

The Dogri novel 'Nanga Rukh' was first published in 1978 and it got the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1979. The novel lends itself admirably to translation, because it is very short and free from regional elements. The novel has already been translated and published in Hindi. This English translation is now being offered under the title 'Churning of the City.'

It is an unusual novel in the sense that it is not a conventional piece of narrative fiction in a conventional style, with a plot and characters. It is, instead, a sequence of situations through which a sensitive questioning consciousness runs and illumines the contemporary reality.

The composition as it emerges shows the city divided between the dark half (the poor, neglected, exploited) and the brighter half—automatic machines replacing human workers; trees yielding place to hospital buildings, *mahatmas* and *devis* with tricks capturing water distribution points and places of worship; men in masks, which can be had by bartering one's eyes, ears, brain and love, playing the game of catchy slogans, meetings and posters; and human beings fragmented in their personalities, related to nothing, close to none. This composition raises certain fundamental questions about the human situation.

The style is also interesting and engaging—short, clipped sentences, interspersed dialogues, brisk movement of lines, a tongue-in-cheek stance and telling, effective strokes in the shape of naive comments and uncomfortable questions which strengthen and deepen the awareness of the changing face and values of the city.

It is hoped that non-Dogri readers will enjoy reading this sketch of the churning of the city which is also the churning of the consciousness of man.

SHIVANATH



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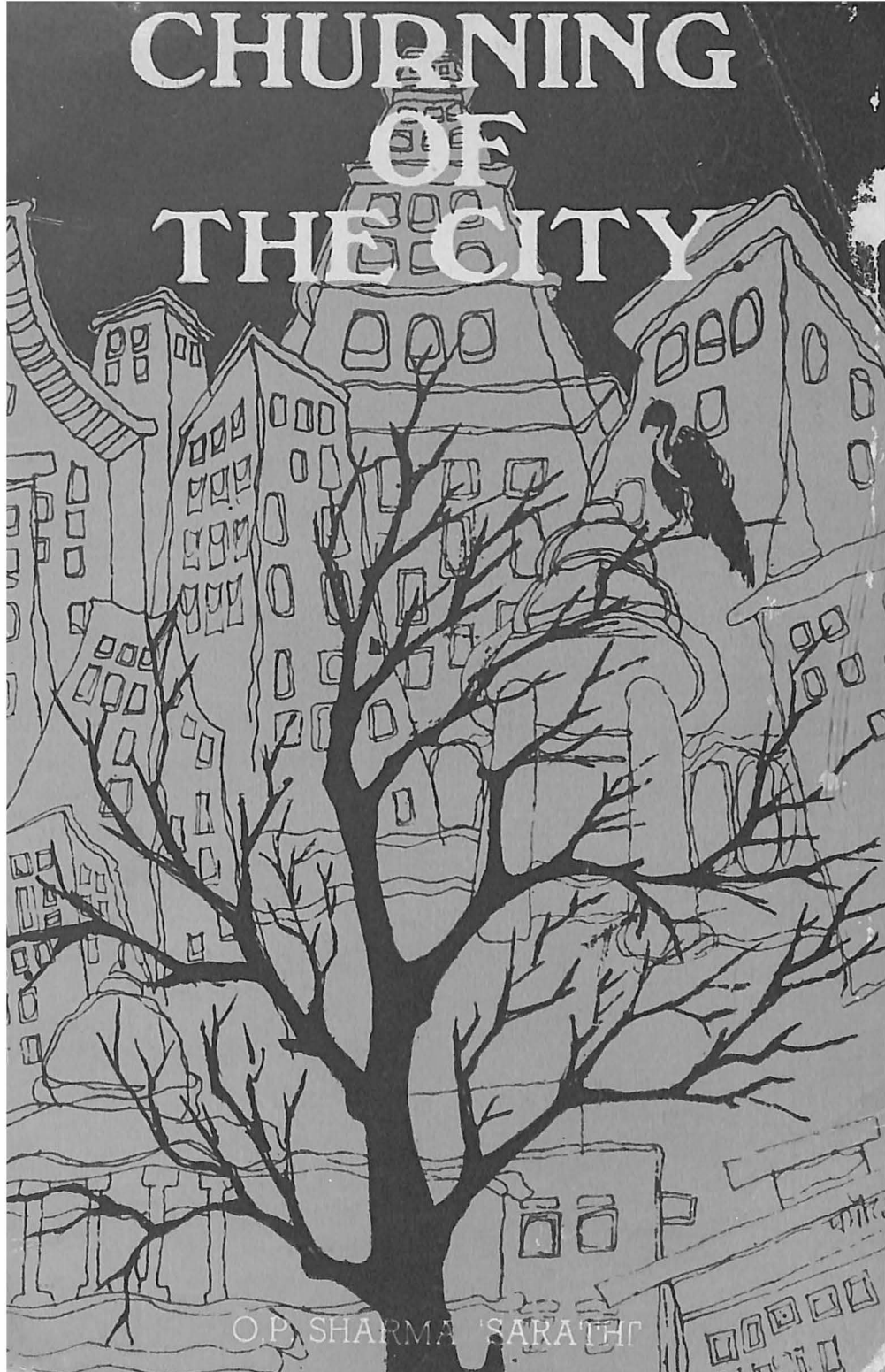
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CHURNING OF THE CITY



O.P. SHARMA 'SARATHI'

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O. P. SHARMA 'SARATHI'

Translated from Dogri by
SHIVANATH

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1

He was no Siva.

He was a writer. But he had to take poison.

A long time ago he had heard that once upon a time there was churning of the ocean. There were two parties to it—one of gods, the other of demons, and the churning of the ocean had thrown up both poison and nectar. In the recent churning of the city, it had been difficult to make out who were gods and who were demons. The churning of the city had produced a lot of things, many things, and they had spilled over and littered the streets and the lanes.

On the eyes fell the smouldering heat of greed and lust instead of rays of sunlight. In the mouth, there were double-edged daggers in place of the sweet tongue and there were bayonets in place of words. In place of hands there were hoes and in place of legs there were crutches of self seeking. These were significant signposts of the churning of the city, that spread, all around, the ashes full of a stench which threatened to suffocate but did not permit one to die.

He had come out of his house after many days. The lane lying close to the entrance of his residence, was crying, pleading; its ribs had got exposed further, the small holes on it had become big rutted pot-holes and its sides, limbs were getting eroded. The passers-by took care to avoid stepping over the wounds of the lane. The humble houses standing around the lane shed sadness over its plight.

There was a thud which made him stop and look around. A young girl who was wearing fashionable sandals and whose face and arms were powdered white, had slipped and was trying to raise herself up. In spite of all her efforts, she was not able to get up. He approached her but seeing her half exposed breasts, he hesitated. And then ? He saw that one of the breasts was in its place but the other had fallen into the pot-hole in the

centre of the lane and the girl was trying to retrieve it and put it back into her blouse.

"What are you looking at, man ? Help me to my feet."

He looked around to find the source of the voice.

"It is me speaking," the girl said, "I am not a girl but a boy made up to look like a girl."

He moved forward and helped the person get up.

"Why are you made up like this ?" he asked.

"To get a job. They say a girl can get a job easier," replied the person, brushing his purple *suthan*.

"Did you get the job ?"

"No, I did not. The employer was sarcastic, he said I did not possess feminine qualities and that I should go and develop these qualities first."

He felt like laughing but he did not allow the laughter to pass beyond his lips. After the churning of the city, it was against the law to laugh within the city precincts; if you wanted to laugh, you had to go to some lonely spot, outside the city limits, to some forest, to do so.

"What do you propose to do now ?" he asked.

"I shall try to change my nature and develop the required qualities, otherwise there is no way to survive except by begging." Saying this, the boy made up as a girl moved away.

He thought of going on his way but he had hardly moved, when four or five boys appeared from somewhere and surrounded him. He got nervous. All of them were smiling.

"What is your name?" One of them asked him.

"Bharat," he pronounced his name.

"What sort of a name is this? Watch out that in future you never help a person who stumbles and falls."

"Why not ?"

"Because whoever is helped to rise, gets into the habit of falling down again and again and every time he falls, he looks for help and starts depending on help. Understand ?"

He liked this reasoning very much. He said, "You are very alert and awakened young men. You are absolutely right."

"Yes. Churning of the city has generated a wave of awakening. For long we were suppressed and kept down by the social environment. But now, we are all awakened young women."

"What ? Awakened young women ?"

"Yes. We are alert and we are alerting others."

So these were girls. But what girls? They had no tenderness in their eyes, no softness on their lips, no smell of roses, no shapeliness of form. And breasts? They had no breasts!

He had come out of the lane and was on the road now. The road was busy, full of people passing up and down, in all sorts of dresses. He found it hard to distinguish men from women—they all looked like mobile show-cases on the run.

He looked at a couple of them a little closely and he felt that their eyes were knives poised to pierce his person. Their gait also appeared irregular and strange as if they were strutting on borrowed legs and those legs didn't quite fit them.

The shops and stores were well decorated as if each shop was a bride, bedecked, waiting for her customer-lover. He noticed one difference, however,—there was too much glazing on these shops, and in the glass were reflected the shapes of those who passed by in different forms.

There was an open space where half a dozen people stood with sticks, twice their own sizes, and scrutinised passersby with the help of their torches in broad daylight and at some distance from there, was a long queue in front of a window. He asked one of the guys with sticks, "What is going on there? What do people get here?"

The man with the stick frowned and tried to beat the ground with his stick but instead, it struck his own foot. In terrible annoyance, he replied, "There is going to be a live dance here."

In surprise he asked, "Sir, is there such a thing as dance of the dead also?"

The man with the stick signalled to one of his companions who caught him by the arm and dragged him to the centre of the road and left him there.

"What the hell are you doing here—standing like one stunned?" The man who asked this with some concern was his neighbour.

"I am looking at that poster," he replied, "I have never seen a picture so big and so frightening. A half-naked dancing girl with the mask of a devil and with an open sharp knife in her hand and a well-fed healthy young man kneeling and pleading with her like a suppliant!"

"This woman kills," his neighbour replied.

"Whom?" he asked in wonder.

"This very young man. She kills him everyday."

"Everyday? And he does not die?"

His neighbour smiled and explained, "She cuts off his head everyday, in the play. They both act in the play."

"All these people in the queue come to see them act on the stage?"

"Yes, they come to see them on the stage."

"To me, the whole city looks like a stage today," he said.

His neighbour was quick to stop him, "While on the road, you should never say anything about the city."

"Why not?" he asked rather loudly.

The neighbour put his hand over his mouth to shut him up and said, "People will think you are mad if you talk about the city and may be, some of them will catch hold of you and lock you up lest you should do any harm to them."

He became quiet but something kept stirring in his inside. Questions like—what all is happening to the city in which he lives? What changes are taking place? How the people are affected? Yet he had no right to speak out, to cry.

On the outskirts of the city, lay a broad road, silent, sighing with the occasional passing vehicle, otherwise resting content with its lot. One could talk about the city on this lonely road. They were on this road now, walking slowly, as if counting the heart beats of this road, afraid lest they should miss one.

All of a sudden, his neighbour stopped, looked up and said, "See!" He saw. It was something worth seeing—a picture about a hundred yards high and so breath-takingly beautiful.

"How has such a big picture come here? Who has installed it?" he asked.

"For some time now a picture is put up here—it is changed from time to time. New colours. New themes. New ideas. Wondrous creations of the imagination coloured by overvaulting ambition!" his neighbour replied.

