

THE BLACK SUN

BHARAT JANGAM

The Black sun

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THE **BLACK SUN**

A NOVEL

BHARAT JANGAM

Nepali Awaj Prakashan Series - 7

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BHARAT JANGAM, Nepal's distinguished novelist was born at Taumadhi, Bhaktapur of the Kathmandu Valley. He is known as Freelance Journalist and Anticorruption Activist and engaged himself in the mission of social service and creative writing. In 1979 he published his first novel, *Kalo Surya (The Black Sun)* which due to its sheer honesty of the content became an instant success. It was highly acclaimed as a successful political novel exposing the stupidities of a tyrannical system by the common Nepali reader and by senior critics and writers including the great leader of Nepali Congress and Nepali novelist B.P. Koirala.

Bharat Jangam is a social writer with a political vision, his cherished goal is the achievement of honesty, integrity and morality in the conduct of social and individual life. He wields his pen with revolutionary zeal. He is extremely dedicated to the democratic rights and human values. He is a creator of “Science of Anticorruption” in the academic arena. His neo-science is based on modern problem of human which is at present in the process of testing and developing in Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. A notion “**Science of Anticorruption**” is an invaluable gift to the Academic-World.

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A Letter to the Writer

B.P. KOIRALA

12, Kartik 2037

Dear Bharat Jangam,

I read your novel entitled **The Black Sun** with keen interest. In it you have attempted to portray the present day decline of values in every area of our national life. For a sensitive Nepalese citizen such a corrupt situation has become subject of great agony. In your writing you have exposed such a corrupt system, which is an admirable attempt. In daily life common people have to undergo great suffering resulting from such a state of affairs.

In case those who rule the present establishment read your novel, it is likely it would prick their conscience. Possibly it would wake up their sleeping consciousness. They might feel guilty in some lonely corner of their soul.

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Your novel has presented a bleak and pitiable picture of the society and that's what seems to be its ultimate objective. Your intention seems to be to expose how corrupt our national scene is. And now isn't there a need to improve such a disturbing situation ? Who is it that has thrown the nation into such a bog ? How did it all happen ? Who will raise finger at him ? In such a context you are very well familiar with my thought. The aim of my efforts in political field is the revival of moral value in national life. From the place where you stand you have helped me in my mission.

B.P. Koirala

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Introduction

I.K. SHARMA

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Put the word Nepal in place of Denmark and the story of ***The Black Sun*** by Bharat Jangam is, in a large measure, complete. The book written originally in Nepali first appeared in 1979 in Kathmandu. Its publication triggered off a debate in the literary, social, and political circles of that country. Because of that it drew a letter of high acclaim from the most respectable statesman and celebrated writer of Nepal, Shri BP Koirala. Since its first appearance the book has run into four editions and recently efforts are underway to bring out the book in Hindi, Japanese, and other major languages of the world. I had the opportunity to go through the English version of the book.

What strikes a lay reader at the start is that the writer does not chase some ***Yeti*** of his fancy for personal pleasure. Sure enough he does not practice

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the gentle art of looking away; instead, he fixes his gaze at the obvious the actuality. This breaking of new ground may be one of the reasons that the book created such a stir in the minds of the Nepali reading public.

The aim of the writer is to hold the attention of the reader to the fact that the present day Nepal has unwittingly come in the vice-like grip of a many - coated beast, called corruption, and unless the Nepalese strive and strive collectively, they will not be in a position to free themselves from its hold for a long time to come. To give this idea a form he contrives a story of a person who upholds the value of Truth till the end although in the process he sees much that is reprehensible and also loses the most valuable that had come to him from his ancestors - a piece of land.

The novel is a first person account of a man who is a standard - bearer of Truth (a specimen of the Gandhian era in India). To comprehend the multi-faceted actuality of Nepal, the 'T' in the novel has multiple roles to play: it is a guide, an investigator, a discoverer, a watcher, a philosopher, a dreamer, and above all, a willing sufferer for the sake of a noble cause. His faith in his ideal, in spite of the muck around him, remains unshaken and he sincerely believes that Honesty or Truth or Integrity or any such ideal should not merely be an item of personal luxury but it should be a social virtue to be seen in the daily life of people.

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The novel has seven sections in all, and each section is named after the day of the week. Beginning with Sunday the story ends on Saturday- meaning from Light to Darkness. Each day takes the narrator-hero to different fields of public activity and each field he finds overflowing with corruption. In the novel this gradual unfolding of the carpet serves a two- fold purpose. On the one hand, it underscores the point that corruption in public life is a perpetual violence on the integrity of an individual, besides being the rape of a system. On the other, it highlights the inner tension of the narrator who is in quest of a clean public life. Thus the hero stands between two truths: the truth he abhors and the truth he adores, the truth he sees and the truth he aims at

Along this journey, not adventure, he meets characters of various hues: a peon of twenty- five years standing, who very well knows (not practices) the mysterious ways of highly-placed officers, and unsophisticated highland boy ignorant of the ways of city life, an honest engineer, named Tirtha Ratna and a contractor (Bikram) who follows the golden mean. Pitted against them are a smuggler, Dorje (a Tibetan refugee named Dukpa) who in course of six years has become a millionaire, a drunken politician (a former Cabinet Minister) who meanest the hero at midnight with Rs. 20,000/- on him in a restaurant and spends rupees thirteen hundred in one go, the officer at the Kathmandu International Airport whose 'daily income exceeds his three months salary' and 'in case he falls into the trap there is no power in Nepal that can harm

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his single hair,' and a lawyer, who intends to extract the four golden teeth of the hero (representing his four ideals).

As odd man out amidst them is the hero who finds a nefarious system erected around him and the common man. The system, the writer clearly brings out, is governed and run by a trio of unscrupulous businessman, the wily administrator, and the unfeeling politician. Their sinister collusion has turned the old Shangrila into a new haven of cheats, swindlers, and exploiters of darkest hues.

From the start to the finish, the characters in the novel directly or indirectly hints at the areas of darkness in the life of the nation: exploitation of the innocent and artless by the smart ones, unpunctuality in the offices, indifferent attitude of office-goes to their work, under-weighting in the market, scarcity of essential items like sugar, salt, and even 'inedible oil'. labyrinthine justice system, the craze for westernization, and above all, the 'yellow fever' to use the Australian expression for money mania. All this has endangered the life of the nation itself. In the novel it is summed up by moderate Bikram this way:

'If they just take something of the fruit, is natural. *But here they are going to destroy the tree itself and swallow its roots and branches.* Nobody fears anybody...Nobody is pure and holy.' (emphasis added)

The writer thus succeeds in reflecting the public crisis in the private mirror of his fictional alter ego.

In essence *The Black Sun* is an authentic microcosm of the contemporary Nepal. It has the silent thunder of a warrior, controlled rage of a priest, and the internal restrictions of an artist. Its reading imposes a heavy burden on the conscience of a sensitive reader.

Associate Professor of English
University of Rajasthan
Jaipur

A far Cry

Dr. Tara Nath Sharma

'**The Black Sun**' by **Bharat Jangam** is an English rendering of his "**Kalo Surya**" originally written in Nepali. '**The Black Sun**,' as it stands, is not fashioned in the traditional mold of novel with an elaborate story intrinsically woven into a centripetal plot construction. The whole design is a sort of centrifuge approach clearly compartmentalizing the work into seven separate episodes which are connected to the central theme the author wants to concentrate on only by the presence of the same protagonist trying to search for truth, integrity and essential humanity at the glaring backdrop of the partyless system.

Represented by the seven days of the week starting from Sunday, the seven sections of the book are, in fact, seven short stories each of which is a scathing attack on corrupt officials, black marketers, smugglers, legal authorities and drunken politicians. Structurally, 'The Black Sun' is loose, hardly concentrating on formidable characters.

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A fleeting panorama of immorality, degeneration and dissipation is presented by a series of hurried visits by the protagonist in his futile search for order and decency. In fact, the last section focusing on never-ending litigation wrangles over patrimony reveals absurdity as the main theme that gives the otherwise journalistic sketches a lasting literary foundation for 'The Black Sun'.

The inherent quality of fiction that holds the attention of most readers is suspense which is lacking in it because the author's primary purpose here is not telling an interesting romantic story with attractive characters, but he is whole heartedly concerned with the presentation of a pungent satire on the partyless anti-democratic Panchyat System. That is why no female character with any significance appears on the scene anywhere. Except a very short glimpse of Miss Shashi Rana at Mahesh Kumar Kedia's office, a young woman serving coffee at smuggler Dorje's miner living room and occasional references to Jeevan's wife and the wife of the protagonist, all important characters are monotonously males. True, in a male world of money and malpractice, bootlicking and flattery there is no place for the fair sex reputed for love, sympathy, honesty, co-operation and fellow-feeling. Completely devoid of human sensibility Mahesh Kumar Kedia, Shanta Ram and Smuggler Dorji worship the Devil.

There is in the blood of every administrative official, every businessman, every technical expert and every politician in the country an incurable presence of cancerous germs that will certainly destroy the every fabric of our cultural and democratic existence. **Bharat Jangam** should be

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congratulated for putting into the mouth of his character named Mahesh Kumar Kedia the central truth that pricks the national sentiment of any sensible Nepalese: "There is no country in the whole world where you can collect currency not as easily as you can collect here." An under developed country like Nepal, where almost eighty percent of people are below internationally accepted poverty line, this kind of assertion with such confidence can come only through the mouth of a monster like Mahesh Kumar. To our mind comes at this juncture the inhuman misery of Ethiopia where a monolithic anti-democratic obstinacy persisted for sixteen years. Nepal had to make a deliberate choice between two paths -- the path of poverty, hunger, famine and total annihilation on the one hand and on the other the path of freedom, efficiently. "That day will certainly come when these corrupt (officials) will be drowned in the river of public hatred. They will parade on their face and chest with bare feet. And the soil of this land will take revenge in due course. Then an honest man like you will be fully rewarded."

True writer is rooted to the soil he stands proudly on. A grassroots author is acclaimed internationally for his depiction of what he intimately knows, is humanely convincing and artistically penetrating. A writer should, as has been submitted, be judged for his in-depth vision of human living, his artistic exposition of social and individual ennui or fervent activity, and his sense of belonging and participation in what's going on in the world. A literary artist is at once an interpreter and a critic. He is, as Shelly says, 'an unacknowledged legislator of the world.' To fathom the depths of human mind and to soar in the as yet unraveled and

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undiscovered vast recesses of space a literary writer is vocationally dedicated.

Bharat Jangam is a social writer with a political vision. His cherished goal is the achievement of honesty, integrity and morality in the conduct of social and individual life. It is indeed a far cry, but nevertheless his only goal in "The Black Sun."

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Translated from Nepalese Origin "*Kalo Surya*"

Kalo Surya is translated into several languages

	<i>Language: Name</i>	<i>Translated by:</i>
1.	Hindi Kala Suraj	Dr. Ram Dayal Rakesh
2.	Russian Chorne Sunce	Alexsender Pablops
3.	Chinese Hai Thayang	Chou Zhang & Chen li
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5.	Bangala Kala Suraya	Sehaebuddin Ahamad
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7.	Assami Kala Khuraj	Prof. Gita Upadhayaya
8.	Kannada Kappu Surya	Dakshina Murthy
9.	Maithali Kari Suraj	Dr. Ram Dayal Rakesh
10.	Newari Hakumha Surdyo	Druba Madhikarmi
11.	Dotyal Kalo Surjya	R.D. 'Prabhas' Chattaut
12.	Bhojpuri Kariaa Suruj	Dr. Ganga Prasad Akela

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Sunday

For the last several days, I had been mentally disturbed .I have begun to hate the present situation of life here because it plays with the future of our present day society. The conditions which challenge every human being here have caused a storm in my heart. I could not see any reason why I felt so turbulent. Every organ of my body shook and smarted to find out a way towards building a glorious future. The conditions are so frightfully messy that it has become difficult for me to grasp them clearly

I got up a bit early that day. I had not taken my regular cup of tea. I had to wait for two hours. So I decided to take my morning tea at my friend, Jeevan's. Thinking so, I set out.

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Jeevan is one of my old chums. He works in a government office as Nayab Subba, a non-gazetted officer He lives in a rented flat with his family. In Kathmandu it is not so bad anyway. His wife cooks for the family. They have two small children . They are of school going age. Jeevan had made it almost a habit to play with the kids before and after his office hours because he felt he should give relief to his wife every morning and evening from her household chores. I felt a bit jealous when I thought how happy Jeevan was ! What a jovial atmosphere prevailed in his house ! All works done so efficiently without any aid of a servant.

I halted automatically before reaching the door of Jeevan's house. I overheard Jeevan and his wife arguing over something inside. I could neither pluck my heart to call out for Jeevan nor move forward. I clearly heard what they were arguing about.

'Why don't you understand, my dear ! You are always nagging me over this thing. Those who are rich, let them educate their children in English schools, let them send their children to Darjeeling or London. I will not let it bother me. Feed the kids with what we can afford. Coach them at home .Next year I will put them in nearby primary school at that cross-road corner in our locality. I will get a promotion, I hope, in my job next year and then I will send them to an English school'

'You said so last year. Do you know, our son is running sixth year now and the daughter fourth. And you are not sure when to admit them in a school. Oh dear!

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See, our neighbour's children are studying in an English school. He too is a Nayab subba like you.

