

chance, he saluted and said loudly. "Jai ho, Officer! Your Honor, you have taken the trouble to come all this way for the sake of the people, and I haven't had a chance to be of service to you. As Gosai *Tulsidas* has said in the *Ramayana*: 'He is fortunate who is given a glimpse of the Lord'. . . Your Honor, I am your humble servant, Ramkirpal Singh, son of Garibanevaj Singh. Caste: *Rajput*. Birthplace: Gadhbundel in Rajputana; Current home: Maryganj."

"Singh-ji, I don't want you to serve me. If you want to serve, the malaria center is opening up. All of you should help with it. That would be the best service you could offer," the officer said, smiling.

Meanwhile, one by one, the people from the *Yaday* quarter were quietly slipping away, unnoticed. They were afraid that the officer might take them to court for tying up Baldev.

As the *sahab* was leaving he said, "Within seven days, carpenters will be coming from the District Board. You people make arrangements for bamboo, grass, rope, and anything else they need. I can count on you, *Tahsildar Sahab*; and Baldev Prasad, of course, since you are a servant of the country; and Singh-ji, you too. All of you join in and help."

They all placed their palms together and bowed their heads in agreement. The officer left with his group. The goat bleated.

Baldev walked behind the cart as far as the village limits. When he returned, he told everybody, "The Bengali officer of the District Board was Praphulla Bannerjee. His clerk is Jittan *Babu*. He used to be a clerk in the Congress Party office!"

TWO

To this day there are many villages and towns in Purnea District whose names bear the stamp of the indigo *sahabs*. The ruins of their bungalows standing in the deserted jungles and meadows remind travelers of the long-forgotten tales of the indigo era. . . . Often a young man returning home with his bride will tell the driver, "Slow the cart down here, so the bride can see the *sahab's* mansion. . . . There's McKay *sahab's* mansion. . . and there's the indigo pond!"

Pushing the curtain aside and shyly drawing back her veil, the bride peeks out and sees a pile of bricks and rubble in the middle of a thick forest of *jarber* trees. "Where's the mansion?"

The bridegroom's face fills with pride. "You see, the *sahab's* mansion was right near our village. *Memsahab* lived there!"

The ox carts of pilgrims returning from the Ganges halt there for a while. The young women and children get out and cautiously approach the ruins, while the old women search the jungle for medicinal roots and herbs.

Maryganj is such a village. To reach it, you go east from Rautahat Station for about fourteen miles, then cross the old Koshi River. For a long stretch along the banks of the Old Koshi there is a forest of palm and date trees. The people of this region call it the '*Nawab's today* grove.' It's hard to say which *nawab* planted it, but from April until June, the locals—from sweet-sellers to shepherds—live it up like *nawabs*. After drinking three *anna* worth of *today*, a fellow can imagine himself a big *nawab* bordering around a chauffeured motorcar: "Stop the motorcar, you bastard!"

Beyond the palm forest, the plains stretch for thousands of acres from the foothills of Nepal to the banks of the Ganges, a vast, barren border region. Even wild grass doesn't grow there. Just scattered sand dunes and an occasional *ber* bush. After crossing two miles of this plain, you can see a dark forest towards the east. Right there is the Maryganj bungalow.

About thirty-five years ago, on the day when W.G. Martin laid the foundation for his bungalow, he had a drummer announce in the nearby villages that from that day the name of the village would be Maryganj. At the time, Martin *Sahab's* new bride, Mary, was living in Calcutta. They say that once a farmer accidentally uttered the old name of the village. That was it. Where could he go? Martin *Sahab* whipped him fifty times, counting every stroke. Now no one remembers the old name of village, or else some vague dread arises when recalling it. Who knows!

Martin *Sahab* first changed the name of the village, had the District Board build a road from Rautahat station to Maryganj, and had a post office opened; then he went to Calcutta to fetch his new bride. If Bhairo's mother, the oldest woman in the village, were still living today, she'd tell you, "Oh! *Memsahab* was like an angel—like an angel in *Indra's* court!"