They approached the big picture and kept looking at it. But the theme eluded their comprehension. The picture was beautiful—five or six musicians with their eyes closed and mouths open were articulating some song. Their expression indicated that they were totally absorbed in the rendering of their music. But in their hands they had elephant tusks instead of musical instruments—

big-sized tusks, and they were strumming on them and singing.

"I am a bit confused," he said, "The singers, their posture and their expressions are all right but can ivory tusks serve as musical instruments?"

"Ivory tusks can't produce music but they show all right. Isn't it?" his neighbour retorted, "Have you not heard the saying that elephants have two sets of teeth—one for showing and the other for masticating?"

"You mean, they are not musicians but poseurs?" he asked.

The neighbour smiled, "Yes, that is right. After the churning of the city, it has become a convention now; one will be counted among musicians if one puts up a pose of being one by carrying an ivory tusk on his shoulder and making the appropriate gestures."

"What will happen to the real musicians?"

"They say a new residential area is going to be built up in the suburbs. There will be requirement of construction materials for it, including sand. Genuine musicians will convey to that area bags of sand on donkeys."

Engrossed in conversation, the two of them had veered to the middle of the road and they were so lost in talk that they did not hear the screech of a vehicle braking by their side. The driver was beside himself with rage as he got down and caught him by the collar.

"Driver master, how has he offended?" his neighbour asked with some trepidation.

"Who is this man from the bush? He doesn't see where he is standing, right in the middle of the road!"

"Please forgive him. He lost his bearings. This mistake will not be repeated."

"It is not a mistake, it is a crime. Does he not know that even the rules of the road and regulations for drivers and vehicles have changed? Earlier, the rule required the driver to presume that anybody walking or standing on the road was blind. According to the new rule, every person walking or standing on the road must act as if every vehicle and every driver is blind. Remember this—always remember this for the future."

The driver released him, scattering the embers of his rage all around; then getting back into his seat, he drove away with speed and sputter.

"What did he say?" he came to himself and asked his neighbour.

"He said, be careful, every vehicle is blind and will over-run anybody coming in its way. Let us move on," the neighbour replied.

Dusk was descending and it would soon be dark.

They wanted to see more pictures and posters beginning from one end and moving to the other but it required time. They, therefore, decided to come some other day in the morning.

As they approached the city, it became brighter. Where was the darkness of night? There was so much light all around—so much, and so hard and bright that it hurt the eyes.

The shopping area had become even more attractive now. Everybody on the move looked beautiful—those with clothes on and those without clothes, those with legs and those with crutches, the well-fed and the lean and thin—all looked bathed in light and beauty.

He wanted to say something, but he kept quiet until they reached the city square where a traffic constable stood with a bright electric bulb burning over his head. He could hold himself no longer and whispered to his companion, "After the churning, our city has been divided into two."

"What do you mean?" The neighbour who was looking at the legs of a woman who looked like a man from waist upwards, turned towards him.

"Our neighbourhood and our quarters never see any light after nightfall. But here, not a nook is unlighted."

"The light which was supposed to illuminate our neighbourhood, is also lighting this area," the neighbour whispered to him, "It is not electric bulbs and tubelights, it is gold that burns and lights this place."

"What did you say? Does gold also burn?" he asked.

"Gold alone burns and lights. It appropriates to itself whatever little light is burning elsewhere so that it may burn brighter."

The road had in the meantime pushed them back in the lane. The lane was too dark and they held each other by the hand. They had hardly taken two or three steps when his companion slumped to the ground with his hands on his forehead.

"What happened? Why did you sit down?"

"My head struck with somebody so hard that I see sparks in the dark."

"Yes!" he sighed, "It is too dark in our lanes and alleys. You are right. Gold alone burns, not light. But there is no gold here. Even blood does not burn here."

2

A new day dawned and the sun stormed the place; it soon started knocking at his door also. He got up, rubbing his eyes, opened the door and peered out.

"What's the matter? Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the sun. I bring daylight to the world. I came here to tell you that I am here. Day has dawned, now get up."

He was standing in his own house and therefore could laugh loudly—"You? You are the sun? You look worse than a burnt *chapāti*."

The sun did not show any annoyance. He smiled instead and said, "Different people describe me differently. I never mind it. It is my duty to come, peep into every house and awaken people."

"I am awake. You can go now."

"I am going. But...People tell me that they are awake and that I should leave. But they fall asleep again as soon as I turn my back. Many people have started telling me lies."

The sun made a wry sad face and lifted himself into the bosom of the sky and began to glide.

He went over to the narrow little courtyard spread in front of his room. He felt hungry—his intestines were howling for food. People around, neighbours, and strangers, were already on their feet, scampering up and down. A play had started.

He had been watching this play, he did not remember, for how long but it was a play without a beginning and without an end, without a start and without a climax. He felt that the characters in this play of satisfying hunger, the cry of the stomach, were on the increase and they were all busy memorising the given script. But they floundered and missed the words. How long has this play in the name of practice been going on? He wondered sometimes that the night came to an end, and the day ended; the mountain climb came to an end and the river ended.

even the life of a man ended, but this play, this exercise had no end. The characters were on the increase, the scripts were growing longer, the exercise was getting tougher but there was no sign of an end to all this.

The room was full of smoke. An old woman was struggling to light a fire by blowing over bits of firewood, not dry enough. In spite of the big change, many homes still used undried firewood for cooking and when it did not burn, the housewives themselves burnt within.

"Are you preparing to go out?" his neighbour came and asked him. He was accompanied by a girl today.

"What sort of preparing is this? A preparation that commences in the morning and ends in the evening, is no preparation—it is called shackles—a noose in the neck."

His neighbour smiled, "A man puts his neck in the noose all right but the noose does not kill him until his last breath."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I am taking this girl along," his neighbour replied.

"Where are you taking her along? Who is she?"

"She also wants to see the picture; the one we saw yesterday."

"But you are setting out so early, all ready?"

"Seeing it will take a whole day. It is spread over an area of 4 miles."

He burst into laughter. How fond of seeing new pictures is this neighbour of his! Of seeing pictures that are displayed after the New Change. But there is one thing he does not understand—that these are our own pictures, with us as the subject matter. We stand in front of them and laugh while looking at them, while these pictures laugh back at us.

"You are not going?" his neighbour asked.

"I shall get there by the evening. You are on your own but I am not free. I shall come after finishing the day's work."

The neighbour and the girl went away. After some time, he also left his house.

Everyday, on his way to work, he used to pass by a secluded spot with a big tree in its centre—a tree with a large canopy of shade. It provided shade and shelter from the hot burning sun; wayfares stopped under its shade, rested their tired feet and filled their lungs with the air made fragrant by its broad leaves.

Today, the spot was bare—widowed as it were. At the very first glance, he felt as if some city elder who had provided protection to people, friends and strangers alike, had been cut down. He was moved to the quick and advanced towards the man who was chopping the branches of the fallen tree and asked him, "Why has this ancient tree been cut down?"

"It was in the city development plan," the man replied.

"Cutting down trees, removing providers of shade—is this among the principles of development?"

"Calm down, talk slowly. If you want to know more, go and ask that man with the dark glasses."

"Who is that man?"

"The new owner of this piece of plot."

"Is something else going to come up here?"

"Yes. A heart hospital will be built here."

"A hospital for the heart?" he asked with disbelief, "You are joking. What is a heart hospital? A heart is that part of man's body which ticks and purifies man's blood."

"Yes, the same heart. It has been seen that hearts of the people of this city are not all right. This hospital will be the centre for making them all right. This is one of the schemes in the City Development Plan."

"Hearts are not all right?" He didn't know and was not able to understand why.

"Yes. Hearts of the people are not all right. Heart diseases are on the increase." It was the shrill voice of the man with dark glasses.

"Yes, sir, I understand," he said in a very humble tone, "Earlier, something used to happen to the hearts of men in youth. Now, even little kids are holding their hearts in their hands."

The man with dark glasses laughed at his stupidity and said, "This hospital is not going to treat that disease. The heart is an instrument in man's body, which purifies blood. This will be a centre for treatment of that instrument."

"This tree also did a lot of good to the heart. You think this hospital will do more good to the heart?" he asked.

"This old tree was not worth two-paise any more. This centre will cost millions of rupees."

"Sir, I don't think the new hospital will do as much good to the people passing this way as did this two-paise-worth tree."

"I am not concerned with what you think. I am responsible

for putting up a two storeyed building here and I am going to do that in a short time."

He reached his place of work but his head was full of the fallen tree and its lopped off branches and the branches that were being chopped. As soon as he got to the iron gate and looked up, he saw that he was very late. He was sweating and afraid. On entering the shed, he found the foreman standing near his machine. The foreman smiled on seeing him—the first time ever. He also smiled back. But he also got anxious on seeing that the machine on which he worked was being dismantled. Before he could speak, the foreman himself opened up, "Bharat, the machine is being removed. In its place, a new machine will be installed. The new machine will not require a man to operate it."

"What did you say? The new machine will not need a man?" his mouth opened with disbelief.

"The new machine is automatic—it does everything itself," the foreman said.

"It works itself? It can put the seeds in itself?" he asked.

"The machine has 15 to 20 arms. It can put in the seeds. If the oil flow gets uneven, it blows a whistle. On the bottle being filled, it moves it forward and places another bottle in its place. It corks the bottles and arranges them in a carton." The foreman enumerated all this in one breath and continued, "The installation of this machine was a part of the development plan of our factory. A number of machines were to be imported. They have now arrived."

"So, there is no need of man now to operate these machines?" he asked.

"When a machine begins to turn out more than a man can do, where is the need for employing a man?" The foreman moved up to the new machine and pressed a button. It moved like the movement of a deluge; fifteen or twenty arms at once started moving up and down sideways. It reminded him of a large picture put up in some city square which showed a fierce looking demon holding in his vice-like arms a number of people and squeezing them; it had this caption in big letters—ELIMINATION OF DISHONESTY AND CORRUPTION IS PART OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME OF THIS CITY. He was not clear as to whether the city planners intended the end of the demon or the man whom the demon held and squeezed.

"You can enquire here after some days. If there is any work for you, you will be told," the foreman told him.

He came out. When he reached the big iron gate, he was stopped by an iron man.

"You can't go out."

"Normally, people coming in are stopped but you are stopping people going out."

"There is no rule now which says that anything or any person coming in should not be allowed in. The rules of the factory now say that those going out should be stopped and searched."

"You can search me," he said.

The iron clad man moved up to him and then stopped and said, "I was all right, but the officer incharge has covered me with iron so that I can neither bend nor see people clearly. You are an old hand. What will your search reveal—except empty pockets? You can go."

After many days, he felt once again that the road was not cooperating with him. If he moved forward, the road pushed him backwards. He kept walking but it looked as if he was standing at the same place, merely moving his feet.

He kept marching on the same spot for quite some time. Then he raised his head and looked ahead. There was a ship-sized poster on a big wall, it bore a slogan in metre-long letters—

PROGRESS, GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT—THESE ARE NOT THINGS WITHIN THE CAPABILITY OF ONE OR TWO MEN. THEY CALL FOR A JOINT EFFORT BY ALL. LET ALL BEND THEIR ENERGIES TO MAKE THE CITY BEAUTIFUL. At one end there was the picture of a very attractive woman. The woman was so bewitching that she could make the onlookers forget themselves; she had wings of gold and appeared to be getting ready to fly.