Irritated by his wife's stubbornness, Jeevan croaked, 'What nonsense are you talking ! Do you know the salary I get ? Is it enough for running our home ? For months we have been without our morning tea. It has been so hard for me even to afford coarse rice to eat and how can I admit the kids in a school this year ? It is easy to say - 'Admit the kids in a Boarding School!' But, do you know how much it involves, once the kids get admitted. One has got to make school dresses; buy text books and pay the fees.' He continued breathlessly, 'And, you are talking about our neighbour. Why on earth should not he admit his children in a English school? - a Nayab Subba as he is at the Kathmandu International Airport Customs Office. His daily income exceeds his three months' salary. This is not all. If from today onwards he has to continue for one more year, he would live a comfortable life without doing anything for the rest of his life. Last year, he was only a Khardar (a petty official). Only after three months, see his standard of living! Never compare me to him. No, Shout up and go about your cooking business. I don't want to get late for office.'

But Jeevan's gullible wife asked with great curiosity 'Where is this Kathmandu Airport Customs Office ?' Intending to snap the discussion, Jeevan said, 'I mean Gaucher Customs Office. Don't you know ?'

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'Then why don't you better get transferred there than wait for this promotion that you are talking about ?'

Jeevan retorted in an irritated manner, 'Yes as if office is dictated by your father's dictate - the Airport Customs ! so that I get transferred there as soon as I want !'

After a moment's pause, Jeevan began to grumble 'Who is there in power to back me ? I tried to find out if I were related to the Boss somehow. But no. It's all hopeless ! For if I start currying favour with those in power, I have no time. Who will look after the kids ? If I go out, there will be no cooking. During the office hours there will be no chance for talking. To please them with gifts, I have nothing. Then how can I get transferred to the office where I can make money ?' He continued. 'Some days back, I had a novice in my office. I trained him in all sorts of office works, I hoped that the Boss will be pleased with and transfer me somewhere like that office or customs office. But it all turned out to be hopeless. It was not in my lot. The novice young man whom I had trained was appointed as a sub-customs officer. Within a year now, see ! he will make a fortune. Roll into his home. There is nothing to be surprised at' he went on, 'If a fellow like him gets the chance ! He is the son-in-law of the brother-in-law of our Boss. Hope, however, has a survival value.'

'Don't worry! Chance will come to me someday. Then I will put my children in an English Boarding

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School, and bedeck you with gold ! Now go and cook. It is half past six already.'

In the meantime children started crying. They were just waking up. The discussion took a new turn. Jeevan said there is no bread for breakfast today, so go and cook something.

It was a long time since my last visit to Jeevan's house. Now I know my acquaintance with Jeevan was only with his smiling face that I see when I meet him in the street. I also know that it was now months since they had stopped having their morning tea. Now they didn't even have bread for breakfast for children. So my idea to have my morning tea at Jeevan's was immoral. I hesitated to call out for Jeevan. So, I thought I would see him at his office.

It was Jeevan's hope and patience that had sustained his activities, perhaps, his life. Though he was in Kathmandu, he did not seek to admit his son in school, did not want to eat even a coarse rice to his hearts content, did not seek to build a roof over his head. Thoughts came in my mind about Jeevan. I reached home thinking about Jeevan. It was seven o' clock. A hot cup of tea arrived at my table. Steam of the tea spread about my face. I sipped the tea slowly. Now hundreds of my peers and pals who led a life like Jeevan's, appear in my vision. Where are they ? What are they doing ? And what situation are they in ? How do they bear it all ? Such questions started troubling my mind. Then I found myself 'a question' in our existing society.

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I reached Jeevan's office and said, 'It is ten o'clock already. Hasn't anyone come yet ?'

'Who do you want to see, sir ?' a middle-aged man asked.

'Jeevan, Subba Saheb,' I said, taking a look around in the room with chairs and tables, 'Is this Subba Saheb's room ?'

'Yes, Sir!' the man nodded, 'This is the seat of junior staff; That is the seat of Subba Saheb and in that room is the seat of Undersecretary Sir.'

I asked him with a smile, 'Where is your own seat ?'

He hesitated for a while and said, 'Where is my seat ? Oh! what significance a peon has so that he should have a seat!. No seat. No place to sit on ? Sit outside the room. When they ring the bell, I go in. If they ask for tea, I make it, if they ask for a cigarette, I fetch it. So, no time to sit. No need to sit.

As he described the things in such an innocent and artless manner, I grew more curious. I asked 'How many years is it now that you have been working in this office ?'

'Oh! twenty-fifth year now,' he said bluntly without hesitation. And pointing out to a chair in one corner of a table he said, 'Please! be seated over here. That is the table of subba Saheb. I must go to unlock another room. Saying so he went out.

I was alone in the room. I looked around. There were three steel cabinets. On them were placed piles of papers and files, a heater, a kettle and a few cups and

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plates lay in one of the corners of the room. A calendar hung on the wall. Through a gap of one curtained door of the room, one could have a glimpse of a swivel chair and the table of the Undersecretary. There was a 'No Admission' sign hung up on the door. What kind of man this Undersecretary might be who sits there ? I asked myself. Then I heard Jeevan calling out, 'Krishna Bahadur!' Jeevan came into the room. When he saw me there, he was surprised and said, 'Oh! you! How come you are here. We didn't see each other for ages. Isn't it ?'

'Oh yes ! that's why I have come to see you. I was here at ten o'clock.'

Jeevan said in a cheerful manner, 'I always leave home at 9:30 for I prefer to walk. Oh ! it is a damn nuisance to travel by bus during rush hours ! It's so difficult ! No matter how early I want to reach my table, I can't arrive earlier than 10:25 to 10:30. Because Undersecretary Sir never arrives at his table earlier than 11 A.M. no business can be carried out before his arrival.'

Jeevan opened a cabinet and took out some three or four files out and put them on his table. In the meantime, Krishna Bahadur entered the room and said, 'Did you call me, sir ?'

Asking him to make tea, Jeevan added, 'Has Khardar Saheb not arrived yet ?'

'Undersecretary Sir has sent him on some private work. Yesterday he said he would not come today. Don't you know it, sir ?' asked Krishna Bahadur.

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'Oh! these Hakims ! they take their subordinates as if they were their slaves and use them for their private work fifteen days a month.' Jeevan heaved a sigh and said, 'It makes no sense to take pride of that you work in a government office really! If you don't do what they say, they get enraged, and if they are enraged, you will either get transferred or will have to resign, there is no other alternative. If you could please these Hakims, your record is good. What should one choose ? Benefit, or no benefit at all ?' said Jeevan, unloading his mental agony before me.

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I was nonplused! I didn't get their official business. I had no experience, and had no capacity to pass any judgment upon such matters. But Jeevan was talking as if I knew everything. Actually I was only looking at him with my inquisitive eyes. I uttered nothing.

'Today our Boss has ordered me to complete this file. I had already done it with what my conscience and capacity had allowed me to, but he wasn't satisfied. Now, how should I complete this file ? My brain is not working, Jeevan put the file on the table and started fanning his face with his cap!...and on, 'I cannot do what he says because my conscience doesn't allow me to do what he wants me to. Not to do also doesn't help. You can't escape!'

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Still I was far from comprehending what he really meant. I wasn't in a position to say anything. Then Jeevan asked, 'Do you have any work with me ?'

I couldn't reply his sudden inquiry because I had no business with him. I had come just to see him in his office in the context of the argument he had with his wife in the morning and to get some more information about him.

I felt somewhat embarrassed and said, 'Nothing special. Just to see you. Has been a long time since we met. That's all.'

He might have been surprised to find me so reserved. Because we two were among our very intimate friends' circle some years ago. Today under these circumstances we were embarrassed to face each other. Jeevan was a responsible husband and family-head as well as a responsible government officer.

Jeevan asked again, 'There must be something. Why not ?'

In the meantime Krishna Bahadur brought two cups of tea and put them on the table. Now we found before us 'tea' to carry on our conversation.

I said, 'I think we just had our morning meal. So why this tea ? So soon ?'

Jeevan replied haltingly, 'Yes! but I had no appetite for meal in the morning. And moreover, it's been a habit with me to take tea when I come to office. This tea is also one of the facilities provided to us by the government office. So why not benefit from this facility, too ? For petty staff

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workers like us, what special facilities are there ? Nothing. This facility also is upto the Hakim. There is no rule that we must get it. If the Hakim is displeased, he can stop it tomorrow.

Then I lifted the privileged cup of tea in my hand and started sipping. I remembered their argument in the morning. And I knew Jeevan hadn't had his morning meal not because he had no appetite. It is Kathmandu. He is only a Nayab Subba. He has to pay at least Rs. 150/- for house rent. He has to feed four mouths. Even if he goes to buy coarse rice, he has to buy a minimum of seventy kilos for a month. Then add vegetables, salt, cooking oil, spices and so on. These are only basic requirements. In round-the-year-budget he has to add the expenses incurred on the occasion of various festivals, new clothes, and the guests - totaling all, the budget appears to be impossible for me to maintain if I were in Jeevan's place. How does he manage to maintain it ?

While taking tea, I asked, "How long have you been in service, Jeevan ?"

'Oh! about ten years now. You know very well the time when support stopped coming from home, I was forced to discontinue my study. This Undersecretary, Mr. Shiva Nath, was one of my classmates. As he enjoyed the power of money, he had access to higher education. But he has been in service just for six years. Now he is my Hakim. From the point of view of rank, he is two levels above me; and from the point of view of salary he gets three times more than I do.'

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'On! the same Shiva Nath ?' I said, 'The one whose father was supposed to be an extremely wealthy man ? He was a Ditha (Junior Judge) during the Rana times and lived in north of Kathmandu. The same person ?'

'Oh! yea, the same,' Jeevan replied discouraged. 'It is a pity! There was a time when we used to visit his house as friends. Now we are treated like his servants. We go to pay his electricity bills, to pay his telephone bills, and on the occasions of festivals, go for shopping for his family.'

I said, 'In the office where your own friend is your Hakim, it should be very favorable for you. Don't you think so ?'

Jeevan said, 'In this government office, the tradition is that the lives of the staff workers remain caged by Hakims. If the Hakims is displeased, there are rules and sub-rules under which the Hakim can take the oppressive measures against the staff workers. On the other hand, even in absence of such rules, the Hakim exercises his oppressive power on the staff workers referring to the orders of the higher authorities. such is the tradition in this office. So we are completed to cringe. It is not in our power. In turn, our Hakims also must please the Hakim above him. If the Hakim is pleased, he can make us millionaire within a few months. This is a fact. With this hope, we have to please him anyway. This is the tradition".

I felt like asking many more question, but I didn't. Even if our friendship is perfectly idealistic, I cannot ask

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such question. Now I knew I wasn't far from the realities of Jeevan's life. So I let Jeevan himself unleash his suppressed anger. He was ready to go to the Shib's room. In the meantime, shiva Nath came and entered his room without noticing our presence. Jeevan followed him into the room to pay his salutation. After a while Jeevan came back and said, 'I am going to the Sachib Sir's room with this file. Meanwhile you may chat with Shiva Nathji. I will be back soon.'

Assuring me that he would be back soon, Jeevan took leave of me. I was now curious to see Shiva Nath. I called Krishna Bahadur and sent my name - slip to him. Krishna Bahadur took the slip to Shiva Nath, but Shiva Nath didn't call me immediately. I was told to wait for a while. My attention was naturally drawn towards Krishna Bahadur.

Krishna Bahadur, who is an expert to move his footsteps to the tune of the bell of his hakims, has twenty-five years' experience of government service in his life. When Krishna Bahadur was already in government service, Shiva Nath had, perhaps, not yet finished his alphabet. And in government service, certainly there is no post below the peon.

So Krishna Bahadur must have begun his government service as a peon and is bound to end up as a peon. That is all. It is an compulsory to know Nepali reading and writing to be appointed as a peon. But in the army or police, it is not compulsory. A person appointed as a constable can get promoted to the rank of an

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inspector or a superintendent of police. Recruited as a soldier, one can later rise up to the rank of a Major or a Lieutenant. But a peon cannot get any promotion even after twenty-five years of service. I had heard that during the days of Rana there was a rule of classification of the literate and illiterate soldiers and the literate soldiers could get promotion gradually from junior to senior clerk. Krishna Bahadur, however, appeared to be happy as a peon. It is he who comes to the office first and leaves the office last.

A young man in Nepali dress came into the room. As he went to occupy a well decorated chair, I was sure that he was one of the section officers in the office. Since I didn't know him, I didn't like paying any attention toward him.

After a while he entered Shiva Nath's room. Shiva Nath was asked him why he was late in his case. But their conversation was not clear to me.

'The Undersecretary Sir's son ... Jawalakhel St. Xavier bus very crowded,

The section officer came out of the room of Shiva Nath. The bell rang. No sooner did the bell ring than Krishan Bahadur went darting into the room. Coming out, he gave me indication for going into the room to see Shiva Nath.

I entered the room and shook hands with Shiva Nath. And I could clearly see him uneasy in my presence there. Maybe he was proud of his designation. And I

could see Shiva Nath's eyes were surveying around the table as if they were looking for something lost.

Breaking the silence in the room, I said, 'Shiva Nathji, I didn't know you were here. How long have you been here ?'

Since last year,' said Shiva Nath in a serious manner.

There was a vast difference between the Shiva Nath of the past and the Shiva Nath of today. We were about to end our formal meeting. Shiva Nath did not feel at home with me, when I reminded him about our student life. He opened up a bit, but didn't seem to recall anything specific about me. I open-heatedly described the past. I also referred about my uncertain future. Finally, I said, 'You must have so far served in different government offices, haven't you ? And may be by now you want to get transferred somewhere. Don't you ?'

