

The Soiled Border

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

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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 *Kshatriya*. . . . *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 *sepo*y 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

places and stayed with important people. Please forgive our mistake."

Since that day Khehavan Singh Yadav kept insisting to Baldev that he stay with him. "The good name and honor of our caste is in the hands of people like you. It's not as if you are some outsider. Your mother's sister could even be my father's brother's wife! So you and I are cousin-brothers!"

Khehavan's wife, on her own, went to Baldev's old aunt and said, "Consider our house your own. A house isn't a home without an old woman in it. How can I do everything all alone—churning the butter and at the same time collecting dung in the cowshed?..." The world of Baldev's aunt had completely changed. Until yesterday she had been going from house to house pounding and grinding grain. But today the headwoman in the village had come to her and made her head of an entire household.

When the carpenters came, Baldev-ji roamed from quarter to quarter telling everybody, "The carpenters from the District Board have come. The work should be started tomorrow... Malaria fever comes from mosquito bites. But if you take quinine, nothing will happen, no matter how many mosquitoes bite you!" In the *Tatma Kshatriya* quarter, near Mahangu Das' house, people listened with surprise to what Baldev said. The women of the courtyard stopped near the bamboo lattice, pushed back their veils, and listened too. "Now we don't have to bother with burning cowdung all night to make smoke. Let the mosquitoes bite as much as they want!"

The people of several quarters—*Poliya*, *Tantrima Chatri*, *Yaduvanshi Chatri*, *Gahalot Chatri*, *Kurma Chatri*, *Amaya Brahmin*, *Dhanukdhari Chatri*, *Kushvaha Chatri*, and *Raidas*—all promised, "We won't do any work for seven days. Tell the masters to call a halt to the plowing and hoeing. All we have to do is build a hospital building, a house for the doctor, a kitchen, and one extra guest room. The work will all be done in seven days."

Tanuklal of the *Dhanukdhari* quarter raised a question, "But if we stop plowing, the masters won't pay our wages! If it were only one or two days we could manage somehow, but seven days without pay? That's too much!... It's fine for the people in the *Tatma* and *Dusadh* quarters. Their women can get a couple *seers* of *gainchi* fish by searching the muddy waters of the *Kamla* from

morning to evening. And they'll manage to get a few *seers* of rice, too, by digging near the piles of straw of the rich *babus*, or by scouring the rat holes. Or else they'll dig up sweet potatoes in the jungle near the old bungalow. The coolies from Katihar mill buy up sweet potatoes at Rautahat market for four *annas* a *seer*, just like that. But it'll be awfully tough for the rest of us."

Baldev, disappointed, asked, "What are we going to do now?" But Tanuklal already had a solution to the problem. "There's only one thing we can do," he said. "If the masters give a half day's wages, we'll manage."

Thinking over Tanuklal's suggestion, Baldev went off to the *Malik* quarter. Vishwanath *Babu* would agree to it, but you could never tell about Ramkirpal Singh-ji. Just yesterday Birju Singh of the *Sejroy* quarter was saying, "Singh-ji won't give any help with the hospital. He said that Vishwanath and Baldev were the champions of the hospital."

It was useless to expect any help from the *Brahmin* quarter. From the day they heard about the hospital, they had been going around day and night telling all kinds of stories about doctors and English medicine. It was Jyotkhi-ji's belief that it was the doctors themselves who spread diseases. They poke you with a needle, put poison in your body, and you become weak forever. During the cholera season, they pour drugs into wells, and the whole village dies of cholera. And who had ever heard of black fever before? These people brought the blood of people sick with black fever all the way from eastern Assam, in bottles. And nowadays, black fever has spread to every home... Besides, foreign medicine has cow's blood in it...

Baldev ran into Vishwanath *Babu* right near Bhagman Bhagat's shop. As soon as he heard about Tanuklal's proposal, Vishwanath *Babu* became irritated. "...Tanuklal from the *Dhanuk* quarter? He thinks he knows everything. You can't do anything without him making some objection. Baldev, you're so naive. Did you ask him if the hospital would be just for the masters' benefit?"