3

There was a public meeting in the square. Lots of people stood close to each other but they seemed strangers to each other. They were looking towards a platform set up on planks placed above empty coaltar drums. The meeting had not yet started. He also joined the crowd and started looking around for some known person with whom he could converse. He was surprised that none of the persons he knew was there; they had perhaps gone somewhere else. And the people who were there, standing and moving around, were total strangers, absolutely new faces.

After some time, a man went up the rostrum. But as soon as he showed up, people started laughing. The laughter spread and swelled. The man on the rostrum looked around anxiously. When the laughter subsided, he spoke in a plaintive tone, "Believe me, I am the man who is going to address you."

A loud voice rose from the crowd; somebody said, "What can a man in tattered clothes with unshaven beard, without shoes and without a garland round his neck, tell us?"

Another voice: "Yes, you are right. He has no vermilion mark on his forehead and no *dhoti* over his legs. How can he claim to address us?"

A third voice: "Only a big man, big in all respects, can speak to us from the rostrum."

The man on the rostrum shouted, "Friends, speaking to you has nothing to do with a mark on the forehead, or a *dhoti* on the legs or with bigness. Speaking is a matter of ideas and ideals. All my life..."

"All your life you have been begging alms," a man from the crowd completed the sentence jeeringly, "and even now you are fit for nothing more than going around with a begging bowl."

"I have not been begging. Instead, I have been making beggars give up begging. I have been making them learn to read and

write," said the man on the rostrum.

"Come down from the rostrum. Otherwise you will be pushed down," said another man.

The man immediately came down from the rostrum and another man went up. As soon as this other man appeared, there was such an outburst of applause that the walls reverberated with the sound of clapping.

This man had a three lined mark on his forehead, a shining gold chain round his neck and gold rings in his ears. He was clad in silk *kurta* and *dhoti*. His shandals were embroidered in gold thread. He bowed to the audience theatrically like a magician bending to the viewers before the start of his tricks. Then he spoke in sweet tones, "I am your most humble servant—a small man worth no more than dust. I have dedicated myself to the service of the people. I am a servant of society and am always thinking about your problems; these problems keep me awake at night, and on my legs during the day. I did not come here to tell you anything. It is a long time since I last saw you. I am here today just to have your *darshan*." After a brief pause he continued, "I have an appeal to make to you. You wouldn't believe me but believe me, there has been a theft in my house."

The mention of theft made everybody quiet. A pall of silence fell over the entire audience. It appeared as if the theft had taken place, not in the speaker's house but in the houses of all the people gathered there. "We are all sorry. We shall collect subscriptions to make good your loss," spoke up a man around whose neck was hung a larger than life photograph of somebody.

"This loss cannot be made up," said the man with the forehead mark from the rostrum in a voice wet with tears, "I had carefully saved a few ideals which would have been of use to you and you alone. Some thief has stolen them. The theft is actually not mine, it is yours; it is not of my ideals but of your ideals. The theft has not been committed by me; it has been committed by one of you. I am not the thief; you are the thieves."

Silence prevailed for some time more. Then there was some commotion. And a man from the crowd came forward and announced, "I and my companions here vow not to drink water until we have recovered your lost ideals and restored them to you."

"Every thing here rests on you and you alone," the man on

the rostrum said, "Even if you are not able to find my ideals, you should not forget me. Otherwise, my soul will continue to cry even when I am gone."

There was clapping of hands once again; so violent that it bloodied the hands of the clappers.

"You saw? What a dissimulator he is!" said his neighbour, putting his hand on his shoulder, "Are ideals also some sort of objects that can be stolen? But all these people kept listening and he kept telling them. Some have even taken a vow to search for them."

"It has been a curious spectacle. This man looked to be a dissimulator by his expression and movements. But the man who came up to the rostrum earlier, did want to say something. The people did not listen to him," he said sadly.

"These people do not respect a man, his ideas or his ideals; these people respect the forehead mark, the garland, and the apparel. It was a mistake on the part of that man to have gone up the rostrum," the neighbour said.

In a few moments, the people had forgotten that there had been a public meeting there. They moved on to their respective jobs. The labourers who had been engaged to dismantle the rostrum had completed their job and were looking for the man who had to pay them for the job done. But that man was nowhere to be seen.

A labourer standing nearby said, "That man with the forehead mark had promised that as soon as the clapping of hands had died, we would be paid. We had carried these materials to this place. We have bruised our hands by clapping hard. And now he has disappeared."

The labourers kept complaining. The spectators had left and gone towards their destination.

"Did you go and see the picture posters?" he asked his neighbour.

"No. I could not see them. I had to stop on the way," the neighbour replied.

"Why? What happened?"

"Do you want to become great?" the neighbour asked, "Great in the sense that you are known to be a big man in the city?"

"Do not talk in riddles. I shall give a reply to this question

later. First tell me what happened."

"There was a place where there used to be a *Chhabil*. I used to go there to drink water when hungry. I was looking for it but did not find it. Perhaps there is no *Chhabil* there any more. Looking for it I came across a holy man, a *mahatma*," the neighbour told him.

"Then?" he enquired anxiously.

"Then what? The *mahatma* said that there was no *Chhabil* there any more and that he was there in its place and he was the one who could make people big."

"How does he make people big?"

"We can know that only when we go to him. But he was saying that he could make a man big in no time."

"I shall come along with you. I want to see how a *mahatma* makes a man big."

"He appeared to be a miracle-worker. Have no doubts. He will come to know if you doubt him and will get annoyed. He was saying that those who doubt can never become big," the neighbour informed him.

He kept quiet.

As the sun went down, they both reached the place where there used to be a *Chhabil*. The *mahatma* was already there, waiting for them; he had with him two young men and two others. He could not make out whether these others were young men or young women.

"So, you have come?" the *mahatma* asked his neighbour.

"Yes, sir. How could I disobey your orders?"

"But this other man with you—he appears to be full of doubts. It is not good to have such doubts."

The neighbour smiled and looked at him. Then he said, "No, Sir, Bharat has no doubts in his mind."

He also indicated with a movement of his head that he had no doubts.

"Which one of you desires to become big first?" the *mahatma* asked.

The neighbour stepped forward, "Sir, I came first."

"Shall we make him big first?" the *mahatma* asked his disciples.

"Definitely, sir," all of them responded.

The *mahatma* set about performing his trick; he took out a

big-sized bag and started fingering it.

He kept looking at the *mahatma*. As a matter of fact, he was not convinced that whatever the *mahatma* did, would be all right. He did not like the *mahatma* at all. There were quite a few citizens who were dark but the *mahatma* was rather unusually dark and clumsily big-bodied and while handling things excitedly he would close and open his eyes feverishly. Seeing his winking, he was reminded of a beggar who once said, "Small or big, a person who winks his eyes too fast, is hell bent on some mischief."

The *mahatma* took out two or three electric bulbs. Then he asked his neighbour to stand at some distance from the wall. The neighbour went and stood there. In the meantime the *mahatma* quickly climbed up an electric pole and joined the wires and came down and switched the bulbs on.

Then he asked his neighbour to look at the wall. He looked and saw a shadow—his own shadow—bigger than himself.

"This is my first miracle. See yourself on the wall—you have become so big!" the *mahatma* said.

"You are great, *mahatmaji*," his disciples echoed in one voice.

He and his neighbour were looking at the shadow on the wall. Both were wondering how a person could become big with his shadow.

"*Mahatmaji*, have I really become big?" the neighbour asked.

"Yes. You have become big."

"But *mahatmaji*, he is the same size. Only his shadow looks big," he went up to the *mahatma* and told him.

The *mahatma* let out a guffaw so raucous that the birds sitting on the pole were startled and flew away.

"You fools! These days, he alone is big whose shadow looks big. The longer the shadow, the bigger the man."

"It is a miracle indeed," the neighbour said.

"Whatever it is, if it is accepted that he has become big with his shadow, what will happen?" he asked.

"It will produce respect and fear among people—respect and fear both go together."

"But he cannot call himself big at all places. The key that makes him big is in your hands," he said.

The *mahatma* snapped back in anger, "Wherever he

remembers me, there I shall be."

With this, the *mahatma* picked up his things and made to leave. He said, "*Mahatmaji*, you have confused my neighbour. You claim to make people big. How big are you yourself?"

"This is now part of the charter of development of the city that a man is as big as the bulb he possesses and as big as the shadow he casts," said the *mahatma*.

"If someone refused to accept your bigness?"

"We have our ways and devices to get it accepted," the *mahatma* smiled as he said this and looked towards his disciples.

"You are leaving, *mahatmaji*?" the neighbour said. "Tomorrow itself, I shall go up a raised platform and announce with all my force that I am a big man. Will you come there tomorrow?"

The *mahatma* laughed and his laughter struck awe in the hearts of everybody present. He said, "It is not necessary for me to be there. I am present in this city in many forms—I am a beggar at one place and a doorman at another, a dispenser at the third and a newspaper hawker at the fourth. It is a question of recognising me; I am everywhere."

The *mahatma* made a move to leave with his disciples and had hardly moved a few steps when he shouted from behind, "*Mahatmaji*, stop this fake miracle-mongering, stop deceiving people, throw away the mask. Why do you confuse and confound people who are all right as they are?"

The *mahatma* made a sign to his disciples and they all rushed to him like a bullet and grabbed him. The neighbour got frightened and said to him, "Say that they are all big men. Otherwise, I don't know what they will do with you."

The four disciples held him so tight that his arms and neck got numb. He cried out, "*Mahatmaji*, You are great! you are a big man. Your shadow is also big. Your disciples also are big men."

The choral singing was at its full swing. People were shaking their heads in a state of ecstasy. Some had their eyes closed.

Probably some of them had gone to sleep. He was able to recognise some of the people seated there. The one who recited the religious story and led the singing was a woman who appeared strangely tense with pride and arrogance—so taut that she seemed to run the risk of breaking any moment and falling to pieces. In between the religious singing, one man was telling another, "My shop was losing business. I told my wife to get fully made up everyday and just sit in the shop, without talking. This strategy proved so useful that now it is becoming difficult to cope with all the customers." The other one to whom these words were addressed replied, "I was involved in litigation for a, long time. The case was dragging from one date to another and it was causing me sleepless nights. Then I got some religious rites performed and willed away the house to somebody. Only after that the case was decided in my favour. The house was worth only ten thousand rupees, the case I won was worth sixty thousand."

Suddenly everybody stood up. He saw that *Arati* was being performed. All were moving their lips with great devotion. Some people did not know the words of *Arati* and they were doing up the buttons of their shirts or jackets.

The singing and prayers came to a close. All left. He remained seated. A middle aged man came towards him and said with a smile, "Well, *Bhagatji*, the prayer session is over. You may now go home and enjoy your food."

"But I want to ask something," he said.

"It is late now. Ask tomorrow," the middle-aged man said.

"I may not be able to come tomorrow," he said.

"Then ask. What do you want to ask?" the man said with some irritation.

"I do not want to ask you anything. I want to ask that lady."

"The lady?" the man was angry now. "What do you want to ask her?"

"I shall tell only her."

"She does not speak with anybody after the prayer. She is my daughter. Ask me whatever you have to ask."

"She is your daughter? You are very lucky. She is a divine light. I want to ask her just one question."

Lest there should be some trouble, the man called to his

daughter. She came and sat down. The man said, "Now ask what you want to ask. Quick."

"I want to ask if prayers, austerities, *yoga* and meditation are things concerned with the body."