'Public Service Commission has commissioned me in this Ministry six years back. I have served here for one year. Earlier I had served in excise duty and tax offices for two years. Now I am trying to get transferred to Birgunj or Biratnagar Customs Office, Shiva Nath added, supporting his statement, 'What's the use of staying in this Ministry ? It is nothing but killing time. One can say there is actually nothing here. Once in a while one or two files come to your table. Check them and forward. That's all. If you remain in this Ministry for long you will be mentally, physically and economically wretched. I prefer

to get transferred to an office where I can be damn busy. Let's see, which way the wind blows. ?'

I tried to know more of Shiva Nath. Now he was more open. There was nothing that should make him uneasy. I am a simple citizen. If he was indulging in self-praise, it would only add to his personal value. I took the opportunity and said in support of his statements, 'Your four years in excise duty and tax offices must have made you really a very qualified person to work in the Customs Office.'

'But who bothers about your experience here ?' Shiva Nath explained. 'Public Service Commission didn't commission me here as easily as you might think. I had to use a lot of source and force, you know! Fortunately there was a man in the Public Service Commission who was trained by my father. My father himself went to him and arranged things to get me commissioned in the Finance or the Foreign Ministry. This is how I came here, you see! Following my appointment here, I wasn't given any responsible job for a year. Afterwards, with tremendous efforts, I was transferred to the Excise Duty Office. Then onwards was my life put on the right track...'

I said to myself, "Shiva Nath must have made a lot of money while he was serving in the Excise Duty Office. Now he is trying to get transferred to the Customs Office. Shiva Nath himself drives to strengthen his economic status. He thinks - an office where one cannot

make money, or a person who cannot make money, is worthless. I asked him softly, "Your salary ?'

Smiling sarcastically, he said, 'My salary ? How much ? Oh! it is just about enough to meet my monthly expenses on cigarettes. I mean, just about four hundred and something. They cut chunks of my salary every month as I have taken loan from the provident fund.'

'Where did you build your house ?'

'At Thamel, government loan didn't even help me to purchase a piece of land for my house. That is, it was not enough,' he said, heaving a sigh of relief, 'I had some money, about two hundred thousand and with this money. I built a small bungalow. I had taken nothing from my father's property.'

'A good son never expects anything from his father,' I said, offering moral balance, 'It is better to stand on one's own legs in happiness as well as in misery. ?'

Now he seemed to have a wish fulfilled - a private car. And he was confident that he would possess one someday. And he also had placed his faith on his Hakim that in near future he would get transferred as Customs Chief Officer.

I asked, 'Which one is better: Customs Office the Birgunj one, or the Biratnagar one ?'

'Both are the same. Because both are on the Nepal-India border. But one should find Birgunj to be better because Birgunj is the gateway to Kathmandu.'

'Oh! if you think Birgunj is better, you should go to Birgunj', I added, showing a streak of realism.

'When you are in Tax Office, you live in fears twenty-four-hours. In the Customs Office, everybody knows how things go there. Dividends are distributed from top to bottom and Tom, Dick and Harry knows this. Some get more, some get less. That's all. And if you want, you can make a fortune. But you ought to have guts for the Unthinkable. I mean the immoral. And this was in practice even in the days of the Ranas.'

'What you gain without doing anything immoral is moral,' I said, encouraging him, 'How are the chances of income there?'

'Maybe eighteen to twenty thousand per month. And on top of it, it is distributed as a bonus just next day of the payday. So it is sort of an open secret. And nobody can brand it as a Black Market. This is the reason why I am trying so hard to get there.'

The telephone on the table snapped our conversation, Shiva Nath signaled me to say 'just a moment' and received the phone.

'Hello! yes Sir! Good morning Sir!' Shiva Nath talked on the phone, 'Yes Sir! I had told Jeevan He has brought the same file Sir! Yes Sir! Good bye Sir!' Putting the receiver back he turned toward me and said, 'Staff doesn't understand what the Boss' means and the Boss also doesn't understand how the staff think. So I am trapped in the middle and consequently it is I who has to act as a middle-man.'

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Since I was ignorant about the matter he was talking about, I simply gave my noddings for endorsement. In the meantime, Jeevan entered the room. Without looking at me, Jeevan went to the table of Shiva Nath and stood near the chair and gave his opinion on the file, 'This file cannot be worked out according to what Sachib Sir says because it will be against the financial rules and regulations. How can I write anything against these rules and regulations ? Sachib orders 'make adjustment with the rules and regulations somehow or the other', but there is nothing to adjust with what he intends. You think for yourself Sir!. The work of the contract has been finished already as mentioned in the agreement. The amount of money the contractor was supposed to get has already been given to him. Now how can this unnecessary and groundless claim be entertained by the government ? If it was only a matter of fifty or sixty thousands, that would be tolerable, but to claim eight million! Oh! Good Gracious! It is unthinkable for me. We are petty staff workers. We must think for our job. If we are caught by the Anti-corruption Department, how will you explain it ? Now Sir! think for yourself.'

'Give me the file,' shiva Nath snatched the files from Jeevan's hands and hurriedly studying it said. 'You can't question what Sachib Sir says. Understand ? Yours is a petty job even if you are ever sacked. But have you ever thought what can befall Sachib sir ? If he says then we will have to fulfill it at any cost. Moreover, the right to make decision belongs to him. What Sachib Sir wants

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is this that, there should be no two opinions over the same file in the same Ministry. How can he do anything which may prove to be a trap for him ? In case he falls into the trap, even then there is no power in Nepal that can harm his single hair.' Shiva Nath, 'Do you know who he is ? And who is there behind his back ? You don't. Alright, be that as it may, we just have to be honest for our bread. And we have to carry out his orders with due respect anyway, understand ?'

Shiva Nath studied the file for a while and said, 'Look! here is something for you as a clue, Construction and communication Ministry has also given a sort of opinion as it should. You can take it as a ground,' Shiva Nath spoke confidently, as if blessed by a sudden light of reason and started dictating, 'Okay. Write as I say - 'However the contractor had to complete the construction work in accordance with the agreement, the factors of the rising market prices and the extra work that the contractor had to carry out beyond the project estimate which he did and is very well confirmed by the letters submitted by the contractor from time to time. And the opinion of the concerned Ministry has also supported the claim of the contractor for creating a situation of conflict with the financial rules and regulations. So, however, it goes against the financial rules and regulations, just for once, the claim of the contractor for rupees eight million has been found to be justifiable. So a request for sanction of the same is hereby submitted'. - This is all you have to write. We don't have to pay from our pocket. If they, who

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have to pay, are willing to pay, why should we make a headache out of it ?. Please go and submit the file today.'

The long instructive description that Shiva Nath put forward so easily was hard for Jeevan to accept and adjust. Jeevan hesitated to take the file. But when Shiva Nath asked him respectfully to take the file, Jeevan took it and said nothing. Quietly he went out of the room.

'Jeevan is our classmate, "Shiva Nath said laughing". Do you know him ? He is innocent. Doesn't understand. That's why he couldn't progress. He is in government service for the past ten years.

In the meantime the telephone rang. Shiva Nath took the receiver, "Hello! Good morning Sir! Yes Sir! I have ordered Sir! yes Sir!.....yes Sir.....yes Sir! Alright Sir.....I am coming Sir!"

Shiva Nath glanced at me and said, "Now I have to go to Sachib Sir's room. Will you please come tomorrow ? come! we shall have a nice chat. So let me take your leave. see you again!"

Shiva Nath and I came out of the room. Shiva Nath went towards Sachib's room and I lingered around for a while in the outer room. Jeevan signaled me to sit in the chair nearby. The section officer occupying a chair in the same room first glanced at me and then at Jeevan for I was a stranger in the office. Jeevan introduced me to the section officer whose name was Krishna Gopal. I greeted him with "namaste" and he returned my greeting cheerfully saying "namste". We started our conversation casually. I was told that he had entered government

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service recently, just three years ago. One could know at a glance that he was a simple man, in simple dress, I concluded. He had not yet had any chance to relish the fruits of government service. He was only sustaining himself and his family with salary alone.

Jeevan said, addressing the section officer respectfully, 'Haking Saheb! Tell me how can I work out this file according to the intention of Sachib sir?'

'Look! Subba Saheb, Tell me how can I work out this file according to the intention of sachib sir?'

'Look! Subba Saheb, whatever comment you write, I will sign it and forward. That's all I know. Moreover, if Undersecretary Sir has already suggested you to do what is to be done, it is useless to raise any question further about it. If you do not want to be in job, write a resignation. If you want to be in job, do what you are told to do. There is no use wasting any more time on it.'

Jeevan kept quiet. Studying the file he began drafting the comment. He was under compulsion, and couldn't help it. He couldn't afford to take his job lightly. There is nothing he could do, couldn't give up his government service either.

I was not interested in the problems and wranglings going on in the room, because it didn't concern me and it was beyond my understanding. I was concerned only with the life of the present. In this context, I asked Krishna Gopal a few questions. 'Krishna Gopalji! how do you find the life of a government servant?'

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My query brought a sudden shadow of gloom over his face. For sometime he couldn't utter a word. He asked me to repeat, and I did. Strange waves of awkwardness riddled his face. He spoke seriously. 'You have asked a very difficult question.' he said.

'If you find it difficult, let's drop it. I just wanted to know what would it be like if I joined government service, nothing else.' I said with a smile.

Krishna Gopal said, 'No. It is not difficult. But for your second query, I have three hours, answer. That's why I hesitated. If you have someone closely related in the higher post in the Government, you can join it. Otherwise, your life will be miserable. Yes, there is another trick too. That is - if you have the skill of oiling and buttering, that too will work,.'

Jeevan said, interrupting, 'Tell him straight Hakim Saheb - three 'Bs', that is, Buttering, Beguiling and Beseeking.'

The three 'Bs' referred by Jeevan made me laugh. All three of us began to laugh. Despite the cheerfulness of the conversation I saw a deadly gloom in Jeevan's face. He was still engaged in studying the same contract file. No sooner had I glanced at Jeevan that I was compelled to think about his miserable situation - 'What a hard situation Jeevan is in. The best time of his life has already passed. He should be congratulated for his patience and tolerance. How much a man has to suffer in dearth of an opportunity. And how could he have his peace of mind in a house plagued by scarcities and

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hunger and how could he have any rest in an office faked by immoral routing practices. However, his face didn't betray his inner agony, because he was a Nepalese. His life - a curious mixture of rural and urban lives.'

Jeevan had no control over the mentalities of his Hakims who force him to write what they intend. His conscience didn't allow him to draw such a big amount of money - eight million rupees from the public fund. But helpless as he was, he had to write what he didn't want to write. Yes, he had to begin the commentary. He had been selling his life daily for ten rupees. And thus he had sold his whole life.

Jeevan finished his work on the file. He put the file on the table of the section officer and said, 'Yes, now you can forward it, Sir! I have saved my job.'

Krishna Gopal, looking at the file, said, 'For this work, if we are transferred, as a reward to some tax office, wouldn't that be nice?'

Supporting the optimism of Krishna Gopal, Jeevan said, 'Try your best, Hakim Sahed! I asked you to seek transfer from here. But you don't listen. Opportunities do not come to you; you have to seek opportunity yourself'.

Now Jeevan seemed to have undergone a drastic change in his mental attitude, surrendering his principles and conscience to the forces of the corrupt world outside.

Krishna Gopal said, 'Yes, you are right. But what can we do. Jeevanji! I have tried. But no success. If we had someone in power to back us, why the hell! should we be living such a miserable life. See! Harikant was

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transferred to the Excise Duty Office, better still, to its distillery branch. He doesn't have to sell himself. Even then, thousands of rupees will be rolling into his home. And if he has passed his M.A. also, what is there to be surprised about? Recently he has been transferred to the Land Revenue Office of Saptari. Minimum, he will make half a million of it sure. We are of the same rank. We can't afford to eat even nominally priced vegetables let alone afford for the meat curry and make our meal enjoyable.'

Jeevan said, 'He is a nephew of our Minister. He is an exceptional case. But take Shiva Bahadur's case. He is an ordinary man like us. When he was Khardar in the Department of Local Development, he was nothing and had nothing. Again, he was a temporary Nayab Subba in the district office. Even there was nothing so conspicuous about him. But when he came to the office and was transferred to the Customs Office, Oh! just in six months, see his building! Now he doesn't have to work. Why would he? Only with income from his house rents, he can employ six officers like you. Anyway it is patience that pay. We will have to see how things go for us. One day, I am sure, we will find our feet on the right track.'

I didn't react to the conversation between Krishna Gopal and Jeevan. Because I knew it had become a routine work.

Krishna Bahadur was alert on his duty. He asked his Boss whether he should prepare tea. When he got order, he prepared it instantly and brought three cups to

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the table. Sipping tea, Krishna Gopal said, 'Jeevanji, today I have to go soon. I am told there is a vacant apartment in Banerwar, and the rent is very reasonable. So I am going to take a look at it. If anyone asks, please say 'he is out at the moment on official work.' Oh ! take this file to Sachib Sir's room also, please !'

Krishna Gopal got out of the room. Now only Jeevan and I were left in the room. He wore an expression on his face that showed that despite his desire to talk to me he had to look into the file. And he remained silent. Meanwhile, I broke in, 'Jeevan ! How are the kids and your wife ?'

"They are fine! well, the kids are sometimes fit and healthy, and sometimes not! It's natural."

"It is now time to send kids to school. Isn't it?" I mildly touched off the context.

'Yes! it is time now. But !' Trying to maintain his composure, he said, 'I plan to admit them next year.'

Jeevan was still trying to hide his real life from me. This is the typical mental attitude of a Nepalese. No matter how much they suffer, they never get nervous. They have fear for their 'prestige'. They want that nobody should come to know the reality of their life. How long would this continue ?

