understand and explain this aspect our culture to rest of the world today."*

**Ashok Singhal**



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978-81-931312-8-2