"Yes. Their concern is with the body only," the middle-aged man said. The lady nodded her assent.

"I have heard that the One whom we worship and on whom we meditate, is the same everywhere."

"That is also right," the man said.

"My question is this—if he is everywhere and is the same everywhere, then what is the meaning of all this shouting and beseeching and sitting erect with arrogance and salesmanship?"

"You seem to be some sort of an atheist. I had a suspicion that you were up to some mischief; you are blaspheming God. The Lord says that whosoever blasphemes God will go to hell." The middle-aged man was fuming with anger but he smiled and said, "Does the Lord also say that you may use him for commerce?"

The man was now beside himself, red with rage and said, "The *Bhagawati* has been kind so far and no harm has come to you. Go away at once. If she gets annoyed, she will reduce you to ashes."

"I want to be reduced to ashes," he said.

In spite of the middle-aged man's threats, he did not go away. He was not reduced to ashes. Four men lifted him like a sack and threw him out of the hall. While leaving him, they advised him, "Pray to the goddess before you go to bed. The mother goddess will come in the night and terrorise you."

He kept awake the whole night in the hope that if the mother goddess did come to terrorise him, he would be able to see her. But the mother did not come, nobody frightened him and the night passed into morning.

He heard some noise in the neighbourhood. He came out. Several people had gathered and each one was shouting his own

story. He was not able to follow a word of what they were saying. He asked one man, then a second, then a third. But none of them even recognised him.

All of a sudden, everybody stopped talking. There was total silence. Out of an old gate, a man and a woman who appeared to be husband and wife, came out. The woman started shouting loudly, "This man is breaking the laws of the city. He should be sent to an asylum." Everybody joined in to echo her, "Yes, he should be sent to a lunatic asylum. He is insane".

"Why should he be sent to the lunatic asylum?" he came forward and asked.

"This man appears to have joined in with the mad man," some people said. "He also should be thrown out of the neighbourhood."

"But why? What has happened?" he asked.

"Now the rule is that everybody, every man, woman, boy, girl must stand on his or her own legs. If one cannot, he or she should borrow or hire another's legs. But this man is asking me to give my legs for him to stand on," said the woman. "This man who is taking his side, is also a cripple. Both of them are a blot on the neighbourhood."

He knew that all his neighbours were mere onlookers. Not onlookers only, they were ever ready to run away and escape. All of them sympathised with the woman and a few of them even gave her a parting advice, "In the city, many women have given their legs to their men to walk with. You also should do the same. Thus your man will be helped and saved from being sent to the lunatic asylum."

4

The loneliness and the darkness of the night were hurting him and he was trying to cushion the cutting hurt with thinking and imagining. There was a knock at the door. He recognised the tap of familiar fingers. Without moving from his place, he said, "Come in."

His neighbour entered and sat down beside him. Neither of them spoke for some time. Then he started the conversation, "It is becoming difficult to manage to stay on in this city any more. Even friends and acquaintances have become strangers, Behaviour patterns have changed; manners of social intercourse, mutual obligations, even social practices have changed. I am thinking of leaving this city for some other place."

"What thoughts are these? You will leave your city? You cannot escape the soil; it will go with you wherever you go," the neighbour said.

"At least, the people there will be new, different. There will be new faces to see."

The neighbour shook his head, "No. There will be no difference. Human forms will be different but human nature will remain the same. Windows will change but the eyes that look through them will remain the same. Why should we not do what others have done?"

"What have the others done?" he asked.

"Most of the people have put on masks," the neighbour said.

"Masks? You mean we should give up our essential nature, our duty and our work, just to be able to continue living in this city, among those people?" he asked.

"No. You do not have to leave anything or hold on to anything. We shall acquire the masks and keep them handy. We shall use them when required. Otherwise they will remain on the peg."

"Where do you get the masks?" he asked.

"They are available. And people are using them. After the churning of the city, it is common knowledge now that you cannot progress without using masks."

Even before day-break the next morning, his neighbour came and said, "Let us go. Hurry up."

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"I have found out about the shop where masks may be had."

"You have found the shop?" he asked with some surprise.

"Yes. You can get masks of all types there. Cash down or on instalments, big or small."

He wondered how masks could be had on instalment. Many things were available on instalments in the cities. Goodness and evil were available on instalments. Human beings and their deeds could be had on instalments. And now masks also were available on instalments.

They did not take the road through the city, they took a by-lane and walked briskly. They had not seen the place earlier. It was away from the city, in the outskirts. Surrounded by high-rise, beautiful and multi-coloured buildings on three sides, was a large, plain, open ground where innumerable people were waiting in long queues.

The wavy queues spread and rippled like snakes. But in spite of so many people, there was silence and surprisingly, there was not a single organiser. Sitting in queues they talked in whispers. He and his neighbour joined the tail of one of the queues.

"It will be difficult to get our turn here," he observed in a very low muffled voice.

"It does look like that. But one has to be patient if one wants something."

After a little while, his neighbour asked the person in front of him, "Brother, what are the prices of masks here?"

"Prices?" the man replied like an experienced salesman, "There are many prices. There are different rates of instalments also. It depends on what mask you want to have. But it appears you have not filled in the forms yet."

"Forms? What forms?" The neighbour enquired.

"Both of you should first go to that building, get the forms and fill them in," the man pointed to a blue building.

He and his neighbour left the queue and moved towards the building. It was a four storeyed-structure. Enquiries on the

ground floor showed that forms were available on some upper floor. The people on the first floor directed them to the second floor. They climbed the steps and looked with wonder at the grandeur and decoration of the building. They had never before set their eyes on anything so grand and so heavenly. All the people working in the building had masks on, hiding their real features but it was strange that while they were at work their bodies were uncovered.

Climbing up to the third floor, he said to his neighbour, "Friend, everything else is all right but I did not like their being uncovered."

The neighbour smiled faintly and said, "You can know who is covered and who is uncovered only if you can see their faces and eyes. But all of them have covered their faces and eyes; nobody knows who is who."

When they reached the third floor, a man welcomed them with a bow and lifted the curtain. They entered a room. A man sitting at a large table with a glass top was turning over some papers. On seeing them, he pushed aside the papers and asked them, "You want the questionnaire forms?"

"Yes, sir. We want to fill in the forms. We had joined the queue for masks but somebody told us that it was necessary to complete the forms first."

"Yes. It is necessary to complete the forms," the man at the table said. "You will also have to state why you want to have masks."

They pondered for a few moments, realising that they had not asked themselves why they wanted masks. Then, his neighbour replied, a bit hesitantly, "Sir, we want masks because we want to live like the people of the city among them. You know the saying, while in Rome, do as Romans do."

"There is another reason also. Everybody who wants to identify himself with the welfare and development of the city, must have a mask. He can hide his weaknesses and vile tendencies by masking his face, for the good and the welfare of the people. If people come to know of somebody's weakness, they will not listen to him. It is true that every man has weaknesses, but one who has to do things for others, needs to hide his vile deeds."

"You are absolutely right. Man is human after all. If he did

not have some flow or the other, he would become God—the supreme being,” the neighbour said.

“Now tell me what sort of masks you need?”

“How many types of masks do you have?” the neighbour asked.

“There are many types—the finest quality masks, medium-quality masks and inferior quality masks,” the man at the table said. “Take these forms and tick the type you want.”

They both took the forms. He asked the man at the table, “What is the instalment rate for the best quality and the most beautiful masks?”

“We have very few of the costliest ones. There is no instalment to be paid for them. Instead, you have to pawn something for them,” the man at the table said.

“What is it that we shall have to pawn?” he asked.

“For that type of mask you will have to pawn your intellect.”

“Intellect?” He was shocked by the reply, “Pawn the intellect?”

“Yes, the intellect, the brain,” the man at the table seemed to chew the words as he uttered them.

He thought that intellect was the only thing which basically distinguished man from animal. If a man pawned away his intellect, he would be reduced to the status of an animal.

“For other masks, what are the things that will need to be pawned?” his neighbour asked,

“The other masks are cheaper. For some of them, we accept eyes as security. For yet others, we may keep ears, feelings, imagination, affection, pride, vanity. Now fill in the forms. Everything is given there in detail. You have only to tick the relevant entry and sign the form,” the man at the table said in a tone as if he was in hurry, as if filling forms was like filling a pit with stones, as if he were saying, “Quick, fill up fast.”

“Sir, you must be giving people some time to think and consider?” he asked

The man at the table smiled, “Certainly. You can take your time to consider. You can take as much time as you please. You can go and consider carefully.”

They got up and made for the door. But before they could get to the door, the man at the table said, “If you feel that you do not need masks: you should return the blank forms; their

supply is limited."

They hurried down the steps. They saw some people carrying away some masks—some good ones, some inferior and some useless. For a long time they kept watching them. Then, his neighbour went up to a man and asked him, "This mask is very pretty. What did you pawn for it?"

That man replied gravely, "My wife was always telling me that I did not make proper use of my brain. Today, at her instance, I have pawned my brain away. She will be happy now" said the man and moved on.

They advanced further. A man forced himself in their way. He was wearing a mask bigger than his size.

"What do you want to tell us by forcing your presence on use?" he asked.

"I want to show you my mask."

"Why do you want to show us your mask?" he asked.

"Because you think I am a very lowly person. With the mask on, I must be appearing great to you," the man went on babbling for some steps by their side and then separated from them.

When they reached the junction of two roads where the city limits started and where the *WELCOME TO THE CITY* signs were displayed, he said to his neighbour, "It is good that we did not take the masks. I did not like at all those buildings, and the business going on there."

The evening sun looked red-hot with anger as it prepared to slip down the horizon. Standing on the terrace of his dwelling, he found himself looking up at the inverted cup of the void which appeared to have released the sun to fall out. All of a sudden, a stranger appeared before him and began to start at him.

"What are you staring at?" he asked.

"I am looking at you", the stranger replied.

"Why are you looking at me?"

"To see if you recognise me or not."

"You?" he looked at him closely and said, "I do not recognise you."

"I am the greatest philosopher, writer and social worker," the stranger said.

He felt surprised and said, "Maybe you are. But why are

you becoming small by announcing this yourself?"

"Because I have a mask on," the stranger laughed.

His laughter made him feel distraught.

"You were fooled, weren't you?" it was his neighbour.

"Have you pawned away your brain?" he asked in annoyance.

"No. I borrowed this mask from an acquaintance just for fun," the neighbour replied with a smile on his face.

"Go and return this mask to that man," he said.

"Let me have a little more fun."

"Fun ? It is this sort of fun that makes me want to leave the city."

As the neighbour was leaving him to return the mask, he called him back and said, "Is it not possible that you tear off this mask ?"

"That man will shout at me," the neighbour replied.

"Yes. If the masks are torn to pieces, the people who are wearing them will not get back their brains, ears, eyes, whatever they have pawned and the city can be saved from being ruined."

The neighbour tore off the mask. It made a terrific sound, so loud that other people came up to the roofs of their houses to see these two men.

5

Sitting by himself in the garden, he was looking at paper flowers. Everything in that garden—trees, leaves, flowers—was synthetic. He was judging as to which flowers should have what smell and which tree could possibly attract by mistake a bird to come and sit on its branches. He looked up at the sky. Birds were coming with speed, flying over trees and leaves and going away. Man can deceive himself with colours and paper flowers but cannot deceive and lure the genuine lovers of trees and leaves and flowers. He smiled to himself.