Jeevan made so many queries about me. I answered them in my own way. However, Jeevan didn't seem to be satisfied with my answers. There was no specific reason why I wanted to see him. I wanted to see

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him just out of my curiosity which I cannot divulge. However, when our conversation grew friendly and intimate, his doubts disappeared. Now he had to go to his Boss with the file. Winding the conversation hurriedly, he asked me to wait for a while and disappeared.

Again I found myself alone in the room. My eyes searched for Krishna Bahadur. After a while Krishna Bahadur appeared. Desiring to hold him in the room, I struck a conversation, 'Krishna Bahadurji! you are an expert in making tea.'

'Oh! no Sir!' Moving closer he spoke modestly, 'I am not an expert, experts are in the restaurants. Hakim Saheb always scolds me, and say that I am a bad tea - maker!'

'Well! It is the habit of Hakims, you see!' I said, 'It is really good! I am not kidding.'

There was a flash of happiness in his face. Desiring to say something and ask something, he looked around in the room. I requested him to be seated on the chair nearby. But he moved the chair a bit and just sat on his two feet nearby and said, 'sir! today you are here all day. You know all the senior and junior officers and staff of this office. But in the morning you were looking only for Jeevan Subba Saheb.' I just nodded approvingly and said, 'Krishna Bahadurji! you worked just in this room all the twenty-five years ?'

My question made him laugh. Trying to control his laughter, he said, 'No. why only in this room. I am here just for past three years now. I have worked as a peon in many different offices. I have been in several Ministers'

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room, too. I have 'rounded' four different Ministries so far. I wonder how long I still have to go on like this.'

'How much is your salary ?'

'At the beginning, I started out as a temporary peon. only later, I was made permanent. So totaling all my grades, I get little less than two hundred. I mean, not still two hundred. It will be two hundred after four years.'

'Where do you live ?'

'Dahachok, if you could walk fast, it would take three hours for you; and two hours for us.'

'Oh! you have to come daily, covering such a long distance ?'

'Well! I have to. I can't help. I am not a Hakim.'

'What you mean ? If you were a Hakim, you didn't have to ...?'

'It is up to the Hakims. Come, it is alright. Do not come, it is alright, too. They don't have to come on foot. They get vehicles. Even then, no Hakims arrive at the office before 11 A.M. Moreover, if they just sign their attendance, that's enough. And when there is surprise checking, it is just meant for the petty staff workers, not for the Hakims.'

I was feeling a bit lost hearing Krishna Bahadur's delightful talk. I had the impression that he had served twenty - five years in different government offices and had seen many top officers come and go, rise and fall, must be a worldly wise man of long practical experiences. He was crystal clear in his opinion. As experience given him a good understanding of how life

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operates, he seemed to be fearless and free. Or maybe as his officer was out of the room, he was feeling free to speak out his mind.

'Krishna Bahadurji! Is your salary enough to maintain your life ?' I struck an important point.

Krishna Bahadur turned towards me and said laughing wryly, 'You are asking me this question just pretending you don't know things. Krishna Bahadur is not alone. He has a family. He has sons and daughters. But you should have asked 'Is your salary enough at least to meet the expenses for salt and cooking oil ?'

I was a bit puzzled to find Krishna Bahadur so sharp. In his mind. And as I was given several answers at once to my single query, I could not dare ask any more questions immediately. I looked at him surprisingly and asked, changing the topic, 'As you have been in government service for such a long time, you must have known a number of big shots of Nepal, too, so far. Haven't you ?'

'Why not! ministers, secretaries, directors - all the Hakims I have served so far are countless. Oh! I know them very well! why not ?' He kept silent for a while and said, 'But it is useless knowing anyone for us poor people. Who cares for us ? I know the services of many Hakims. For fear that I may betray them when they see me, they say 'Krishna Bahadur, are you still in service ?' and hand in a few rupees saying 'Krishna Bahadur! Have something?.'

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He further added, 'I cannot remember the number of Hakims these hands have welcomed. When they come, at first, they know nothing. I have to inform them on many things. So the name 'Krishna Bahadur' hangs on their tongue. But when they begin to know things and start fattening themselves, they forget to ring the bell and start scolding me, 'Idiot! don't you hear the bell ?' Krishna Bahadur continued, 'Afterward I have to act according to their moods.'

'You mean, you have to teach them their official activities ?' I said innocently.

'I find, most of them come without knowing anything. Moreover, I find, one Hakim doesn't inform the other Hakim. And I have to inform a new Hakim for months. I have to tell him the files are here; the Hakim Mr. A. lives at so-and-so place; the Hakim Mr. B has contact with the Hakim Mr. C. in So-and-so ways; and the People who are in contact with the remaining Hakims are so-and-so. These are the things. Until the People are thin, their behaviour is one thing, when they get fat, their behaviour changes.'

Krishna Bahadur, a fatalist, who blamed his fate for his poverty, didn't appear to be so much unsatisfied with his status and job. If anyone before him became rich, he wasn't jealous of him. Though he complained of his meagre salary compared to his hard work, he had no ways to compensate for it. He looked satisfied somehow. It was difficult to say whether it was a virtue or a blunder of the community.

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Krishna Bahadur didn't know in which office money could be made. But he certainly knew which officer had made how much money. He knew the old house of the officer and knew the new one inside out. He also believed - to be a Hakim one had to be blessed. That's why he took each and every Hakim as a sort of divine denizen. He told me some episodes of the miraculous cure of his illness when he was severely scolded by his Hakim. He told me about an incident. Once he had to take care of his job by four hours horse-racing back and forth everyday even when he was feeling unwell and had eaten nothing. He told me another story of his hardship that occurred when his daughter was married. But as the marriage didn't work, she is now living with him. Despite all such hardships and sufferings, Krishna Bahadur thinks and is confident, that if he would be made a Hakim, he could run such 'hakimhood' very well.

I was so surprised to hear Krishna Bahadur asserting so vehemently that he could run the office of a Hakim very well if he would get a chance - a man who had been nothing but a peon all his life. Maybe his experience told him that he could run the office of a Hakim very well. His reckoning was simple. 'Just to do some talking, just to know some Nepali reading and writing and just to sign. That's all. Most of the work is done by the subordinate officers and the staff'. By the way he said, 'Nobody wants to bear any responsibility. If anything goes wrong, they refer it to the higher authority.'

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But where exactly this higher authority ? How high is the authority ? Isn't is there any limit to the higher authority ? This is what the Hakims say and do . I have seen them saving and doing so. If this is all what they have to say and do, why cannot I run the office of a Hakim ? Please think for yourself.'

Krishna Bahadur said proudly, 'However it is only a a star-gazing affair for people like us. I am a peon. Peon is my caste. Whatever caste I have been given by my parents, it is situation that has fixed my caste. They have been calling me 'Peon' for the last twenty-five years. Why should I care for anything else now ? How long have I to live in this world ? Just a few more years. So I should not hate this caste of peon. I am a peon. I am alright where I am.'

Krishna Bahadur had yet to finish his talking when Jeevan arrived. He looked overjoyed pleased that he was besides himself. Striding towards his table, he said, 'I had to stand in queue to enter SachibSir's room. So I have been late, sorry !'

Jeevan beamed with enthusiasm. He looked kappier now than he was in the morning. Something must have happened that had brought about such a remarkable change. Maybe now the rose of hope has started budding in the dry land of his life. His face was telling me clearly that the Sachib was pleased with him. I asked him, 'Was your Boss pleased with you for your work ?'

Jeevan felt shocked. His lips were quivering. His face wore a surprised look!

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In an uneasy manner he muttered, 'How did you know it ?'

I answered with a laugh, 'Is it any unusual thing ? Why don't you tell me what the Boss told you ?'

Signaling Krishna Bahadur to go out, he said, 'I have never seen Sachib Sir in such a good mood as I have seen him today. When I presented him the file, he studied it, and he ordered me to put the file in a drawer of his table. I did so and stood nearby, waiting for his further orders. The Boss said to me 'Are you in the Ministry from the very beginning ?' I didn't have time even to say 'Yes Sir!' then he said, 'Which office are you thinking of getting transferred to ?' When all of a sudden, I heard such a word from the Boss, my whole body began to shake! I tried to say something, but I couldn't utter a single word. Not being in a position to say anything, I just folded my hands and kept standing with a bowed head.'

Describing what had happened in the Sachib's room, I could see his body furiously shaking as if he were still in the Sachib's room. While he was saying something, he suddenly kept quiet. Though he was saying nothing, the changes in his expression told everything straight away.

I said, shaking him from his reverie, 'And Jeevan, then what did the Sachib sir say ?'

Jeevan made his attempt to collect himself and finally said, 'Yes! the Boss called 'you thick-skull'. I kept silent. 'Look! I am going to give you alone this chance of

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selection' he said generously. My mind whirled - what place is good and what is not. I had found every place good barring where I am. I must select a good place because such an opportunity comes only once in a lifetime. But such a good place didn't occur to my mind. I could only say this much 'I am suffering so much, Sir! I will go wherever you order me Sir! The Boss kindly said 'do you want to go to the tax office ? Well! leave it. You can't deal with those 'Marwaris'. My heart jumped anarchic. A golden chance lay before him, and it disappeared in a flash of a moment. Then I began to think if I was told to go to the Land Revenue office of Rasuwa where I don't want to go ? Controlling myself, I said 'if I could go to the Customs!' The Boss laughed at this and said 'Why didn't you say this before, you damn fool!' I finally said what I wanted to say. But something worried me again. If I am told to go to the Custom Office of the northern region ? That will make me lose a golden chance.'

'Fumbling to express my wish, I suffered like a clown. Again the Boss said, 'Do you want to go to the District Customs ?' Instantly I felt a great relief in my tormented mind. I moved one step backward, folded my hands and said -'Sir! If I could go to the Kathmandu Airport Customs, that would be very very kind of you Sir! No sooner had I finished than that Boss said, 'Oh! you want to go there ? But do you know what kind of a place is that ?' Though I didn't grasp the full meaning of what he meant, I understood him. I just nodded my

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acceptance. He said again very kindly, 'Tomorrow, tell shiva Nath about what I said and ask him to bring the comentary to me ?'

'I was so overwhelmed by a rush of happiness that my feet refused to carry me. Slowly stepping backwards, I came out of the room.'

When he finished, I saw his shaking body cool down and stabilize. He looked very happy! Had I not been there at this moment, he would never have narrated me his drama of shame. I didn't feel like asking more that this about him. I just joined him in his victory and said, 'Something very good happened today. Now after this, we will meet at the Airport Custome Office.'

'Not only 'very', say 'very very' good', Jeevan added quickl, 'you don't know how miserable my days have been. Now god willing! I will be able to build a roof over my head.'

Jeevan began to unfold hidden foolishness of his life in the past, 'Look! the same file which I didn't want to work on, the same file has changed my life. Now I understand why I suffered so much. I should have done this long before. It was quite right, if you are once in government service, to forget your ideals and conscience and carry out orders.'

Jeevan chattered like a housewife about his plans in near future and referred to some fears as well. At one point, he said, 'They say, the place is very risky. They do very strict checking there. But it doesn't matter.

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Everybody is after the same thing. If you have it, nobody can do anything to you.'

It was almost the whole day that I had been in Jeevan's office. I proposed to take leave of Jeevan. But he still wanted to hold me back. And in the end agreed to let me go only after having a cup of tea. And I could not refuse.

Jeevan ordered Krishna Bahadur to prepare tea.

It was ten o'clock in the night and I had no sleep in my eyes. I had thrown my body flat on the bed. Before my eyes were flashing the scenes one after another from Jeevan's home to his office with all the incidents, including the change that occurred to Jeevan, following the Sachib's assurance to him. While I thought of the mental attitude of such responsible people like Shiva Nath and Krishna Gopal, I felt frightened myself. My body was aching. And I thought for hours about Krishna Bahadur. Then immediately Jeevan started reeling in my mind. I feared if my mind was in its proper place.

MONDAY

Like this country, my home too is plagued by scarcities and hunger. Everyday my nagging wife tortures me. Today there is no salt, and tomorrow there would be no cooking oil. Sometimes she complains of the scarcity of fuel- wood and sometimes of rice and so on. Though I want to do shopping for the whole month at once, all the things required are not available in the market at a time. As every day a new price list of consumer goods is issued by the Government, so my budget too gets upset all the time. If I bring home anything less, it doesn't make any sense. It is equal to scarcity in my home. My wife doesn't believe me if I say there is scarcity of goods in the market until the Government's declarations confirm it. She firmly believes that I don't look after the needs and necessities of the household.

Today early in the morning I was told "there is no sugar". I said to myself, "I just hear what I have been hearing all these days!" I wasn't surprised when I heard that a half a k.g. of sugar that I had brought standing in queue had finished today. What is in scarcity all over the country is scarce in my home, too. What is there to be surprised at? Within two weeks the price of sugar has gone up twice. At first, the rise in price was ten percent. Next time it was forty-five percent. I often thought how is it that despite such price-rise there is still scarcity of goods in the market?

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The government gazette doesn't say that the price-rise is due to scarcity. Instead, everywhere "sugar is available here" sign is put up. So how can my wife, a simple housekeeper, believe that there is scarcity of sugar in the market? But the fact remains, here in this country, the real situation and the news do not tally. I can't discuss in with her and I can't also make her understand, because she possesses the proof. I don't. So I am left open to grapple with the problem of scarcity somehow or the other.