Bhagman Bhagat was always chewing *betel nut*. When he spoke it seemed that he was chewing his own words. "Arey, thi' i' the wor' of a grou', so e'ryone shou' ge' toge'er an' hei'. Wha' do you say, Prasad?"

There were always four or five men sitting around Bhagat's shop. Two or three more gathered when they heard Vishwanath Babu's voice. People considered old Sumrit Das a gossip. But sometimes he said the right thing at the right time. As soon as he came into the shop, he said, "Arey, *Tahsildar*, you don't understand. Tanuklal didn't speak on his own accord. Someone is behind this. If you just come over here I'll tell you about it, in private." Sumrit Das took the *tahsildar* a little way from Bhagat's shop and began to explain. Someone sitting in the shop said grudgingly, "Now that's what you call an old sneak! Everything 'in private'!"

Bhagat admonished him with a glance, "Not so loud! Baldev's here!"

After his private talk with Sumrit Das, the *tahsildar* changed his attitude. When he came back he said, "OK, Baldev, go ahead and tell the people in the *Taima* and the *Poliya* quarters that I have excused them from paying fifty rupees of their taxes. You saw me give bribes to the officials that day. Biranchi was there too!... Now, go to the *sepoj* quarter and see what they say. I don't care what others do, I only do my duty."

When Baldev reached Singh-ji's house, Singh-ji was already on his horse. He was probably going to Katihar. It's bad luck to interrupt someone starting on a trip, so Baldev kept quiet. Six or seven men were sitting around Singh-ji's door. No one even asked Baldev to sit down. Baldev greeted all of them at once with "Jai Hindl." Shiv Sankar Singh's son, Hargauri, asked Baldev, "Tell us, leader Baldev, what's new?"

"Everything's going well, with your blessings. *Babu Sahab*, when did you return from school?" Baldev asked, sitting down on a reed stool nearby.

"I hear you're becoming a big leader."

"*Babu Sahab*, how can a poor man be a leader? I am only a servant of people like you."

"Now that you're a leader, who's washing the pots and pans in the Congress office these days?" Suddenly, Hargauri became enraged. "Arey, brother, if somebody dies and everybody goes off to *Kashi* with the ashes, who's going to stay home to lick the plates after the funeral feast? One trip to jail and you've become *Pandit* Nehru! You were only a volunteer in the Congress office, and now,

a one-eyed man among the blind, you've come here to show off your leadership! Volunteer! Hmph!—you're a horse's ass!"

"*Babu Sahab*, why dirty your mouth with such language? You are an educated person, and I'm just an illiterate. What did I do wrong?"

"Get out of my doorway, you ingrate! The District Board has approved the hospital and allocated the funds. You embezzled it all. And now you're looking for more! You're all thieves!... Get out of my house!"

Furious, Hargauri got up to strike Baldev. The people who were sitting around instantly grabbed him. Baldev sat there quietly. "Go ahead and hit me if it will cool your temper!"

Hearing the commotion, a crowd gathered. Nobody liked Hargauri's childishness. Even Shiv Shankar Singh was dismayed when he heard about it: "So what if he's a leader or a volunteer? What's there to get so worked up about? What did he do to you?... Well, Baldev, don't take it badly. Just consider it a joke... as if he were a younger brother."

"Uncle Shiv Shankar, *Babu Sahab* insulted me and was going to hit me. But I didn't insult him. Ask anyone. As *Mahatma-ji* has said..."

In the neem tree a crow cawed.

Hargauri was shaking with rage... These people were strange. Just an hour ago, they were making a bunch of complaints about Baldev and talking about toppling his leadership, and now even his father was flattering Baldev! A cowherder for a leader?...

"The people of the *Guar* quarter are coming in a mob!" A boy came running all out of breath with the news. Hey!... there was shouting in the northern part of the village. The oxen, tied to their stakes, raised their ears in alarm. The goats grazing outside the village came running home, bleating. Dogs started barking... What's going on?

"Arey, my son! Gauri, my son, rey!... Come into the courtyard. Kaliya of the *Guar* quarter has gone crazy!" Hargauri's mother came running, crying and beating her breast, and dragged him into the courtyard. The children started crying.