Unnoticed and unrecognised by him, a girl came and sat by his side. She was so pretty, so fair and so attractive that the moment he set eyes on her, he became nervous and made a move to get up. The girl laughed a sweet little laugh and said, "Is that all that remains of your love and affection and feelings for me? You have completely forgotten me?"

He rubbed his eyes a couple of times. Tapped his head. Strained his mind. But he could not recognise the girl. At last, he blurted out, "I am sorry, I do not know you."

"I am Ramā", the girl said.

He was shocked and looked at her with surprise, "Ramā?"

"Yes, Ramā. The same Ramā—your life—your all."

"But you? So pretty? Where have you been?"

"I got married," the girl replied.

"You are married? Where is your husband?"

"In this very city. I have asked him several times to come out with me but he feels ashamed to go out with me."

"He feels ashamed? Why?"

"He says he looks more like my father than my husband."

"Looks like your father? What do you mean?"

"He is old."

"You have married an old man? Deliberately?" he asked with surprise.

"Yes, I married an old man deliberately. But then what of that? What is so surprising about it?"

"Nothing. It does not matter but still..." he lowered his eyes.

"Still what? I have got all the means of happiness—everything," the girl said with a smile.

"All the means of happiness? Everything you want? Is that true?" he asked.

"Yes. It is true. He is a millionaire and I am his wife. He recently underwent treatment for two years. If you have money, you can get any treatment, you can get back everything."

He was surprised at what she was saying. Of what clay was this girl made that she talked like this! He could not imagine what she would say next.

"Then you should be faithful to him," he said.

The girl let out a guffaw, "Faithful? My foot. We both are partners in the commerce of life—sharers of profit and loss. There is the same type of faithfulness from both sides. I have given him full freedom and he has given me full liberty. He says domestic harmony should rest on mutual trust."

For a long time there was silence between them. Then the girl asked, "How is it with you? How is life?"

"It is all right. It will be all right. Due to the new rules of the city, everyone is all right—happy. There is peace."

"The city has developed fast. What was it like previously? And what is it like now? Where there was wilderness, we have high-rise buildings, electric lights, glass mansions and flower gardens. My husband is especially interested in the development of the city. Without the active interest of millionaires, no city can develop much."

"But, does he just think about these things or also do something about them?" he asked.

"He thinks as well as does. With me he always talks about the people and the city," the girl said and got up to go, "I will go now. We shall meet again sometime," she said.

"Yes, do meet me if you have something to do with me," he replied.

"Not otherwise?" the girl asked.

He kept looking at her closely. He did not say anything in reply.

When the girl had left, a strange sadness enveloped his whole being. Every minute his thoughts went towards what had transpired just then. He tried to divert his mind to other things.

In a situation of rapid progress and development, the oldest things appear to be the most backward. But people always keep them in view, perhaps for the reason that they serve as signposts to the rate of their advancement and progress.

He was face to face with the ruins. One of the ruins had assumed a human shape—that of an old man, an ancient man who seemed to be saying, “I was not a ruin in the beginning. I was a mansion, beautiful and eye-catching, with doors that opened to the world outside and shut out the world outside when closed, with many windows through which you could look out and look in, with ventilators which let in fresh light. I had walls that could hide secrets and floors that were trod by infants and young girls and old people. But all that came to an end.”

Another ruin standing by its side, appeared to burst into laughter, as if to say, “That is all that you were? I was much more. I had halls full of splendid mirrors and gorgeous chandeliers, that throbbed with music and dance and songs of life. But those who inhabited me did not wear masks. They would die rather than give up their values. They could sacrifice their lives to keep their word. But....”

Then both the ruins seemed to ask him, “You live in a new house of the new city. How do you do?”

He felt sad. He could speak about only that which he knew. But for some days now, he had been in a state of confusion about the city and about himself, and did not know much about either.

“I cannot say,” he replied, “I could say something if I found people, walls, lanes, roads, characters, deeds and intentions stable, but nothing is the same any more.”

“Yesterday a few men came to me. They pushed their shovels in my sides a few times and then left,” the ruin narrated. “It made me laugh. As a matter of fact, they did not like us.”

"I too heard some such sound of shovels. And I became alert. To me, they looked like paper horses. The places where they are used to digging are new. We are old. Each one of our bricks will set their teeth on edge."

"I looked for you all over." It was his neighbour speaking with some irritation. "What are you doing here?"

"I was talking with these ruins," he replied.

"Talking with ruins? Are you in your senses?"

"Just now, both the ruins were sitting beside me, telling me their tales."

The neighbour was at his wits end, "What are you saying? The ruins were sitting beside you? Get up, let us go." His neighbour took him by the arm in an attempt to make him get up.

"Where should we go?" he asked.

The neighbour became anxious at this, "Let us go home."

"Home? Where is home? Whose home?"

The neighbour heard him but gave no reply. He sat down by his side and said, "There is going to be a meeting of people in the city square today. I am going to address them."

He pricked up his ears, "You are going to speak? What will you say?"

"Only this...increase what is decreasing and decrease what is increasing."

"Will the people listen to you?" he asked.

"Yes, they will listen. Before I speak, the *mahatma* will be already there and he will make me big. People listen to big people."

"When they have heard you, what then?"

"After hearing they will think," the neighbour said.

He let out a loud laugh and said, "Many people in the city have pawned away their brains to get masks. Without brains, how will they can think?"

The neighbour felt depressed. He wanted to go up to the rostrum and make a speech and now his words had discouraged him.

"Still, I want to speak," the neighbour said.

"All right, you speak and I shall watch the fun," he said, looking toward the ruins.

In the main bazaar they sensed a certain change in the atmosphere. Many people—heads, eyes, feet—were on the move like a flood. All moved silently, communicating only important things through whispers.

At the city square itself there was nothing. There was neither a platform nor any people. Nobody stopped at the square. He asked his neighbour, "You said you were going to speak to the people there?"

His neighbour also was surprised. The whole plan seemed to have flopped. He spoke to one of the men standing near the square, "A platform was to be erected here. And some people were to address a meeting."

The man did not reply; he simply sauntered away.

They both turned from the road to the lane when they saw a big poster pasted in a corner. He glanced at it. It said : WE ALL WANT TO BECOME HAPPIER. A NEW WAY TO HAPPINESS HAS BEEN FOUND. THE WAY IS TO STOP SEEING, HEARING, SPEAKING AND THINKING. IF YOU HAVE TO SEE, SEE WITH EYES CLOSED. IF YOU MUST HEAR, HEAR WITH EARS PLUGGED. AND IF YOU CANNOT DO WITHOUT SPEAKING, SPEAK WITH YOUR MOUTH SHUT TIGHT.

After reading it, the neighbour looked toward him. He also looked toward his neighbour and then said, "The quieter you are, the happier you will be. Now some altruistic leader wants to see everybody happier. The terms are very well drafted. But he should have added that those desirous of supreme happiness should also give up eating, drinking, feeling and sensing."

"What did you say?" a strange-looking man asked him putting his hand on his shoulder.

"We should give up sensing and also eating," he replied.

"Both of you appear to be strangers here. It is ordained that you should not speak. But you continue to speak."

"Why is the poster silent as to what will happen to one who continues to speak?" his neighbour asked.

"He will be honoured in a big congregation and given an award," said the man and pressed his shoulder so hard that it hurt.

"He was a devil of a fellow. He almost snapped my shoulder off," he said.

The neighbour was perplexed.

Returning to his room, he thought that he also should write a big poster which should carry the legend "By closing one's mouth, eyes and ears, one is no better than a stone. The question of happiness and supreme well-being therefore does not arise." He thought he should cover the big poster with his own poster. But he postponed his plans to the next day.

Early next morning, he went to the terrace above his room. The sun was rather cold and dusty. The sky was a little misty. The houses in the neighbourhood were also not clearly visible.

"A very strange thing has happened today," his neighbour came and told him. The girl who accompanied him on the previous occasion was also with him.

"What strange thing have you seen?" he asked.

"It appears as if the whole city has been swept empty. People have left for some other place."

"Where will the people go? They are like worms in a rotting fruit who will squirm within and die there itself."

"Well, come out and see for yourself."

"Is she also coming along?" he pointed towards the girl.

"Yes. She also wants to roam about."

"Why should you bring her along?"

"I have not brought her. She has forced herself on me. She babbles mad things. She says anything may happen any time, that she has a few days to spend with me and I should let her be with me. I felt pity for her. So, I said, "okay, come along."

When his neighbour had referred to something "strange" happening, he meant something that he had not seen before. He was wondering what had really happened to the city where "happening" only meant "hearing".

"What are you thinking?" the neighbour asked.

"I am thinking that wherever a man goes, his body, covered or uncovered, goes with him, his room, bare or furnished, goes with him. I think even if a man gives up his body, they go on."

"I understand. I shall wait until you are ready to go out."

Now, all the three came out and did not find anything unusual. The shops, people, roads, lanes, theatres, cars were as before. He wanted to ask his neighbour about the place of the unusual happening but he hesitated. The girl accompanying them smiled every time she looked toward his neighbour. His asking would

disrupt their mutual happiness.

One thing new was, no doubt, there in the city. At every crossing, at every roadside and at every corner, there was a new picture. Some people stood in front of them looking at them. Below every picture was written, IT IS YOUR OWN PICTURE. But everyone who looked at the picture, soon turned to look at the others watching, as if asking, "Is this our picture?" In every picture, a man was shown reaping a harvest of gold wheat-ears.

"Is this our picture?" a man asked him.

"That is what is written," he replied.

"I have no fields, no bullock and no plough. I work on the road. And to cap it all, the jest that I am harvesting golden wheat!"

Perhaps all of them were whispering similar things to each other, because none of them had land, bullocks, or ploughs.

"I feel like tearing this picture off," another man spoke up.

"You have no right to do so," he said.

"Why?"

"Because there are many people in the city who are actually harvesting gold. This picture represents them also."

The man looked at him with surprise. "In this city? Harvesting gold? Who are they?"

"You are not able to think up. And I dare say that for some ten or even twenty years more, you will not be able to do so. The fact is that we are the fields that grow gold. The harvesters are those who have started the trade in masks and are moving around naked. It is difficult to recognise them because they have covered their faces and eyes."

He felt that his talking to that man had been like lighting the fuse to dynamite. People started gathering around him. He became nervous, regretting his mistake. He knew that those who fixed the pictures would be around, somewhere near-about and seeing people gathered at a place, they would come quickly. He also knew very well that people hanging pictures at the cross roads were no ordinary people; that they were fully equipped with nails and screws and chains and hammers and ladders and pliers; in short everything. And they were capable of hanging up a man in place of a picture. He covered his face and slowly slid away from the crowd and sat down on the stairs of a big

building.

"What is happening there?" a man standing in the stairway asked him.

"I don't know. I actually wanted to enquire from you about what is going on there," he replied curtly.

The man had seen him coming from where the crowd was but he did not point this out. After a few minutes, the commotion and the movement died out like hot ashes settling down when water is thrown on fire. Everyone dispersed but his neighbour and the girl continued to stand there, looking in all directions, perhaps for him. He became worried and wished they would move away from there to some other side of the road where he could join them.

At last they moved. He also stirred and after a few brisk steps joined them.

"Where were you lost?" his neighbour asked him.

"I shall tell you later. Let us go back home right from here," he said to his neighbour in some flurry.

"Why? Why should we go back?"

"If you don't want to, don't. I am going home."

"But what is the matter? We must know," both the neighbour and the girl said together.