But Martin *Sahab's* plans remained incomplete. Just one week after coming to Maryganj, Mary caught malaria. Martin realized then that he should have opened a dispensary before the post office. When her fever didn't subside, even after taking quinine pills for three days, Martin spurred his horse to Rautahat Station. But when he got there, he found that the train to Purnea had left ten minutes before. Without a second thought, he turned his horse toward Purnea. Purnea is twenty-four miles from Rautahat, but if you ask anyone from Maryganj, they will tell you, in detail, the tale of Martin's winged horse—by the time Martin arrived at the civil surgeon's bungalow, the train hadn't even reached Purnea station!

But when Martin's winged horse and the civil surgeon's jeep reached Maryganj, malaria had already consumed Mary. . . . Mary had wandered into a ditch near the well and died there while plastering mud on her head of silky curls.

After burying Mary, Martin went to Purnea and met with the civil surgeon, the district magistrate, the chairman of the District Board, and the health officer. He left no stone unturned in his efforts to get approval for a small dispensary. The officials assured him that it would definitely open the following year.

It was just at this time that German scientists, in one fell swoop, brought the indigo era to an end. Their experiments at making indigo from coal were successful, and the walls of the indigo mansions came crashing to the ground. The *sahabs* sold their bungalows and began to buy tracts of land. Many started businesses.

Martin's world had already fallen apart. His mind quickly followed. Mad Martin would spend his days wandering from courthouse to courthouse in Purnea, with a bundle of useless papers under his arm. He would say to anyone he met, "The government has authorized a dispensary. It will open next year."

They say that one time, after getting the runaround at Delhi and Poona, he returned to Maryganj very dejected. He would lay on Mary's grave all day, crying, "Darling, the doctor won't come!" Afterwards, his insanity became so bad that the authorities sent him to Kanke, where he died in an asylum.

Mary's grave still stands in the garden of the bungalow in a thicket of flowering bushes. The bungalow has fallen into ruins,

and the indigo tanks are cracked and broken. A dense growth of *pipal*, *babul*, and other wild trees has sprung up all around them. No one will go near there, not even in the daytime. The *tahsildar* has taken charge of the mango orchard, so it is neat and clean. But in the forest of the bungalow, jackals howl night and day. People call it the haunted jungle. One time, Nandalal of the *Tarma* quarter went there to get some bricks. From the moment he touched them, he was doomed. An evil female spirit came out of the forest and began to beat Nandalal with a whip—a whip of snakes! Nandalal died on the spot. The spirit was as white as a stork!

Maryganj is a big village—one with people of all castes. East of the village runs a stream which they call the *Kamla* River. During the rainy season, the *Kamla* overflows, and water remains in big ditches—ditches full of fish and lotus flowers! On the day of the full moon in January, a crowd gathers from morning till evening to take sacred baths in these ditches. Sellers of sweets and snacks come all the way from Rautahat Station.

The villagers tell all kinds of tales about the great power of *Mother Kamla*. . . . They say that whenever a wedding feast or a death anniversary feast was held in the village, the head of the household would bathe and, putting the end of his *dhoti* around his neck, would invoke *Mother Kamla* and offer her *betel nut* and *pan*. Then the waves would begin to rise just like indigo being churned in a tank, and a heap of silver platters, cups, bowls, and glasses would pile up on the banks. The householder would count all the vessels and take them home. And after the feast, he would return them to *Mother Kamla*. But not everyone was so honest. One time a householder stole some platters and bowls. That was all it took; from that day *Mother Kamla* stopped giving them vessels, and that householder's lineage came to an end—he was completely ruined! There are two versions in the village regarding this crooked villager—the *Rajputs* say he was a *Kayasth*, and the *Kayasths* say he was a *Rajput*.

The *Rajputs* and the *Kayasths* have been feuding and fighting for generations. Because the *Brahmins* were few, they always acted as mediators. Recently, the *Yadavs*, too have gained influence. But even after the *Yadavs* started wearing the *sacred thread*, the

Rajputs wouldn't accept them as *Kshatriyas*. Instead, from time to time they would pierce the *Yadavs'* claims to *Kshatriyahood* with barbs of sarcasm. One time the *Yadavs* gave an open challenge. Things were getting out of hand. Everybody was taking sides. *Tahsildar* Vishwanath Prasad, leader of the *Kayasths*, assured the *Yadavs* that he would support them in court. Basant *Babu*, the lawyer of the *zamindari* court, said that the government had recognized the *Yadavs* as *Rajputs*. Because of this, there would be a big to-do over the case. The lawyer himself said that.