I went to each and every shop of my locality. My footsteps were moving along the negative nods of the shopkeepers. Some shopkeepers laughed at me. Some said "NO" irritatingly. Some didn't even nod their heads. As I was to get sugar for home, I couldn't leave a single shop. Worn out by inquiring, I went on asking at every shop. All of a sudden, I happened to see a red signboard painted in large letters "*here salt trading corporation's sugar and salt are available. sugar price rs. ... per k.g.; Salt price Rs. ... per k.g.*" They had pasted a tiny piece of paper at the point of price. I heaved a sigh of relief, stopped and fumbled for money in my pocket. I thought: let me take salt too. Opening my bags, I asked the shopkeeper to pour in two k.g.s of sugar and four k.g.s of salt. But the shopkeeper scrutinized me from head to foot and irritably said, 'Don't you know that sugar is out of stock?'

For a while I couldn't grasp the meaning. I said, 'I have just come to your shop. How can I know that you don't have sugar in stock?'

'Even when they know we don't have, why pester us with meaning less question,' he replied coldly. 'If I didn't have to sell other goods. I would have closed down the shop.'

I didn't take his grumbling seriously. I sat on a nearby stool and said, 'The board that is hung over there

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doesn't say 'No Sugar'. How could I know ? I just looked at the board and came to your shop'

The shopkeeper looked very reluctant to discuss the matter with me. Maybe he had confronted too many customers like me already. I had myself visited so many shops. How could I make him realize it ? After a while, the shopkeeper cooled down and said, 'It is not only today but since long that sugar has not been available. You don't understand and talk of the board. We have not hung it up by our sweet will. The board was hung up by the Salt Trading Corporation in all the shops like mine, you see! We don't say we are not their dealers. We are, but when we are their dealers, isn't it their responsibility to supply us the commodity for retail sale to the customers ? They are sitting comfortably in their swivel chairs in their air-conditioned offices and it's we who have to face the customers and bear the warrants. Isn't it a pity!'

'Really! you don't have sugar ?' I wanted to be sure. 'No sorry! If I had, I could do business. But I don't have.' But why is this scarcity ? What's the reason ?'

'Well! we don't know the reason ourselves. It should have been available, following the price-rise. The other day I went to the Salt Trading Corporation Office for sugar. They said I should deposit money. I deposited money for twenty sackfuls of sugar. Now I make daily rounds to the Corporation. But the sugar is nowhere to be seen. But there is a rumour that they are going to distribute a sackful to each and every dealer. Even a sack could help. We could at least distribute half a k.g. or a quarter k.g. to our customers.'

I said then and there, then can I get half a k.g. by the evening, sir ?'

He laughed ironically and said, 'You can't believe these people. See! Ten days ago, they made me deposit money.'

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But they have not yet delivered the stuff. So how can you believe them! I am fed up with these people. They are not businessmen. Just by doing some clerical work, you can't be a businessman. If it were so, everybody would be a businessman and would become a million aire or billionaire. In Nepal they can't select a right man for a job or a post. Any one can do or be anything here. Think for ourself!" The way the shopkeeper analyzed the situation appealed to me very much. Maybe my facial expressions were encouraging him to go ahead. He continued his chatter. 'They argue the reason of scarcity is diesel. Now it is heard the price of diesel also shot up just this week. These corporations can't mislead the public. They advance logic which is not convincing. If they had said that because of the scarcity of diesel the highways were deserted that could be convincing. But even that isn't the case. Besides, we have another means of transport - the ropeway. And the ropeway is working. In brief, the matter is - the business is being carried out not by businessmen, but by easy going officials. If it were businessmen they would manage to obtain the supply and make it available to the consumers even for the sake of their prestige. In brief the solution lies in the hands of these inexperienced officials. If there is scarcity, importance of these officials goes up. Petty businessmen crowd them to butter and pamper. Big business magnets invite and entertain them in 5-star hotels. They even indulge in favouritism and nepotism. Moreover, even when there is no scarcity, they can create an artificial scarcity.'

He paused abruptly and drew my attention by touching me. Pointing to a man walking on the sidewalk across the road, he said, 'Do you know that man ?' Since I was so engrossed in listening to him, I failed to follow his directions. Confused I said, 'Who ? Who is he ?'

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That fat man over there.'

'Oh! but I don't know him'.

'You don't know a man like of him ?'

'I have never seen that man.'

Where do you live ?'

'I live in Kathmandu.'

'Then you must have known him.'

'Half a million people live in Kathmandu. It is impossible to know everybody. You know the people who come in close contact with you.'

'Well! Maybe you don't know him.' full convinced of my ignorance, he heaved a sigh and changing his facial expression, said, 'Well! as a matter of face, I don't know you too.'

He grew quiet for a while. The course of our conversation took a new turn. But now I myself felt like knowing about that man. I had the opinion that that man must be some celebrated figure. Turning to the shopkeeper, I said, 'Who is that fellow ?'

'He was the Boss of the Food Corporation some time ago.' He answered flat.

'Why isn't he using a government vehicle ? Why is he on foot!'

But he is an ex-boss. When he was in power, my God! you would get a glimpse of him just once in a blue moon. Let alone the Boss, it was difficult to see even his assistant. Now maybe, he has started to walk on foot on the sidewalks just to get mixed with the people.' He went on, 'Don't think, he walks on foot because he doesn't have a car. It is these people who have pushed the people's economic life into such a hopeless bog! It is these people who made the corporations run into loss. It is these very people who go around in a bearing as if they were the most respectable and important members of the society. And

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they do not feel ashamed at all! Rather we feel ashamed ourselves when we see them!'

I remembered a news item published some days ago in one of the government newspapers. Intending to know the reaction of the shopkeeper on the news item, I said, 'I had an occasion to read a news item in one of the government newspapers a few months back that some businessmen were arrested for legal action on the charge of selling some kind of inedible oil. Are you talking about the same corporation ?'

'Yes! the same corporation. You mentioned the inedible oil. Even this inedible oil is not available in the market. In this nation, there is scarcity of even adulterated items.'

This shopkeeper, age about fifty, fifty-five, appeared to be a clean-in-conscience man. He was speaking out his mind to me without any hesitation and seemed to be enjoying our conversation. He had leisure now because it was not the rush hour for his shop. It is eleven in the morning.

I was interested in that man of whom the shopkeeper was talking about. I opened the context again and said, 'We have yet to finish about that man whom you had just mentioned.'

'Oh! yes! But what can you do about these exploiters only by talking ? I just wanted to show him to you. As for myself, when I remind myself of these people, my mind gets upset and my blood boils and I feel like striking these bloodsuckers with a blunt knife until they are on the door of death! But I am helpless! I have no power. If I take any action, people will think I have gone mad. So what can I do ? There is nothing but to express my disappointment and frustration ?'

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Though he outwardly appeared old and fragile, in his impassioned arguments one felt some buried creative human force struggling to come out and strike if given an opportunity. Shopkeeping was only his means of maintenance. So whatever he was saying, he was saying totally out of selflessness.

As I sat in the shop, a number of people came there and asked for sugar but went back! Helplessly I kept thinking about the people's dependence on sugar. Can't they do without it ? I found-the answer was myself. I was wasting my time myself.

In this context, I said, 'When the demand of sugar couldn't be met, the Government should have declared so. People think out a way themselves. Don't you think so ?'

Yes! you are right! It is the policy of the government which is responsible for the misery of the people. What is not available, people find out an alternative for that. This is human nature. But here in this country, they keep people in dark and confusion so that they can be easily rubbed.'

The shopkeeper went further, 'Do you know ? If they could succeed in creating an artificial scarcity within twenty-four hours in Kathmandu alone, they can exploit over half a million rupees from the consuming public on one single item. It is this hoarding black business my which the officials and the big business tycoons become millionaires overnight. Listen, it may surprise you! Some days back when the price of sugar went up, one businessman made half a million rupees first time. And second time he made two millions. Who is going to check all this ? The scarcity of sugar in the market is just one plain evil reality. Those who consume sugar will go on doing so. If you can't do without sugar, you will buy it at any cost. For you, the difference is only of two or three rupees. You don't care.'

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I nodded approvingly. He went on, 'This country needs only officials. Here in this country it is officials who govern; it is officials who run the industries; it is the officials who manage all contract; it is the officials who run the business. I mean, the entire socio-economic fabric is controlled by the officials. Can you name a thing which is not controlled by the officials ?'

'Smuggling,' I said too,

'Do you think this is run without the collaboration of the officials ?'

I had no answer to his question. He still seemed enthusiastic to talk to me. So he said, 'This is the season up. If it keeps going up like this until the rainy season, the people the low income group will be forced to go without rice. See, vegetables and pulse! Compared to the last year, the prices have doubled. You can't sell anything because of the high prices. We are petty businessmen. Our buying and selling rates have to match anyway. I am not satisfied. But when you are not satisfied, what else can you do ? It is not my weakness only. It is the weakness of all of us.'

I asked the shopkeeper by the way, 'How long have you been in this sort of business ?'

'Oh! just about five years.'

'What did you do before ?'

I was in government service, in the Auditor General's Office. At the beginning I was just a clerk.'

'Was it long before ?'

'During the time of one of the Rana Prime Ministers I spent a long time of my life in Government service. It was about time for pension when I resigned.'

'Oh!'

But there is reason why I resigned. My nature is : I hate back door manipulation. You see! But there is nothing what you call responsibility in our offices. It is the matter

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of the state fund. You can't indulge in negligence because your conscience doesn't allow you to do so. If you go about your duty, will you begin with ? Begin from the bottom ? Or from the top ? You find yourself helpless. If you would pay close attention, you can discover so many unsettled accounts which may take a century to get cleared off. The day I found myself unable to get involved in the cheating of the state fund, I decided to quit. After my resignation, I wondered what next ? I tried industry. I started my rounds to the industrial Department. I had to start an industry with the money that I received on my resignation from the government service. When I asked for permission to start an industry of my choice, they said that such industries have been barred. It made no sense to start an industry which had no market in Nepal. Industries which have indigenous market had already been licensed to big industrial tycoons. According to the rule of the government, if some industry had already been set up at one place, no one can start the same kind of industry at that place. For this rule, I had been unsuccessful despite the years of efforts". He further said, 'When I discovered that only the big industrial tycoons have their hold over the industries and a lot of trickery goes on in the industrial field, involving industrial department, I got discouraged and abandoned the field and finally came into this shopkeeping business.'

Following our conversation, I had developed an intimate relationship with the shopkeeper. The main factor was his honesty. My mental attitude towards the shopkeeper underwent a radical change. I began to respect him. I asked him his name and gave him mine.

A mature and gentle shopkeeper like this is rare in Kathmandu, I thought. "The prices scare us away. In these shops they charge as much as they can. I am giving you an

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example. The electronic watch which is now selling at rupees one hundred a piece was sold at rupees eight hundred and fifty before. Now calculate, how much profit they make ? Now go and see, you will find every item being sold this way. Well! Let's drop this affair of foreign goods. Now let's see how the yard goods are selling in the market. They sell Nepalese and Indian yard goods at fifty percent profit. But do you know how much profit they make on the Japanese and Hong Kong stuff ? - hundred percent! Our administration is blind. They have no eyes to see. Why should have they made rules and regulations when they do not desire to implement them ?'

Listening to him I concluded, he has a very different type of personality compared to those cunning businessmen in the town. If all the businessmen were like him, our business community would become an ideal. On asking about how to control the rising market prices, he said, 'The main factor behind the rising prices is the weakness of the administration. And the government's policy is another contributor to it. The government has the full right to control the market prices. But it doesn't take any action. Maybe there is one hurdle for the administration, too. This hurdle is the fixing of the prices by the commercial corporations of this country as they like. There are also items which are selling in the market at random prices. Even that is not controlled by the administration'. Infuriated, he continued, 'If you go and see, you will find them selling many items at double the rates. The shops which sell foreign goods are not for ordinary people like us.

I remembered another news item which had been appearing in the government news paper from time to time and inquired, 'But I have read news about the punishment

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meted out to the black-marketeers. Now you say, they don't take any action. What do you mean ? I don't understand.'

'Have you read the news published that the black-marketeers have been fined ten thousand, five thousand, even one thousand rupees ?'

'No. The news speaks about five to fifty rupees fine.'

'Then! This fifty and hundred rupees fine is just for the sidewalk vendors and petty shopkeepers like us. Not for the big stockists. Nobody can touch them. Firstly, these big people have money power. Secondly, our rules and regulations are so simple that they are easy to get manipulated. Well! Let's drop this matter, too.'

The shopkeeper added, 'Let's think of the government's policy. Nepal is a poor country. Food stuffs that Nepal produces is just enough for the country itself. But the government allowsexport of food stuffs to earn dollars. This policy benefits only a few people. The majority of the people have to go without food. Pulse, Soyabean, Ginger, Chill, Garlic and the like are supposed to be exported whereas the production of these stuffs in the country is limited.'

I found the shopkeeper to be an experienced man. Maybe he has done a good deal of study of the administration and its policies. He has served and seen a number of government offices in his life.

Expecting to get to know many more things from him, I said 'Is there noway to control price-rise ?'

He immediately replied, 'Oh, yes! Why not ? Do you know who controls our trading centres in any of the cities.of the country ? These are the people who have brought about this economic mess! I mean this economic hardship to the common people. From the east to the west, from the north to the south; these very people rule our

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economic life. These very people are reigning supreme in the heart of the capital, Kathmandu. And their only purpose is to make money and pass it home.' The shopkeeper further said, 'Though they have as much right as we have as native citizens. Moreover, they are also protected in their own positions. So they benefit doubly. And they are honest to none. They are honest to only one thing - money. That's all!' the shopkeeper concluding his analysis said, 'so, in the first place, it is necessary to control these people. The administration should make policies that suit our own interests first. And the administration should not also let the officials of the corporations indulge in this kind of freedom that they are enjoying. This way, the administration can fully control the market prices.'