He was annoyed. He turned in the direction of his house, leaving behind the neighbour and the girl.

He breathed a sigh of relief on reaching his room. He was panting badly. His head felt heavy and benumbed.

"What a strange fellow you are!" It was his neighbour's voice that startled him. And this irritated him so much that he felt like tearing him to pieces. The neighbour tried a couple of times to draw him out in conversation but he did not reply. The neighbour sat down quietly hoping that he might start talking some time, without being asked. But man's mind is a strange moving thing, worrying, convoluted, irritating like a thorn in the body.

"Go home now. Come tomorrow," he said. The neighbour got up and left, without a word.

Next day, the neighbour met him in the evening. Immediately on seeing him, he told him, "Some more words have been written under the pictures we saw yesterday. It is written IF THIS IS NOT YOUR PICTURE, YOU AND ALL WILL

HAVE TO CONFORM TO THIS PICTURE.

He smiled thinly, "That is what is bound to happen. If one person cuts down a tree, others stop him. If all start cutting, somebody arises to stop them after all. Living in a certain environment, people do not give water where water is needed. But where there is no need, they are prepared to give their blood even."

"I read something more that was written," the neighbour said.

"There are many more things that will be written. Tell me what you have read."

"There will be a public function on the last day of every month where everybody's performance will be assessed. Some will be given awards. But those considered unfit to receive awards will be condemned and maligned."

"What will make people qualify for the awards?" he asked.

"Many things. But broadly speaking, awards will be given to those who report any damage to the road, to those who plan and think about the progress and development of the city, to those who always speak about the progress and advancement of the city, and to those who give up self-interest and make it their vocation to serve others."

"Friend," he spoke to the neighbour. "Upheavals, big and small, keep occurring. We go on living with them. But this new upheaval may perhaps be the hardest to bear. What day is it today?"

"Today is the last but one day of the month," the neighbour replied after making calculation on his fingers.

There was so much gaiety, and such glittering lights ! Such bright colours and lively ways ! All the beautiful ones of this world seemed to have gathered there. It was a huge gathering around a very large rostrum. Seeing them, one would think that they were all denizens of *Indrapuri*. But . . . the reality was different. The reality sat at some distance away, was there only

to watch them, to hear them, to listen to their sweet speeches, to look at their smooth, well-groomed, slippery and milk white figures, and to bloody its hands with clapping. One reality that was visible, was on the stage, but another reality that was live and palpable, was below the stage.

The reality sitting below the stage was clapping for no reason and was wondering

Suddenly, a loud voice arose, "You people are the crown of our head. We are here because of you, and you are there for us. Our relationship, yours and ours... extends to millennia. In fact this function is not ours, not at all ours; it is your function and has been arranged at your call and is meant for you." The man declaiming thus was not recognisable; he had put on a mask that showed him at once, neither real nor false, and then both real and false together.

The clapping was so loud that it reverberated through earth and heaven. The resounding intensity of clapping held up the proceedings for a long time.

The proceedings started again. A woman with lovely features and charming figure, who looked more a man than a woman, came to the centre of the rostrum and stood surveying the scene. Then moving to one end of the platform, she said, "How peaceful and quiet it is now! How reassuring! All this has been possible due to the combined effort of all. All have contributed to the success of the function with full dedication and single minded devotion and this function will be remembered as an historical event in this beautiful, attractive and peaceful city. Some persons have sacrificed even their personal happiness and comfort and sleep to make this possible." Then she loudly spoke out the name of a man. It was a name known to the city people but the man who came to the platform was a stranger, not known to any body. This stranger folded his hands and bowed to the people as if he was bowing to a god in the temple. Then the woman put a garland made of gold beads around his neck and put a gold embroidered cap on his head. There was clapping once again.

The neighbour said, "You are not clapping."

"Did you not recognise this man?" he asked.

"No, I have not been able to place him."

"He is the same man who said that he had lost his ideals."

The woman's voice came floating from the pulpit, "You

ought to know what troubles and privations this gentleman has gone through for your sake. Finding ideals is like fishing out pearls from the depths of the ocean. There were thefts at his place, twice, and both times he had to dive, strive, almost drown; he was exhausted but he did not give up. Right up to now, he is wedded to his word and is searching for ever new ideals."

Then there was a round of conferment of awards. Many people were called up and citations were read out:

"He went from house to house and took statistics of mutual love subsisting between people." Clapping.

"He has gone from door to door and collected figures about psychological hurts." Clapping.

"He has been from place to place to prepare a report on how many people without arms are engaged in useful work and how many people with arms are doing nothing." Clapping.

"...His services will not be forgotten for centuries to come..." Clapping.

"He prepared a plan for banishing hunger and poverty from the city. So far this plan is applicable to only those cities where there is no hunger and poverty. But shortly, this plan with some modifications, will be useful to us too." Clapping.

"This gentleman is being honoured for his suffering. He is a millionaire; if he wishes he can give everything to the people and he is sorry that there are some people who do not have many things. And in his sorrow, he eats only once a day. Having all the pleasures of the world, he starves on one meal a day."

The show was over. But the people remained sitting. There was another announcement from the rostrum... "Everybody should now leave. Those who don't, will be pushed out."

At this announcement, the people clapped profusely and then they rose and left.

"Let us also go," the neighbour said.

"Wait a bit," he said. "Now is the time to see things. But we have to hide ourselves to be able to see."

Both of them moved to a dark spot and looked around. At last, he said, "Let us go up this tree and conceal ourselves there."

"But the leaves of the tree are paper leaves and they will crackle and give us away." The neighbour said.

"Let us climb any way," he said, climbing up a couple of yards. There were all sorts of sounds on the rostrum also and the noise from the tree got lost in the bigger noise. They went up the branches and sat there quietly hidden from view.

On getting down from the rostrum, the awardees and the award-givers both gathered on one side. All of them took off their masks and robes and embraced each other.

"I am feeling ashamed," the neighbour said.

"Seeing them unmasked, naked?"

"Yes, seeing them naked."

"But do you recognise all these people?"

"I have seen them earlier somewhere."

"They are the same people who sell masks and get the forms filled in."

It was past midnight. Then the early hour of pre-dawn. But the mask and rostrum people were still there. They both got tired of sitting in the tree, watching things.

At last, they climbed down. The moment they set their feet on the ground, two men pounced on them. One of them said in a hoarse voice, "With whose permission did you climb the tree?"

"We wanted to take permission but we did not find anybody around here then," the neighbour replied.

The man smiled, "You have seen everything?"

"Yes. We enjoyed it very much. It filled us with pleasure," he said.

The man smiled again and said, "Then you both should join the group."

"We shall join if we are asked to," the neighbour said.

One of them ran to fetch two masks, and handing them the masks, said, "Take these masks. Put them on. Now you are members of the group. On the way, if somebody asks you, just tell him that you work for the mask people for the progress of the city. Now you can go."

They put on the masks. When the two men had gone, they took them off.

"What is the matter? Why you have removed the mask?" the neighbour asked.

"The moment I put it on, I felt that I did not know how to walk any more."

"I also felt something like that. When I put it on, I felt as if I did not know how to speak any more."

"Let us move. If we see somebody on the way who is likely to check, we shall put them on for a while," he suggested.

6

At every step, on roadsides, on big shops and showrooms in the main bazaar, on turnings of lanes and corners of houses, many things had been inscribed and superscribed in the meantime. A campaign had also been mounted to announce with drum-beats, the need for reading and understanding what was scribed. Whatever was written did not, however, find any correspondence with what existed. Whatever existed as reality did not find any place in what was written on posters. People looked at the posters and passed on. A few stopped to read a few words, and left half-way. Some read the whole inscription, smiled and moved on.

This flood of posters created a tremendous change. Some people started discussing the writings to satisfy themselves that they understood them. Some persons tried to reach at and analyse the falsehood of the slogans. This divided the people into two groups. It became a common sight to see people talking loudly about the subject matter of the posters, discussing the matter animatedly.

On the last day of every month, there was a function and through those functions, the numbers of award-givers and award-receivers increased. Those who got the awards, now started walking naked through the bazaar sometimes. Perhaps the law permitted award-winners to walk about in naked uninhibitedness.

"If you pull a net too hard, it will break. But it appears that the pull is not yet hard enough," he told his neighbour.

"But to announce again and again about a thing that it is your own, that it is yours, is rather shoddy. Isn't it?" his neighbour said.

"What is it that has become ours now?" he asked.

"Now? Now, they have filled the roads to overflowing with statements and announcements."

"What statements?"

"The road is yours. Consider it as your own. Lanes are yours, take them as your own. The lamp-posts are yours, you must think that they are your own."

He smiled. "In this city of ours, people do not really know how to distinguish between what is theirs and what is not theirs. Perhaps that is why all this is being drilled home through posters. It is said that some people had their eyes stolen. They became blind and went from pillar to post but could never realise that their eyes had been stolen. Similarly, it will take a long time for the people to realise that these roads, lanes, bazars and lamp-posts are their own."

"Don't these things belong to the people at present?" the neighbour asked stupidly.

"No. They don't."

"Then to whom do they belong?"

"They belong to the mask people, the naked award people."

"Then why is it being written that people should consider these things to be theirs—their own?"

"Because all these have been misappropriated by them, lest somebody should ask for them to be returned to the people, you should announce pre-emptively that they already belong to the people."

"What will this change lead to?"

"It is not a change. It is downright deception. Deception will lead to deception."

They both scoured the city from morning to evening, from one end to another. This business of paper poster pasting had gone on interminably. There were paper patches in all directions—patches on roads, patches on lanes, patches in bazaars, patches on houses, on trees, patches, patches everywhere with statements, IT'S ALL YOUR OWN.

People were clinging to bricks—the bricks are ours. People were holding on to walls—the walls are ours. People had em-

braced lamp-posts—the lamp-posts are ours. People were passing their hands over roads and bazaars—roads and bazaars are ours.

Still one thing was not clear; if bazaars, poles, bricks, walls belonged to the people, then what was the purpose of putting this on the posters and making announcements about it?

There was a wave of questioning in the city—what is the purpose of putting up these posters and paper patches? The people who had got awards, went to the mask people to enquire about this questioning and said, “We spent nights pasting the patches from place to place. Instead of being pleased at being told that everything belonged to them, the people are asking that if everything is theirs, what is the purpose of broadcasting it?”

For three days the bazaar of masks remained closed. For three days there were deep deliberations—deep thinking and cogitation. Then big posters were written up. These posters were inscribed:

ALL THESE THINGS BELONG TO ALL OF YOU—
THAT IS CLEAR. BUT IT CANNOT BE ACCEPTED THAT
YOU ALSO BELONG TO THESE THINGS. THAT IS WHY
EARLIER IT WAS WRITTEN THAT ALL THINGS BE-
LONGED TO YOU.

The posters were put up. People read them. They left the bricks and walls and poles and roads. Everything was theirs but they were not the owners of all these. Silence reigned in the city.

What was all this? Everything belonged to everybody but nobody belonged to anything. It was a strange one-sided relationship.

After the silence of a few days, a voice arose—this wall belongs to me but why do I not belong to the wall? This brick belongs to me, why do I not belong to the brick? This road, these poles and these trees belong to me, but why do I have nothing to do with them?”

Even the award-winners joined their voices to this voice. They were wondering whether they really were the owners of the awards they had received.

The voice rose no doubt, but this time there was nobody to hear it. There was no mask man to be seen anywhere. The mask market had closed for a long vacation. The awardees had put

on their clothes again.