The *pandits* from the *Brahmin* quarter exhorted the *Rajputs*, that whenever *dharma* was threatened, *Rajputs* were to defend it. Now the terrible *kaliyuga*—the age of destruction—was here. The *Rajputs* should rescue *dharma* with their heroism.

But the situation didn't get worse, and somehow or other the religious battle stopped. Old *Jyotkhi-ji* of the *Brahmin* quarter still claims to this day that it is because the *Rajputs* failed to speak up then that today people everywhere of all castes are roaming around with *sacred threads* hanging from their necks. . . . Whoever heard of a plowhand being a *Kshatriyal*. . . *Shiva ho! Shiva ho!*

Now there are three main factions in the village: *Kayasth*, *Rajput*, and *Yadav*. The *Brahmins* are still mediators. The other castes in the village have aligned themselves with these factions according to their own advantages.

Vishwanath Prasad, the head of the *Kayasths*, is the *tahsildar* for the state of Parbanga. Members of his family have been *tahsildars* for the past three generations. Because of this, today the *tahsildar* is the owner of 1,000 *bighas* of land. The people of other castes call the *Kayasth* quarter *Malik* quarter, but the *Rajputs* lisp it and say *Kaith*.

Ramkirpal Singh is the leader of the *Rajput* quarter. His grandfather was a *sepoy* in *Maharani* Champavati's state while Vishwanath Prasad's grandfather was the *tahsildar*. They say that when a civil lawsuit went on between the state of Parbanga and *Maharani* Champavati, Vishwanath Prasad's grandfather took sides with Parbanga. The officers of Parbanga got their hands on all of the *Maharani's* private papers and she lost the case. Before leaving for *Kashi*, the *Maharani* transferred her remaining 300 *bighas* of land into Ramkirpal Singh's name. Ramkirpal Singh says that one time his grandfather saved her single-handedly from

the hands of *dacoits*. So, as a reward, the *Maharani* gave him the deed. . . . The *Kayasths* call the *Rajput* quarter the *Sepoy* quarter.

The *Yadavs* are the new faction. Just ten years ago, their leader, Khelavan, was herding buffaloes. He became worried when word got around that he obtained all of his money by selling milk and *ghee*. After months of running to the *tahsildar*, bribing the circle manager, and supplying the *sepoys* with milk and butter, he finally managed to get fifty *bighas* of land on the banks of the *Kamla*. Now he owns a hundred and fifty *bighas*. His older son, Sakaldip, attends high school in Arariya Baigachi, where he stays with his maternal grandfather. People call Khelavan Singh *Yadav* an "upstart." But nowadays nobody dares call the *Yadav Kshatriya* quarter the cowherds' quarter.

There is a wrestling arena in the *Yadav* quarter where people gather in the evenings all year round. Every day, as early as four in the afternoon, Shobhan the leatherworker beats the drum—*dhaaka dhinnaa*, *dhaaka dhinnaa*—while young and old from the *Yadav* quarter practice calisthenics and wrestling moves.

In all of *Maryganj*, only ten men are literate. "Literate" means anything from being able to write one's signature to being able to balance account books. Another fifteen are learning how to read.

The major products of the village are rice, jute and lentils. Sometimes there is a bumper crop in the spring.

THREE

The carpenters from the District Board arrived. Baldev's enthusiasm knew no bounds. Officer *Babu* had said to him right in front of *Tahsildar Sahab* and Ramkirpal Singh, "You are a servant of the country." Everyone had heard it. What was worldly wealth to him? *Tahsildar Sahab* and *Singh-ji* might have money, but where would they find the respect that Baldev had? That same day the people of the *Yadav* quarter had apologized to Baldev. "Brother Baldev! . . . we are ignorant and you are so learned. We're like frogs in a well. But you've traveled to many