His answer fully satisfied me. And I didn't dare ask any more questions. I had to search for sugar. I had taken a vow that I would not return home without sugar. It was now hours that I had been sitting in the shop, listening to the shopkeeper. As I must get some sugar anyway. Getting up to move, I said, 'Sir! I am so happy to meet you! I like to see you again. Thank you very much for all the information that you have given me. Now allow me to take leave of you. I have to look for sugar.'

Taking leave of the shopkeeper, I again engaged myself in the sugar searching business. I visited each and every shop around, asking for sugar. As I was coming out of a shop and was making a move towards another, a young man attracted my attention, by asking, 'Is this the Ason Bazaar. Sir ?'

A young man of about twenty, twenty-two years of age,, a cotton bag hanging over his shoulder, clad in Nepalese dress made out of coarse cotton fabric, and a waistcoat of which pockets were bulging out unproportionately. He had sported a cotton waistband too.

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He was barefoot but he had sported his cap in a fashionable cocked style. I could easily guess - he was a newcomer in Kathmandu and Kathmandu was new for him.

I said, "Young man! Where are you from?"

"I am a highlander. I am from Solukhumbu," he said in a sdazed manner, "Is this Ason Bazaar, sir?"

"This is not Ason Bazaar."

"They say there are many houses and many shops in the Ason Bazaar. Isn't it the place? Then where is it?"

"It is still far from here. Is this the first time you have been to kathmandu?"

He nodded his heas affirmatively. I said, "Wait a bit. I am going ther myself. We will go there together."

I made him wait for me and visited some more shops but could find no sugar. Then I moved downtown, taking this young man from the mountains, along.

"What do you have to do in Ason Bazaar ?"

"Some shopping. I hane come from home just for shopping. ?"

"When did you arrive here ?"

"Yesterday on the way they threw me out of the bus. I am a newcomer here...!"

"Why did they throw you on the way? Did the engine of the bus break down ?"

"I don't know .Some were saying "there is no fuel"...The bus would remain there. All the passengers got out, but theycharged the full fare."

"Where did you stay last night?"

"I don't know the name of the place. But it was a little bazaar. In the house where I spent the night, they took all my chickens by force."

"What? They took all your chickens ?"

"Yes! I didn't want to sell them my chickens. But they forced me to."

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'Didn't they pay you?'

'They paid but less.'

'How much did they pay?'

'One hundred and twenty and six rupees.'

'How many were your chickens ?'

'Twenty and one.'

'Why did they pay you that much only ?'

'That's what I said. I didn't want to sell them my chickens at that price. But aboutten of them surrounded me and started harassing. And the bus driver also refused to take my chickens in the bus. As I was alone, I was compelled to yield.'

'didn't you know that you could get better price in the city ?'

'Well! I knew. That's why I brought the chickens. But I didn't know that rich people like them would rob me in such a way.'

'You would have got four times more money here in the city. But it is over now. No use of talking. By the way, why did you come to Kathmandu ? Maybe, you wanted to buy somethingfor your home ?'

'Yes! I have come to buy salt, kerosene oil, and cloth for the whole year.'

'By the way, what's your name ?'

'My name is Top Bahadur.'

Top Bahadur, brought up at Solukhumbu, the lap of Mount Everset, appeared to be very simple and pure of heart. He wore an expression which was free from malice and trickery, greed and selfishness. He was a labour hand from the highland countryside of the country. I visualized in his expression the image of the whole Nepal. I could guess easily that the money that he had in his pocket wouldn't purchase all his required items. There was a big gap between his calculation back at home and the market

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prices here. So out of curiosity, I asked, 'How much money do you have ?'

'I have to buy some cloth to make dress for my father; and some dress - goods for mother and sister. If I had enough money, I would buy a shirt and trousers. If I couldn't afford for both, I would buy just a pair of trousers.'

'And you have to buy salt and kerosene also. Don't you ?'

'Yes! I have to. I have to buy salt and kerosene for the whole year.'

'How much salt and kerosene would you need for the whole year ?'

'About seven k.g.s. of salt and about twenty litres of kerosene.'

The items that he described, I guessed, would require five times more money than he had in his pocket. But he looked confident that the money which he had will be sufficient to purchase all those things.

I asked him jokingly, 'What else do you want to buy ?'

He replied instantly, 'Oh, yes! I have to buy some sugar and tea for father. When father suffers from stomach pain if he takes hot tea, he becomes alright. He doesn't have to drink tea always. Just sometimes. I had forgotten it.'

I laughed at his statements. I stopped suddenly and looked at him. Feeling embarrassed, he said, 'I don't need much. Just about two k.g.s. of sugar. Why are you laughing, sir ?'

I said, 'I too am in search of sugar. I have not found it yet.'

'You can find it at Ason Bazaar. Can't you ?'

'Well! I don't know. We will try.'

'He looked at me from head to foot and said, 'Sir! May I know where do you live ?'

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'I live in Kathmandu. Why ?' I said.

'Nothing else. Why ? Don't you find sugar in the market ?'

'No. I haven't found it yet.'

'My father had instructed me to go to Ason Bazaar where one can find everything. My father had also warned me of the foreign businessmen who are very clear to cheat me.' The young man, the highlander was talking very intelligently. 'The 'businessmen do not talk our language. They speak different languages.'

His talks were plain and simple. He was now feeling at home with me. He went on, 'if I finished shopping today. I can set out for home tomorrow. In five days I can reach home.'

He was innocently ignorant that the money in his pocket couldn't equal the market price here. He was confident and he had taken it for granted that he had done his shopping and was about to leave for home. Perhaps it was already four days since he left his home. Now he was feeling homesick. Perhaps he was also imagining that when he would reach home with all the things he bought in Kathmandu, his parents and sisters would be happy!'

I asked him quietly, 'How much cloth had your father asked you to buy ?'

'Four yards of coarse cotton cloth for my father's half-shirt. Five yards of plain cotton cloth for my father himself. He has advised me not to pay more than two and a half rupees per yard. Till last year, my father used to come himself. This year, he has sent me. I want to buy a nice material for shirt and trousers for myself if I have enough money. If I don't have, even then, I must buy material for a half-shirt and trousers, and I need a piece of material for waistcoat also. And I want to buy a cigarette lighter, too.'

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One of my friends had bought a cigarette lighter. No need of flint. What a nice thing!

By his calculation, the money he had was sufficient - he thought. So he had cherished a wish to purchase a cigarette lighter, too. I asked him, 'Young man! how much are you told to pay for salt and kerosene ?'

Exercising to recall, he said, 'Ten rupees for salt; about twenty rupees for twenty litres of kerosene. I can buy an empty canister at rupees four or five.'

I said, 'Have you calculated ? I don't think your money would be enough to buy all these things, even if all things are available in the market.'

'Well! I have not figured out actually. But have been thinking over it since yesterday. I also doubt that my money would be enough. I also realise that I sold my chickens at a very cheaper price really. Sir! can't I buy all the things that I want with the money I have ?'

I didn't reply and moved silently. And he also didn't try to ask question any more. Reaching the Ratna Park crossing, I stopped when I saw the young man smarting to run across the road. I held him by the shoulder. A car whizzed past before us at a high speed. The young man said, 'Oh! I forgot to look! My father had instructed me to look around and run across.'

I paid no attention to his muttering. I was not interested in it. Only one thing worried me that his purchasing power can't even buy a single item in today's market. Had the twenty-one chickens that his father had given been sold at fair price; and had the market price remained constant he could have fulfilled his dreams. But it was not to be. Unfortunately neither the market prices were constant as they were two months ago, nor his chickens were sold at fair price. These days the market prices in

Kathmandu are so volatile that within twenty-four hours, the prices could skyrocket cent percent.'

We reached Bhotahiti. I started asking the shopkeepers there for sugar. The young man stopped with me when I stopped and moved when I moved. In the process, one shopkeeper said, 'I had it till yesterday. All I sold out. As the price of sugar is going up. The dealer himself has kept it in stock. He is not giving us. Now say, how can we distributors distribute it to the consumers ?'

I went into the shop and requested the shopkeeper more earnestly, 'Please! they recommended your shop. I have come over a distance. You can charge me as much as you like. The shopkeeper said politely, 'By Good! I don't have. If I had I could do business and you would meet your need. Why should I withhold ? I am here to serve you. If you had come yesterday, I would have given you as much as you wanted. Today I don't have. Sir! Please, excuse me!'

The shopkeeper went further, 'Look sir! It is our concern to sell goods. At the rate the dealer supplied the goods, I sold the same at the same rate with ofcourse, a fair margin. Now he stopped the supply because the price is going up. Now think for yourself. What we can do ? Yes! we know very well that the customers do not care about price. They just want to get the stuff. The times are just like this now. The dealer had,' the shopkeeper further said, 'supplied me one hundred sackfuls of sugar at the rate of twenty percent more than the fixed rate. I also sold out the sugar within three days at a price which was not more than twenty percent and it was according to the government rule. Now I don't have any sugar at all. Will you pardon me, for Heaven's sake ?'

I hopelessly heaved a heavy sigh! It had been just fruitless to come downtown over a distance in search of sugar. Thinking that if the shopkeeper could tell me about

where I could get some sugar, I said, 'Where can I get it ? Can you tell me ?'

'Well! I don't know actually. But I know Salt Trading has its depot at Ason. They may not give you as much as you want. But they may give you some.'

I moved out of the shop. I found the young man enjoying his scene very much. I knew without my guidance he couldn't get to Ason Bazaar. So he had been waiting for me. Calling up his attention, I said, 'What are you looking at, young man ? Let's go. We are just near the Ason Bazaar.'

Within minutes we were at the center of the Ason Bazaar. For the highlander all was Ason Bazaar, but for me the Ason Bazaar, a particular area. So I took the young man to that particular area of the bazaar. So I had to go to the bazaar myself to fulfill my need.

He seemed happy that, at last, he had arrived at the Ason Bazaar after four days since he set out from home. He started glancing around the Ason Bazaar Square. Then I said, 'This is Ason Bazaar.'

The young man, the highlander, looked around at a squirming crowd of people, cows, rickshaws and vegetable vendors-all milling along in a limited space of the bazaar. Our highlander said, 'Is this the Ason Bazaar ?'

'Yes! This is the Ason Bazaar.'

By now our highlander had taken me into confidence. So there was no room for doubt. The Ason Bazaar that he was looking at was not of his imagination. Our people from the countryside take Ason Bazaar as the centre of the whole of Nepal. Yes! this is the central market of the capital of Nepal. In this Ason Bazaar, covering thirty thousand square feet area, business of millions of rupees is struck within hours. It has been running like this for the past hundreds of years.

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'Where can I get kerosene oil and salt ?, the young man asked me, 'I am a newcomer. I have no idea.'

I saw Nepal Oil Corporation's board in one corner and under it a long queue reaching point where we stood. I said, 'Look! young man, stand in this queue, when your turn comes, you will get your kerosene oil.'

He said happily, 'Then I will have to buy an empty canister.'

Just around us a man was selling empty tins and canisters. So I said, 'Look! buy your empty canisters here. And stand in the queue and get your kerosene. I have to look for sugar.'

I started toward the shop which had a signboard of Salt Trading Corporation. When I reached the shop, I found neither the salesman nor sugar. On asking a nearby shopkeeper, the reply came, 'Maybe they finished it.' By his suggestion I decided to go to another sales depot.

I reached another sales depot and saw people standing in a queue for sugar. I was so happy that I bypassed the queue and reached the counter, 'Please!' I said, 'May I get half a k.g. of sugar ?'

The salesman was busy. Meanwhile, a gentleman standing in the queue struck, 'If you are in need of sugar, please stand in the queue, We have been standing for hours.'

I blushed with shame. I should have known before. I couldn't utter a word. I glanced at the queue. Hundreds were in the line. I joined the queue myself, ashamed. After about an hour, I got out of the line with half a k.g. of sugar.

When I was on my way through the Ason Bazaar, I again caught a glimpse of our highlander standing with a tin canister. Thinking he had already bought his kerosene. I said, 'Young man! did you buy your kerosene ?'

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Our highlander shot a helpless glance at me. I saw that there were tears in his eyes. He did not speak. He even didn't care to answer my question. Holding his chin, I turned his face towards me and asked, 'What happened ? What is the matter ?'

In reply to my question only his tears, filled to the rims of his eyes, rolled down in streams. Wiping his tears with the lap of his shirt, he said, 'I could buy only kerosene with all my money. Now I have no money to buy other things! I cannot return home without the things that I am supposed to take home. My father used to make money enough to buy all the necessities for the whole year selling the same number of chickens.' Wiping his eyes once more, he went on, 'How can I enter my home with only kerosene! Moreover, I don't have even a few rupees to return home. All the money is taken by the shopkeeper.'

I asked, 'How much kerosene did you buy ? And how much did you pay ?'

He said, 'I bought an empty canister for eight rupees and stood in the line. After a long time, my turn came. The shopkeeper asked me how much I wanted. I said - twenty litres. After pouring the kerosene into my canister, when I paid what I was supposed to pay, the man said 'No. Not enough.' And he took all my money. I had only two rupees remaining. And another man who had done the sealing of the kerosene canister asked for three rupees. I said I have only two rupees. The man snatched the two rupees from my hand and said - 'One rupee, you will pay me later.' Now I don't have a paisa. How to buy other things and how to go back home ?'

Consoling him, I said, 'Well! What will you do now ? You didn't have enough money. Tell your father everything. He will forgive you!'