"Arey, what's going on?"

"Get out your spear, *Chattari*!"

"Where's the staff I got from that *sadhu*?"
 "Go get your arrows!"

"*Arey*, what's happened? Why is a mob..."

But who could answer? Who had time! The whole village was in utter confusion. Hargauri's mother was calling Shiv Shankar Singh into the courtyard. "Old Raudi of the *Guar* quarter came and told me!" she shouted. "Everyone in the *Guar* quarter is outraged that Hargauri beat Baldev with his shoe. Kukru's son, Kalicharan, has sworn by the goddess *Kali* that he'll drink Hargauri's blood!... Come into the courtyard, father of Gauri!"

"Oh!" Baldev ran. "Don't you people get upset!" he shouted. "I'll take care of it. They're confused. I'll have a talk with them."

"Say it once with feeling... *Mahavir-ji*... *jai*!"
 "*Jai! Jai!... Jai!*"

As soon as they saw Baldev, the group of *Yadavs* joyfully let out a victorious cheer. "Say it one time with feeling... Mahatma Gandhi... *jai*... *jai*, *jai*... Hey, quiet! Quiet! Shut up, and listen to what Baldev-*ji* is trying to say!"

"My dear brothers," Baldev said, "all this agitation is no good. Look before you leap! Just think about it. Is this the sensible thing to do?... You were going to commit violence! For this, I will have to go on a hunger strike. Violence is not the way of Mother India, nor of Gandhi-*ji*..."

That Baldev sure is smart. Agitation, hunger strike, and...and what else? Violence! Who understood it? Not everybody could understand the language of wisdom.

"What's a hunger strike?"

"Anger stroke?"

Kaliya explained—Baldev-*ji* was going to fast.

Baldev-*ji* called Kaliya and said, "Kalicharan, you're a fine, young man. But you should temper passion with reason. I'm flattered by this, but I am still going to fast."

"Really, if Baldev hadn't come just in the nick of time, Kali-charan would have turned things inside out!... *Arey*, that Hargauriya! Yesterday he was just a boy! He's hardly learned his A-B-C's and now he thinks he's some kind of Lord *Sahabi*!"

"Him? Study? He's got a beard and a moustache, and he's

two classes below my Sakaldip. He's a total failure! He flunked again this year! His father went to bribe the teacher. The teacher got mad and told him, 'Get-out, or I'll flunk you, too!'"

"*Arey*, he's no student! But I hear he learned enough sweet nothings to pass with flying colors at the Lalbagh Fair!"
 "Sweet nothings?"

No one could beat Dulariya in making up stories. "You don't know what sweet nothings are?... Ha ha... ha ha!... hee... hee! Sweet nothings!"

—Dhaaka dhinnaa, dhaaka dhinnaa!

"C'mon, let's go. I hear the drums from the wrestling arena."

FOUR

"*Satguru ho! Satguru ho!*"

Mahanth Sahab always arose at the auspicious hour before dawn. "Hey, Ramdas! Get up!" he called out. "Go wake Lachmi!... *Satguru ho!* He never gets up without somebody waking him... Ramdas! Hey, Ramdas-*ji*!"

Ramdas got up, rubbing his eyes, and came outside. He looked for the morning star, and then searched for the *Ramdandi* constellation... There's still plenty of night left, he thought. *Mahanth Sahab* has gotten up awfully early today. This February weather is so cold it would chill even a tiger... "Sir, it's still night yet."

"So what if it's still night? It won't hurt to get up before dawn just one day! Don't go back to sleep. Put some wood on the fire. Then go wake Lachmi... *Satguru Sahab* has sent me a dream!"

Lachmi got up and came to where *Mahanth Sahab* was sitting. She greeted him with palms joined and then headed for the well, rubbing her eyes.

...The *Mahanth* thought to himself: Every pore in Lachmi's body is steeped in good will, good thought, and good conduct. It's the Lord's grace. But that Ramdas! God only knows when he will improve! If he hasn't improved even after living with *sadhus* since