Now every household prepared a poster saying that the roads, the walls, the poles, the trees, the bricks, and the lanes belonged to them and they belonged to these things.

Since everybody had written these posters and pasted them, nobody read them. Those who write and those who put up do not read what they have written and put up.

He also wrote a long poster. While he was still engaged in writing it in many colours, his neighbour dropped in. He kept painting, the neighbour kept looking. It was a very brief legend that he had written.

"What's it that you have written?" the neighbour asked.

"You can read what I have written."

"I have read it. I am enquiring about its meaning."

"Distance means distance."

"I understand. But distance from what? From whom? Of what type?"

"Distance?" he asked himself and then went on, "distance from oneself. From you. From the road. From the lane. From light. From darkness. From home and walls. From trees and leaves. There is distance from everything. Nothing is near?"

The neighbour felt further confused and said, "Will this writing of posters never stop? How long shall we go on writing them and reading them?"

He smiled, "As long as there are human beings, walls, lanes, roads, trees and poles, posters will continue to be written, pasted and read."

"I shall stop reading pasted posters now," the neighbour said.

"Can you really stop? I think it's impossible to do so while living in the city", he said.

"Why is it not possible?"

"Because everybody wants to write. If he cannot write, he wants to be among those who write. Everyone wants to put up

posters. If he cannot do so himself, he wants to be among those who do so. Everyone wants to read a poster that is pasted. If he cannot read, he joins someone who can."

The neighbour became thoughtful. His own thoughts were similar. He had always been carrying messages—of things read and heard. He wanted not to think about things he had read. He wanted not to pay attention to things he had heard. But this had not been possible.

"If you really want to give up reading and hearing completely, then do something for me," he said.

"Whether I give up or not, tell me what I can do for you. I shall be pleased to do something for you."

"You will have to take the trouble of going to every house. It is a rather difficult task," he said.

"Yes, I shall go from house to house," the neighbour replied with alacrity.

"You will have to put a question to every man, every woman, every child."

"Yes, I shall do that."

"You have not only to ask but also obtain a reply."

"Yes. I shall get a reply. Tell me what I am supposed to ask."

"You have to ask everyone whether he is with his self or away from his self, near his family or far from his family, near his neighbour or far away, near the road, lanes, trees, walls, bricks or away. Is man near man or away from man? That's all."

"That's all—you have said this so glibly as if this is an easy task," the neighbour mocked.

"Is it difficult?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" the neighbour said in annoyance.

"You were saying just now that you would be pleased to do what I asked you."

The neighbour calmed down. He realised that he was going back on his word. No, he wouldn't. He said, "I am frank with you because we are neighbours. I shall certainly do your work."

7

The neighbour lay awake that night for a long time, worrying how he should start the survey- from where, with whom, from which household.

When he woke up the next morning, the same question started bothering him again.

At last, he decided to start from his own neighbourhood, from the house next door. He realised that he had been worrying for nothing.

He knocked at the door of the house. The door opened. The man who opened the door smiled, "So early today? What is the matter?"

"I have to ask you a few questions," the neighbour said.

"If you are asking only one or two questions, you may do so now while we are standing here. If you want to ask more questions, then come in the evening after I am back from the river."

He had to think. He wanted to ask many things. He said he would call in the evening and moved to the next house. He kept knocking at the door for quite some time. There was no response. Then he tried to peep through the slit of the door. A family quarrel was going on in the backyard of the house. He could hear the voices. The man was saying, "You are fond of going up tall buildings and looking down. If I had known about this thing earlier, I wouldn't have married you. No, I would have refused even to see your face."

The woman was saying, "We were kept in the dark. We were told you owned four-storeyed houses. On coming here, I find that you do not own even a wall."

The man advanced and caught the woman by her arm. Just then the neighbour gave a louder knock at the door. The man released the woman's arm and came to the door and opened it. Seeing the neighbour, he smiled and said, "What is it? You need something?"

"Yes, I need to ask you some questions."

"What do you wish to ask?"

"May we sit down? I have to ask a number of things."

The man took him inside the house, gave him a seat and then asked after a while, "Well, what do you want to ask?"

"The first question that I have is—how near are you to yourself?"

"What did you say? What is near what? I do not understand," the man was taken aback.

"What I mean is—to what extent do you know and understand yourself?" the neighbour asked.

"Me? Know myself?" What a question? Every man knows that he is a man."

The neighbour tried hard to make the man understand the question but in vain. At last the man said, "You have a screw loose in your head."

"My second question is—how close are you to your wife?" the neighbour asked.

"Close to my wife?" the man laughed now. "I am very close to my wife. We are one—like sugar in milk. I love her more than I love myself. My ambition is to become one with my wife, like Meera became one with Krishna."

He wanted next to ask how close his wife was to him, but he thought it would be better to put this question to his wife rather. Then he asked, "How near are you to the road?"

"The road? Say about 200 steps. Quite near," the man replied. He felt like laughing but checked himself and asked, "I am not enquiring about the distance in steps. I am asking about the extent and type of relationship you have with the road, the feeling of belonging that you may have."

The man laughed boisterously—"From where have you picked up such silly questions? Can any man have any relationship or sense of belonging with a road?"

"Why not?" the man's wife chipped in. "You have no relationship with the road? The road on which you walk daily, which takes you to different places, to shops and bazaars and to the homes of friends?"

The neighbour looked at the man's wife with surprise.

"Then you can take it that I have a relationship with the road to the extent that I walk on it," the man replied.

"Man does something for what he needs every day, every hour; he does something for the thing on which he walks and which takes him to places. What do you do for the road?"

The man was non-plussed. He looked at his wife if she would say something. She was smiling but she kept quiet.

"What can we do for the road?" the man asked.

"May be you can do nothing because the responsibility for the road does not rest on you," the neighbour said, "Now, I have the last question, How near are you to the city?"

"We are in the city," the man replied.

"What is your relationship with the city?"

"A lot of relationship. All my relations are in the city. All my work is in the city. My house, home, everything is in the city."

"How near is the city to you?"

"Again a mad question. Have I not told you all?"

"Tell me the way you use the city. What do you do for the city?"

This set the man thinking—what did he do for the city? It was really a difficult question. He had been living in the city for a long time. But he had never thought that some day somebody would ask him what he did for the city.

"I am doing nothing," the man replied at last.

"Now just one question from me—how near to you are the people living in your environment and how near to them are you? What are they doing for you and what are you doing for them?"

"Environment? Environment includes our neighbourhood, our colony, our whole city, all the men, women, children, elders. This is a mind-boggling question," the man said. "Everyone is doing everything for himself or herself. What should we do for them and what should they do for us?"

The neighbour smiled a bit—"I am sorry to have bothered you. Now I would like to put a few questions to your wife."

"Sure, you may ask her. She is a very intelligent woman. I am leaving for work. But be careful, she may start a quarrel with you. She is a bit hot-tempered; this oven gets heated up without fuel." With these words, the man went out.

As soon as he was gone, the woman said, "Ever since I have been living with this man, I have been tormented and tortured.

You ask me whatever you want to ask. Perhaps your first question is on the extent of my nearness or distance from myself. My reply to this is—I am too far away from myself. I am never able to join myself to myself. You can take it that I consist of two parts. One part is sick and tired of this world, the affairs of the world, relationships, problems, lust and greed and wants to get rid of all this. The other part is chokeful with desires and lascivious passion, appetities and interests of self-satisfaction, and myriad hopes. I am close to no one. No one is close to me. I have no neighbours, no claim to any road or environment or man or anything. I am also nobody's. How can a person who is already split into two parts, both at odds with each other, own anybody or belong to anybody?"

The neighbour looked at the woman with surprise. A question was trying to surface from the depths of his being and he was trying to suppress it.

"I shall go now," the neighbour said.

"All that you have asked today, is something that nobody ever asks and nobody . . ."

"Ever tells," the neighbour completed the sentence. "But believe me, whatever you have told me, will remain confidential with me, only with me."

Saying this, he was about to leave the house when the woman said to him: "These questions can be put to you also. You should keep yourself in readiness to answer." She smiled and went inside the house. A faint wave of suspicion rose in his mind and soon subsided.

The neighbour was thinking about the direction he should take next, when a neighbour of his accosted him, "Where are you going today?"

"I was going to your place," the neighbour replied in such a way that the other person could not reply readily. After a while, he said, "Do come. Please come. I was just going home. You are most welcome there. Please come along."

The man led and the neighbour followed. On entering the home the neighbour was astonished. A house, so unimpressive and dingy and ungainly from outside, should be so richly decorated and furnished within, was something inconceivable for him. And he looked at the man who wore home-spun clothes and joined his hands with such humility to greet people he met that

it seemed as if he was everybody's purchased slave.

In one corner, there was a fluffy dog on a leash. He had seen many dogs in his life but this dog's face was redder than his master's.

He had a passing fancy that the face of the dog resembled the faces of several men. He tried to recall the particular man whose face it resembled the most.

"Please sit down," the man said.

As he bent to sit, he felt dizzy. Was he losing his head?

"Pray tell me what brings you here?" the man asked.

"I want to get replies to a few questions I have," the neighbour said mildly.

"Sure. It is our duty to give appropriate and suitable answers to questions that may be put to us."

"No, I do not want answers that may be suitable or appropriate," the neighbour said. "I would like to have correct and honest replies."

"Yes. I can give such replies too. The answers will depend on the type of questions you ask," the man said somewhat melodramatically.

The neighbour felt like laughing but he checked himself and reeled off the questions—"How near are you to yourself? How near are you to your home? How near are you to the road, the city and to man?"

"Is that all? I was thinking that you might ask some awkward questions," the man said. "As a matter of fact, I have no self of my own. I have given everything away—to the people, to the city, to each and everyone. Their being is my being. Their existence alone is my existence; I have nothing of my own. I think you must be impressed by what I have said and will endorse it," the man said solemnly.

He could not reply. Even in a dream, he had not seen the things placed in the room—costly mirrors, precious chandeliers, gleaming doors and windows, shimmering, heaving curtains.

"Who uses the things that are in your house?" the neighbour asked.

"If I happen to touch these things, I clean my hands with earth three times. Only the children and women of the house use them. I am also a human being living in a certain environment; I do not do anything for myself but I have to, for them."

"Indeed, you have to," the neighbour said. Simultaneously it occurred to him that the man must have put on some costly mask and that was why what was false appeared to be genuine. Very humbly, in a low voice he said, "Please remove the mask. The need to wear the mask should arise only where you are dealing with masked people." The man smiled and at the same time he scowled. He said, "You are sitting in my house. I do not admit strangers to my house. I made a mistake in recognising you. You should leave immediately. Otherwise I don't know how I may treat you."

The neighbour remained sitting quietly for a while. Then the redfaced dog started snarling.

"I shall leave now. I have seen something new today. I knew that there were masks and men used them but I did not know that even houses put on masks, making it difficult to recognise them."

While crossing the threshold, the dilapidated door gave him such a push that he fell on his face in the lane. His elbows were bruised. A passer-by remarked laughingly, "That is how they throw a gentleman out from a house of ill repute."

When the neighbour entered the writer's room, he saw posters on the walls, and posters hanging from the ceiling, and posters fluttering on the floor, and posters piled high all around. The writer was crouched over a poster like an insect on a grinding stone.

He responded to the neighbour's questions once or twice in mono-syllables, and continued staring at the poster.

"I want to ask you some questions," the neighbour said.