He said, 'No. I cannot return home.'

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I asked him for the solution of his problem. I said, 'What are you going to do then ?'

I will not return home with only this kerosene. I will sell this kerosene back. I have asked a man to buy it,' he said, 'One of my elder brothers words in India - in Asansol, in a coal mine. I will go there, work for some months, make enough money, buy all the necessary things and only then go back home.'

'Where is India ? Where is Asansol ? Have you ever been there ?' I asked.

'No I haven't. But I will reach there anyhow once I set out. I am compelled. There is no other way out.'

The man whom the young man had asked to buy his kerosene came then and there and said, 'Do you want to sell your kerosene ? If you want. Hurry up! I have to go somewhere.'

The young man nodded affirmatively. The man showed his shop. The young man requested me to accompany him. the man wanted to measure the kerosene. He broke open the seal and measured. There was only sixteen litres whereas the former shopkeeper had assured our highlander that he had put twenty - one litres into the canister. For sixteen litres of kerosene sixty - eight rupees plus seven rupees for the canister - total rupees seventy five the shopkeeper handed down to the young man.

When I found that our highlander was cheated by the shopkeepers, I suspected my sugar also. It was only four hundred and fifty grams. To go back and ask for the remaining grams was just foolish because it had been measured before my eyes. So I consoled myself, 'Controlled commodities are measured that way. Never mind!'

Our young man and myself came into the Ason square. Now the young man our highlander has only

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seventy - five rupees in hand. In the foul play of Ason Bazaar, he lost twenty - four rupees. With this sum of money, he could buy a few yards of cloth for his mother and sister. But it disappeared in the bazaar. And the dream of buying shirt and trousers for his father was shattered, too. Now their home will have to be dark and they will have to go without salt throughout the whole year! The young man was not thinking about this situation of dire scarcity and want. What he was thinking about was money. He needed money to buy all the things that he was supposed to buy for his home. So he decided that he would go back home only after making enough money.

Our young man, the highlander, had come to Ason Bazaar on foot over a long distance. He had cherished a warm affection for Ason Bazaar. But, Ason Bazaar failed to understand him. Only one thing it knew was it should exploit and cheat these innocent and naive inhabitants from the mountains.

I could not help our young man, the highlander in meeting his requirements. It was not the matter of five or ten rupees. I was helpless! I was resourceless! could not stop him migrating to a foreign land, too!

I felt sorry for the young man. I said, 'Young man! Go home. If you go to a foreign land, your misery will be worse as you have never been there. Don't be so rash! Go home by tomorrow morning's bus. Your parents will never mind! Believe me. Go back.'

He said woefully, 'Home ? No. I am not going back home. How can I show them my face ? Rather I will go to my brother and work in the mine and make money. And when I go home, I will take plenty of things along with me.'

'Where will you stay tonight ?'

'Well! just around. Anywhere.!'

'So may I go now ?'

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Allright.'

'You want to spend your nigh just around here ?'

'Well! I think so.'

I parted and moved on my way home, thinking ... so many young men like him leave their homeland and migrate to a foreign country under the pressure of crisis of the economic hardship and skyrocketing market prices. The country has lost a hard working and honesty young man like him. His old parents have lost a good helping hand in their son. His sister has lost a loving brother. And his friends have lost a good chum.

The Black sun

TUESDAY

I had been sulking in one of the rooms of a Government office for two hours. But they were not doing anything to refund my deposit. These officials did not seem to have time even to speak to me. There were four of us waiting in a queue. The official had assured me that he would work out the process of refunding the moment I approached him. That's why I had been waiting. There were only a few chairs in the room. So sometimes I had to stand and sometimes had to share a chair already occupied by someone else. In the end I had to go out of the room as my body ached from sitting uncomfortably too long. Meanwhile, I requested the official twice to work out the process. 'Don't you see that I am working ?' the official snapped irritatingly. As I felt humiliated by his rough manner, I did not like to request him anymore.

I came to this office after two weeks. It was now months that this petty matter had been pending. If they liked to work they could finish it within twenty minutes. But they had not yet cleared this petty matter over a long month despite my twenty tiresome visits. Yes! twenty visits for twenty minutes' work. But not yet over. Wonderful!

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The matter was a simple one. Some months back I had deposited three hundred and twenty - five rupees at the suggestion of one of the officials of this office for some purpose. Later I was informed that the purpose wouldn't get materialized due to some recent change in policies. It was verbally agreed that in case the purpose does not get materialized, the money would be refunded. Sticking to the truth of this verbal assurance, I had started paying regular visits to this office. They neither refused to give back the money, nor worked out the process for its refunding. No matter how small is the amount, one cannot throw away one's sweat of the brow. Moreover, it is the money that I had deposited.

I thought it was sheer negligence because it involved only a small sum of money. Or I do not have the knack of working with these government offices. Did these offices expect me to spend some extra money to refund my three hundred and twenty - five rupees ?. Moreover, my time also has some value, and for coming here I had to spend some money, too. Every time I had to spend two hours. When I saw that nothing was being done despite my twenty regular visits, I decided to give up and stopped coming. But after some days I thought why I should throw away the money. If I get the money back, that would be of some help. And I started paying visits again.

As I stood in the office room to get my money refunded, the official was busy studying his file. He did not pay any attention or say anything to me and to other persons who were standing around his table. Then all of a sudden a man entered, disturbing the quiet of the room, 'Oh! sir! is the work finished ?'

I recognized him instantly. He was Mahesh Kumar Kedia. I had known him for the past ten years since he first came to Kathmandu. No sooner did his deep-toned voice

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fall on the ear of the official then he got up from his chair with a start and said, 'Oh, welcome! welcome! Mr. Mahesh Kumar!'

The official pulled a chair and requested Mahesh Kumar to be seated. But Mahesh Kumar pulled me along towards the chair, sat in the chair and I sat on one of its arms. Mahesh Kumar asked me the reason of my coming to the office. I told him about the matter. I was given to know that he had come to the office for import license.

The official told him respectfully, 'Mr. Mahesh Kumar! you were expected yesterday. But you did not turn up. I have kept every thing ready. Just what remains is the director's signature.'

Mahesh Kumar said laughing, 'I couldn't come yesterday. I have come today. Please finish the matter quickly. Will you ?'

The official took the order of Mahesh Kumar instantly, got a file out of the cabinet and said, 'Please wait for a while. I will go and take the signature of the director. I'll come back soon.'

'Alright. Never mind!'

The official got out of the room with the file. Out of curiosity, I asked Mahesh Kumar, 'Mr. Mahesh Kumar! Have you started foreign trade business yourself now ?'

Mahesh Kumar lightly pressed my hand as an indication that I should keep quiet now. As he didn't say anything verbally, I began to suspect him. I know well that three months before he had been to Hong Kong with an Indian passport. Though he had been living in Kathmandu for the last ten years, yet he had never tried to obtain Nepalese citizenship so far. Born in Burma but driven out of that country, he has been residing in Nepal for many years, but he takes pride in calling himself an Indian citizen. Meanwhile, I remembered a government rule 'No

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foreign citizen can deal in this trade directly or indirectly.' But why against this rule a foreigner was being accorded such a hearty welcome ? Why was he extended such a special privilege ? A curiosity arose in my mind to find the answer.

Mahesh Kumar asked me, 'Do you have much business ?'

'Nothing special,' I said. 'Just a petty business.'

'By car or on foot ?' he asked.

'On foot. People like me cannot afford to use a car always. Moreover it is good for health to walk' I said.

Meanwhile the official entered the room and said, 'Mr. Mahesh Kumar, the work is done. Please take this file and give it to the import section. Your paper is here. Take it from there.'

The official handed the file to Mahesh Kumar. Mahesh Kumar said 'just a moment' to me and went out of the room with the file. I requested the official about my matter. But he said he would look into it the next day. Today he was too busy. However, I was not sure that he would look into it the next day. So I just said 'allright' and got out of the room.

I had just come down the stairs and to the door when I saw Mahesh Kumar in front of me. He had achieved his purpose. I said, 'So soon you have finished your business ?'

'Well! there was no need of lengthy process.'

'For how long had it been pending?'

'Well! I submitted it just the other day. These idiots would have to go without food if they take long.'

Feeling irritated at my own failure, I smiled and said, 'Oh! you have finished your work so quickly. Well! Businessmen like you don't have time, too. It is better to finish as soon as possible.'

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Asking about my affair, he said, 'Did you finish yours ?'

They say, today they have no time. They will do it tomorrow.'

'What ? They didn't do it ? If you had told me, I could make them do it for you, telling them that you are my acquaintance. But you didn't tell me.'

I was surprised to hear him say such things - a foreigner recommending a native citizen in a office of his own country. However he was saying all these things for my good, yet I couldn't tolerate. I said to myself - I can let my interest be hurt. But I do not want to see such situation prevail in my country.

I didn't react to what he said. I just kept silent. He said,

'Where are you going now ?'

'I think I'll go home.' I said.

'What will you do going home right now ? Why not come along with me ?'

'Where ?'

'To my office.'

I accepted his invitation. He moved towards his car. I followed him. I sat in the front seat with him. He drove the car himself. As he was driving towards his office, he said, 'Are you going to start foreign trade yourself ?'

'I have not started yet. I would like to. But it doesn't seem possible for people like us.'

Possibly he was taking me to his office for consultation about foreign trade business. I asked him, 'Have you started foreign trade yourself ?'

'I have been dealing in foreign trade for long. You know very well. I used to deal in foreign trade under other people's import license. Now I have my own registered firm. This is the difference. That's all.'

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I said, 'You are an Indian citizen. How did you register your firm ? Or you have already obtained Nepalese citizenship like your colleague, Dhariwala ?'

'I will tell you later.' he said ending our conversation.

I knew very well his early hard days in Kathmandu. He used to work for the salary of only two hundred rupees. He used to live in an ordinary room for which he would pay just fifty rupees. Today Mahesh Kumar owns three cars and lives in a bungalow for which rent is eighteen hundred rupees. He used to tell me everything frankly. But today he was reserved. I wondered, why ?

We reached his office. Parking the car, he said, 'I have to take your counselling about something. Let's go upstairs.'

He took me to his office. I had been to his office some three months back. Now I see the office had undergone a drastic change. More staff working in the office. Mahesh Kumar has his separate cabin for himself. When we entered his cabin, he instantly asked what I would like to drink - tea, coffee or cold drinks ?

He called his office peon, 'Bahadur! Oh, Bahadur!'

A man entered the room. 'Yes sir!'

I had heard such a name only in the Indian cities like Calcutta, Delhi or Bombay. But today, I have heard such a name in Kathmandu too. When I heard such a name, it hurt me. Now I began to feel kind of hatred towards Mahesh Kumar. I could not keep quiet about this. So I asked the young man, 'Is your name Bahadur, young man ?'

He replied, 'Yes sir!'

I didn't believe him. I said, 'How 'Bahadur' alone could be anyone's name ?'

'Here my master calls me Bahadur. So my name is Bahadur. That's all.'

'How long have you been working here ?'

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'About three months.'
'What was your name before ?'
'My real name is Ram Prasad.'
'Then why do they call you 'Bahadur' ? Tell them they should call you Ram Prasad.'

Mahesh Kumar understood me what I meant. Feeling somewhat uneasy, he said, 'Ram Prasad sounds a bit long name. If I call him 'Kanchha', there is one Kanchha here already. 'Bahadur' is an easy and smart name. So we call him 'Bahadur'.

'If he had shown any heroism, it was alright to call him 'Bahadur'. Bahadur means 'hero' or brave. But I don't think he has accomplished any such heroic act. So why he should be given the title of a 'hero' without any heroic exploit ?'

Mahesh Kumar felt bad and said somewhat blushing, 'Well! Nepalese people had accomplished acts of heroism in the past history. So to call them 'Bahadur' meaning 'hero' is quite nice and appropriate, too. Don't you think so ? Moreover, they call their servants as 'Kanchha' and 'Bahadur' everywhere in India.'

'Yes! the word 'Bahadur' is nice in itself. But we don't like to be called 'Bahadur', you know!'

'Well! Let's drop this matter anyway.' he said, 'What are you doing nowadays ?'

'Oh! I am not doing anything worth mentioning,' I said,

'I am just looking after my domestic affairs.'

He started looking into his official files. After a moment's silence, I said, 'Mr. Mahesh Kumar! Are you dealing in foreign trade through your own firm ?'

'Yes! What to do ? Nepal government's policy is not good. Sometimes they say this, sometimes they say that. Whatever changes they bring about in their policies, we also have to make changes in our trade patterns to suit their changing policies. I would like to remind you that previously we carried our foreign

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trade by purchasing import license at the rate of hundred and sixty percent. Now government has changed its policy. Now they are not going to pay the export bonus. Now, tell me how can you carry out your foreign trade business ? So, as the government changes its policies, we change our trade policies, too. For this very reason, I have registered my own firm.'

'Do you think that government keeps changing its policies ?' I asked him,

He replied, 'Yes, the policy of government is not one and the same. It always keeps changing. Sometimes it distributes license on bonus; sometimes it goes to fix two exchange rates for dollar twelve and sixteen and make the import license free. Sometimes they bring the exchange rate of sixteen down to four teen. Whatever they do, they, however, cannot make us go into loss. Because they cannot work out their policies without our suggestions and advice.'

'Who gives suggestion and advice ?' I asked with curiosity,

'Our group certainly.'

'What kind of a group is it ?'