"I am not free. Let me make something. Then I shall talk to you," the writer replied.

"What do you want to make?" the neighbour asked in some surprise.

"I want to make eyes."

"Eyes? On all these papers?"

"Yes. I shall make eyes on them. I am in a fix. Without making eyes I cannot get out of this net," the writer said with some sadness.

"What is the dilemma? And what sort of net are you talking of?"

"It is a strange dilemma. You see, I was born here, grew up here, among these stones, among these walls. I walked these roads and streets. I roamed the city. I had dealings with people. But everywhere I felt as if I was blind. I could never see their relationship with me and my relationship with them. But I have had the feeling that there was some deep relationship that I had with the people, the city, the lanes, the stones, the bricks and the trees and their branches. And they also have an eternal and unbreakable relationship with me. But what is the nature of this mutual relationship? Why is this relationship there? And how has it come about? I want to find answers to these questions. I want to create eyes and then with their help I want to see everything clearly," the writer said.

"You can tell me about whatever you have seen and known so far," the neighbour said.

The writer became gloomy on hearing this and replied, "I found the tale of eyes, ears, hands, feet, faces and legs, mutual relationships and masks very painful. Everywhere I felt that truth and reality were quite the opposite of whatever I saw. Everything seems to be moving in the wrong direction. There is need to see what is straight and right and to recognise it."

"What are you doing for the road, the people, the lanes and the city?" the neighbour asked.

"I have no power, no authority to do anything. Power resides in the people and I am here because of them. But I wish that people started thinking about the meaning of a mask, the importance of man and the significance of the city, the road and the environment. That's all."

8

Many people were shouting and their shouting mingled with the noises of the lane. The noise was grating and boring holes in his ears-drums. He got up and closed the doors tight and shot the bolt. Then the walls started shouting and the floors began to babble. He stuffed his fingers in his ears to shut out the noise. Then the noises from the lane, the people, the walls and the floor swelled from within. At last, he opened the door and came out.

Outside, the sun seemed to be pulling the day up to itself and the daylight pierced the eyes. But the people, the small crowd, were shouting with their eyes popping out. He went forward and joined them. The air was thick with mutual bickerings and accusations; people were rushing around like ants threatened with the onrush of slush.

They were gyrating on their heels on the same spot. A man was telling another, "When a high-rise building came up to the left of my house, I did not get bothered. But by putting up right in front, a three-storeyed structure, you have blocked light and air from my house. I shall kill you."

"You are the son of the same mother who gave birth to me. You cannot kill me," replied the other.

At another place, there was a different type of commotion. A very young and strong-limbed woman had put on four arms and was telling her man, "You cannot stop me from becoming a man. You were wrong in assuming that a woman is made for carrying on the family. A woman ensures continuation of the family line but she also collects troubles. Now I shall turn into

a man and collect troubles."

"But how have I offendded you? Why are you becoming the cause of my destruction?" the man asked.

"You are a bundle of fragments—your hands at one place, your eyes at another, your legs and arms somewhere else and your brain ticking at some other place. I have put up with these fragments for a long time in the hope that some day you will appear as a whole man to me. But I was mistaken."

"I am whole," the man shouted.

"Absolutely false. If you are whole, why are you not with me, the whole of you together, with me?"

"The whole of me is yours. The complete me is yours."

"No. You cannot be whole. Your inside is full of rubbish—the garbage of many eyes, many lips, many bodies, many voices."

Another man was shouting—"No, no, no . . ."

"You should arbitrate," the man caught him (the writer) by the arm and pulled him towards himself. "This man is quarrelling with me. It happened long ago, he took away a brick from my house and used it in his own house. I also did likewise. Over a period of time, he took away all my bricks for his house and I took away all his bricks for my house. The houses got exchanged in a sense. Today, after so many years, he calls me a thief. He says if I had not stolen his bricks, his house would have been two or three times bigger than it is. This is the dispute."

"This man has cheated. He is a criminal," a man was exposing another who was seated, by lifting his chin. "He had an

idol. We worshipped it—placed before it offerings of flowers, fruits, coins and grain. Then he put up a curtain in front of the idol. We continued to worship and place offerings. But this wretched fellow sold away the idol in avarice and made us worship the curtain for some time. Now when the curtain caught fire, his misdeed was exposed.” With these words, he turned to another person, “This man is not fit to stay here any longer. He should be expelled from the neighbourhood, from among the people, from the city.”

“Yes, he should be expelled and his belongings should be thrown into the river,” some men shouted with one voice.

“But I have restored the idol,” the man whined plaintively. One of the men got angry, “We cannot worship an idol that has been once sold. We are prepared to be put on sale ourselves but we cannot commit such a sacrilege.”

A man was crying himself hoarse, “Make this person account for every paisa. The money was common property. We had thought that with this money, we could get a mansion built with four gates, a mansion like a ship, with one side having godowns for grains, the second side for idols of gods, the third for housing a big money-making machine and the fourth for stacking chains of gold and silver and brass and copper and steel. But this man filled the whole place with just one machine, a brain manufacturing machine. He started manufacturing and marketing brains. And whoever used that brain, started saying, “Man is nothing, roads are nothing, houses, trees, men, women, masks, and wheat are nothing. This machine alone is everything. The machine is man, the machine is god, the machine is city, the machine is people, roads, lanes, stones, bricks, houses. He has corrupted everybody.”

Many people pushed the machine-man but he just laughed.

As soon as he set foot in the bazaar, he noticed the neighbour and asked him, "Where were you all these days?"

"I was collecting answers to your questions."

"Did you get any replies?"

"Yes. I have got many replies. I shall tell you all. I had to undergo a lot of trouble. I am sure you too would have put these questions to many people."

"I ? I have not yet made up my mind; I am thinking of asking some people," he said gravely.

"You are still thinking? I hope you are not wearing a mask. You are not an escapist?" the neighbour asked.

"I am nothing. I am only a writer and a painter. But I have lost everything in this commotion, this pandemonium, this cacophony of voices. I am searching for my colours, my lines, my subjects and mirrors. I am fond of creating and reconstructing. It is an obsession with me. But for many years I have not been able to do anything. Whenever I think of creating something, I feel some kind of a sting. I am not able to see any pattern of life in its reality, in its true colours."

Suddenly, as he was about to leave, the neighbour stopped him, "Look, there, toward that crossing. What is happening there?"

At the crossing of the roads, about half a dozen people had occupied the centre and taken off their clothes, preparing to do something. They both approached them, "What is going to take place here?" both asked.

"Whatever is to happen here, will happen in the evening. It is no use speaking about it earlier."

9

For the first time, the decoration at the city square was something worth seeing. The crowd of people looked at multi-coloured bunting, and from bunting to the hanging masks, and from them to the figures which looked like those of apes and which performed a variety of acrobatics. A clock marching on its hands and moving fast, added to the spectacle; this clock had small circles in place of hour marks.

The platform and the surrounding area were decorated with paper flowers; there were paper flowers spread all over. The crowd and the band were waiting impatiently.

With the sudden appearance of a man on the rostrum, the sea of sound subsided. There was a hush of silence. The man started speaking loudly, "Friends, now the pictures which could never be stolen, are being stolen. A picture that belonged to me has been stolen in broad daylight. The picture may cost nothing today but its value was great. It was my family picture. I have been told that the thief ran toward this square with the stolen picture. You should help me in locating the thief. Without that picture, I am not worth a penny."

Another man pushed the first man on the platform and shouted, "First trace my picture. I am yours, the picture is yours and the thief is also yours."

"When did you lose your picture?" the first man on the rostrum asked.

"Exactly at noon when the sun was overhead," the second man replied.

"My theft also took place at exactly same time."

"Then it is possible that the same thief burgled at both the places simultaneously."

"Yes, it is possible, but it is also possible that the same picture was stolen at the same time from two places."

"Why not? That also is possible."

"Friends," both of them shouted, "A thief has stolen a picture from two places at the same time and run towards this place. Have pity on us and help trace the thief."

A third man came up to the platform and said loudly, "Forget about the pictures. Now brains are being stolen. I remember clearly that when I went to sleep, my brain was in my head, safe and secure. When I got up in the morning, I found that my head was there on my shoulders but my brain had been stolen. I am sure the thief has run away with the brain and come and joined the people here. Help restore my brain to me. You know that it is the brain that distinguishes man from beast. Do take pity on me!"

All the three stopped speaking. An old man came up to the rostrum, feeling his way with a stick. His downcast eyes were slightly wet with tears. In a choked voice he said, "Friends, I am a feeble old man—nearing my end. But it appears to me that I shall not be able to die peacefully. A thief has stolen my bundle. In that bundle, I tied up whatever was left of the pride and name and self-respect of my ancestors. Please help me find that bundle. I want to die with that bundle on my chest. Help me breathe my last in peace. Find for me the thief of my bundle!"

All the three persons who had spoken first, repeated their requests.

Now a very beautiful, lovely featured woman with an air of arrogance, came up on the stage. At first she looked hard at the people, then she said, "I was going along the road with all my things, like other women. But a strange thing happened—after I had gone some distance, the road appeared to be a host of mouths. I moved myself to the other road but there I lost everything. I returned to the first road but, I could not find it, there was a wave of water instead. I have lost my road. Please help me find my road. Otherwise I shall be driven to suicide. Where shall I go without the road? Where shall I go?"

Then there was a pandemonium. A mad-looking fellow, beating his hands and pounding his feet, came up to the platform and started raising peals of laughter, so loud and long that they stretched to the sky.

"Why are you laughing like that?" one of the men on the stage asked him.

"Because what has been lost by me has been lost by everyone," he said, and burst into another guffaw.

"What have you lost?" Two or three persons asked simultaneously.

"I have lost my 'I'," the mad man replied.

"You have lost your 'I'?" there was a question again.

The mad man opened his eyes wide and said, "Yes, my 'I' has been lost and I know the thief."

"You have lost your 'I' and you know the thief also? Where is the thief?"

"Here he is. I myself am the thief. I have stolen my own 'I'."

The other man laughed, "If you know the thief, why the hell are you shouting?"

"Because the soul of the thief does not allow the thief to rest in peace. If I do not shout, I will suffocate to death perhaps. I do not want to die."

The crowd collected at the square clapped so hard and loud and long that the crossroads and the walls and shops all round reverberated and shook. Then the people started dispersing, like dry leaves scattered by a mild breeze.

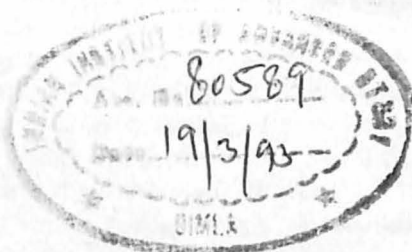
"Let us also leave," the neighbour suggested.

"Yes, let us go. I do not understand if it is the beginning or the end of the play."

Both of them started walking—walking on the road which belonged to all but to whom nobody belonged, which joined everybody but was itself alone.

GLOSSARY

<i>Arati</i>	Prayer-song.
<i>Bhagatji</i>	Devotee.
<i>Bhagawati</i>	Goddess.
<i>Chapati</i>	A flattened round bread.
<i>Chhabil</i>	Water-point for wayfarers.
<i>Darshan</i>	Seeing.
<i>Dhoti</i>	Men's lower garment.
<i>Indrapuri</i>	Heaven.
<i>Kurta</i>	Upper garment.
<i>Suthan</i>	A type of <i>churidar</i> , tight fitting women's legwear.



1844

1845

1846