'He laughed sarcastically and said, 'It is not a visible group that you can see. Don't think that we are existing here as easily as you might think. Moreover, don't think that I am operating my business alone. We important businessmen have organized ourselves into a groups, you know! And when need arises, we also include very important officials. We very often meet on phone. But I cannot show you this group.'

It was clear from his statements that the entire trade of Nepal is controlled by this group. They can do anything. As he was making his statements very frankly and without fear there was no room for doubt. I had seen with my own eyes how he was respected in the government official circle. He also had proposed to help me in my official business, introducing me to the officials as his man. so I didn't find any reason to disagree with him or

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refute his statements. So I went on listening to him, dazzled by his free and frank statements.

He went on, 'You have seen yourself how I make them work. Things were carried out immediately the moment I was there. We do not like dilly - dallying, you know! We contact the departmental heads on phone when we need. We hate procrastination. We are ready to give them as much as they want. But they must work fast.'

He continued jubilantly, 'I think your matter has been pending for many days in that office. Is it so ? What is it ? Can you tell me ?'

Since he was so frank, I didn't feel like hiding anything from him. So I said, 'The matter is not so important. I had three hundred and twenty - five rupees for some purpose. But I was informed that the purpose could not be materialized under some rules. And I also came to know that the money deposited would be refunded as a rule if the purpose failed to get materialized. That's why, I had just gone to get that money refunded. That's all.'

'How many times did you visit the office ?'

'So many times.'

'That means, four - five times ?'

'No. More than that.'

'Then you are not going to get the money back easily. If you are ready to give them ten or fifteen percent of the amount, you will get it back immediately.'

'Why should I give them percentage to get my money back ?'

'What will you do ? This is the rule of your office. Either agree to give them some percentage or abandon it. There is no other way.'

'How can I do that in the office ?'

'Either you tell them directly or indirectly. So long you do not tell them, they will not understand. And as long as they will not understand, they will not work. Either tell

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them when you find them alone in the office, or tell them on the road side. But tell them anyhow. It will work like a magic and the matter is attended immediately. For myself, I call them here in my office for my own business.'

I cannot do as he is doing. I do not know what he knows. That's why there is such a vast difference between him and me. The progress he has made in five years I cannot make throughout my whole life. Of course, whatever he is saying is for my good. But have I any courage to act according to his suggestions ? I cannot do what is beyond my capacity. Lost in such challenging thought, I said to him, 'Oh! you mean, you can call government officials for your business right here in your office ?'

He said laughingly, 'You don't believe ? Well! they must come. They have to. They cannot do otherwise. We have so many paid - officials you know! I mean, we pay them for helping our business. I do not mean government salary.'

He added, 'If we do not pay them, our business process slackens. If the process slackens, the whole business falls into disarray. In business you have to work fast, you know! Moreover, we were talking about the government officials. Well! why shouldn't they come to us ? As you have come to my office now, so they come, too. They are our friends. Do you want me to call an official from any office where we have contact ? If we call them, they rush to us, leaving all their works. They get benefit this way. The more calls we make, the more money they get. What do you think ?'

The telephone rang. He stopped talking. Receiving the phone, 'Hello!What ?one million ?O.K. ... allright! ... allright ... bye!'

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While he was talking over the phone, our coffee had arrived at the table. Putting the receiver back, he gestured me to take the coffee. Taking the cup of coffee in my hand, I said, 'Mr. Mahesh Kumar! Can you really summon any government official here right now ?'

'Why ? Don't you believe me ?'

'No. It's not that. I mean, how can any government official come during office hours. It's impossible. I doubt it certainly.'

'Alright! you say, which officer ?'

He was now asking me 'Which officer ?'. It obviously meant that he had contact with all the government offices. That put me in difficulty. I could not decide which office I should suggest.

I asked him again, 'You mean, any office ? That is, all the offices of Nepal?'

'No. Not that. If you say 'Call a master from the university' I can't. What I mean is - any official of the government offices with which we have our business concern.'

At the moment the same office came to my mind where I had been today. So I said, 'Please! call an officer of the office where we met today. But not a clerk. He should be an officer.'

'Which officer ?'

He put me in difficulty again! Which officer should I suggest ? I do not know anyone. I thought - if the official would be above the clerk that could be helpful to me also to get my refund of three hundred and twenty-five rupees. So I said, 'Please! call any official above the rank of the clerk who comes immediately receiving your call.'

'Alright! I will clear up your doubt,' he said and started dialing the telephone. Talking on the line, he said, 'Hello! Who's speaking ? ... Can I speak to any officer there

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in the office ? ... alright! ... I am Mahesh Kumar from New Road on the line ... Oh, can you come down to my office right now ? ... Please, do come ... I will be waiting for you ... Thanks!'

Putting the receiver back, he said, 'Some officers have gone out to attend meetings. I found one. I have told him to come. He will be here any moment.'

Having ordered an officer he struck a conversation on trade. He was seeking this opportunity for a long time. Showing sympathy towards me he suggested that I too should enter the foreign trade business. He said emphatically, 'You should not miss this opportunity to work in collaboration with us. It would be very profitable for us all.'

As I understood him, he was encouraging me to work in collaboration with them against the policy of the government which I couldn't do. On understanding his meaning clearly, I told him straight, 'This I cannot do. I am sorry! Moreover, I do not need to make money this way!' My reply failed to stop him. He enthusiastically switched on to Hindi and lectured on the importance of money.

In the middle of our conversation, there came a stranger in the room. Mahesh Kumar welcomed him, and said, 'Welcome! Welcome! Oh! you have come so soon. Take your seat, please!'

Mahesh Kumar introduced me to him. I came to know he was one of the section officers of the same office, the same office where I had been so many times and found no official had a minute to spare for me.

Mahesh Kumar explained my matter to the officer and he also advised him, if possible, to help me in the matter immediately.

The officer turned to me and said, 'How long has the matter been pending ? And in which section is it ?'

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'About three months now since I had deposited the money. And it is about two and a half months since I was told that the deposit would be refunded. I had deposited the money. And it is about two and a half months since I was told that the deposit would be refunded. I have already been to the office so many times. Tomorrow they have given me time again. I have to see to it if they would help me.'

'If you come to the office tomorrow, please! see me first. I will help you in whichever section the matter is pending.'

Mahesh Kumar said, addressing me, 'Yes! you remain assured - your problem is solved. You see him first when you go to the office as he has suggested. Everything will be fine!'

The officer said, supporting Mahesh Kumar, 'Yes! yes! everything will be alright. No problem!'

'What I had not wanted from the bottom of my heart, happened. I didn't want this situation to take place. But it had developed unintentionally.'

The officer and Mahesh Kumar started talking about their mutual problems. It showed that they had deep friendship between them. Mahesh Kumar also told the officer about his visit to the office and expressed his regret as he couldn't see the director. In reply to the officer's query whether there was any urgent matter to be attended, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Just to help this friend of mine, I have troubled you! Thank you!'

Whatever reason was there to summon the officer, clever Mahesh Kumar said, 'As this kind of matter should not be talked over the phone, I troubled you to make this trip.' In reply the officer said, 'Yes! you are right! It is always better to carry on business face to face.'

Mahesh Kumar requested him to stay for having tea, but he just thanked and wanted to move. Mahesh

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Kumar didn't have any business with him at this moment. He had summoned the officer just for clearing up my doubt. By chance I also had some business in the office, it was also by the way got appended to the drama. Otherwise how long it would go on pending ? God knows!

Mahesh Kumar said, sending off the officer, 'Please come to my house tomorrow evening. I have something to send for the director.'

'Tomorrow evening ? Allright!' said the officer and got out of the room.

After a moment's silence, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Did you see the power of money ?'

I could not utter a word. I was dazzled. I was just staring at MaheshKumar. What he had said, came out to be true. My doubt disappeared. In my mental vision, the Mahesh Kumar of the past and the Mahesh Kumar of today were moving like figures on the cine screen. A foreigner was bragging and boasting in such a fearless manner in my country. I was just puzzled and could not discriminate whether it was imitable or protestable. Breaking my silence, he said, 'You do something. If you will not, you will have to repent. Your children will curse you!'

I said in a mild manner, 'I like to do something. But I won't like to do what you are saying, or shall I say, I don't have guts for such things. You suggest me something else good and easy to carry out. I am ready. I think it over later on, whether I should work alone or work in collaboration with you. I must do some sort of business. Without doing some business, I can't maintain my family.'

Cutting me short, he said, 'You can't cut gold by honest ways you know! You must resort to some sort of trickery if you want to get something. So what I say, take it for granted. Outherwise, after some days, you will have to sell your car. After some years you will have to put your

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house on sale. As a result, your family will suffer. Today, you are not driving because you can't afford petrol. Likewise, tomorrow you will not be able to maintain your car. I am sure of that, so shut up your eyes and join us.'

Reacting to his suggestions I said, 'Look! Mr. Mahesh Kumar! I agree with you. Money is everything. Even then I am unable to do what you are suggesting. Because this is my birth - place. Here I have relatives, friends and acquaintances. I can't go in for the unthinkable and put my prestige on stake. If prestige is gone, everything is gone. It is better to jump into the river than to remain alone! I mean, I don't want to get excommunicated by my society and remain alone, you know! Therefore, my intention is just to work honestly and what I don't have I don't care about it.' I further said, 'You are out of your country; out of your society. You have only one purpose - to make money. Twenty - four hours you are dedicated to money mentally and physically. Even when your prestige gets hurt here, it doesn't matter. Because nobody knows you here, and nobody cares. On the other hand, when you go back home with your purse, your prestige heightens. Therefore, Mr. Mahesh Kumar! you can work here anyway you like without any worry. But I cannot. You may take it as my weakness or my principle. Whatever you may choose.'

When I was still explaining my case to Mahesh Kumar, two men entered the room. They looked like belonging to Mahesh Kumar's community. They sat in the chairs lined up on the sides of the table. They started talking in their own tongue. I just observed them silently. About after five minutes of talk among themselves, the two men started gazing at me.

'Who is this gentleman ?' one of them asked Mahesh Kumar about me. I pretended as if I didn't

understand. Mahesh Kumar said in their tongue, 'This is a native gentleman. We can use him to serve our interests very well. But this fool doesn't understand. I am trying to make him understand. If we could convince this fellow, we can make a fortune roll. We cannot take everyone into confidence. If we did that we might get into trouble. I am thinking of working through this gentleman. I know him for many years. And we can place our full faith in him in financial matters.'

Another man said, 'Yes! he looks like as you say.'

When they finished talking, Mahesh Kumar introduced me to them, 'Here these gentlemen are two of the biggest businessmen in Kathmandu. He is Mr. Shanta Ram Jetya. He is Kisun Kebdiwala. Now they rank among the biggest businessmen of Nepal.'

Mahesh Kumar started in Burmese. All the three were now talking in Burmese. I guessed easily that they belonged to the same group. Perhaps they had come to Kathmandu together. For about fifteen minutes they went on talking in Burmese which I didn't understand even a word. Maybe they have finished their confidential talk by now. Or Mahesh Kumar thought that I was feeling odd. So he switched over to Hindi.

'Kisun's imported goods is lost in the ship. Now it doesn't make much sense to claim compensation from the insurance company, because the imported goods were underinvoiced. So the claim cannot bring full compensation to the owner of the goods. While the actual value of the goods is five million rupees, the goods were underinvoiced at rupees half a million. In case claim is made, the insurance company will check the goods of which actual value is rupees five million but is underinvoiced at rupees half a million. Only after checking and verification, the insurance company will be ready to pay half a million

rupees. Therefore it is almost meaningless to make any claim to the insurance company.'

When I heard all this, I was stupefied! Kisun, who incurred a loss of four and a half million rupees is talking easily. If I lose one rupees, I be as cheerful as Kisun who has lost four and a half million. According to their description, I came to know, they are not going to claim even that half a million rupees with the insurance company. Shanta Ram has lost only ten percent of his goods. He came to know this when his goods arrived at one of the Nepal-India border customs. Shanta Ram also incurred a loss of seven lac. This loss of seven lac also didn't seem to make any difference with Shanta Ram.

Kisun while talking about the lost goods, said, 'The ship that sailed from Hong Kong was lost in the sea for three months. I had given up all hope for my money just then. Maybe, the loss took place while unloading the goods in Korea. But how to find it out ? On the other hand, when the ship had sailed from Korea after clearing the load, it doesn't make any sense either to hope that we can find the goods there. We can do nothing but to give up all our hope.'

I did not know if such big businessmen had existed in Nepal. Kathmandu appeared to be a small place only outwardly.

I also heard them consoling each other. Kisun was saying that his loss was only ten percent of the amount so far made by overinvoicing. In the case of Shanta Ram, he had won a lottery. he made money before, he made money now. Though not referred ? I could guess that. Mahesh Kumar too must be in the same position as his companions.

Meanwhile, the telephone rang. All became attentive. Mahesh Kumar handed the receiver to Shanta Ram and asked, 'did you say you would be here ?'

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Talking over the phone, he said, 'Hello! What happened Mr. Sharma ? ... Oh! you mean ... they don't want to act ?? ... Give the idiots two kicks ... If they do not come to sense ... give them three ... not more ... If so ... I am in the office of Mahesh ... you come ... Allright! ... Thank you!'

Shanta Ram said, 'The mouths of these idiots are ever - widening. What you could make them do before with one thousand only now they take one lac.'

Kisun said, 'You have taught them to play the tricks of lacs yourself. That's why they act like this. You make ten lac, you give them one lac. What's wrong!'

Shanta Ram said, 'Even ninety percent of the profit seems to be impossible. You know very well, three months before, a cement license was finalized at ten lac. But later on the matter dragged on through the secretary as well as at ministerial level and finally it was concluded at thirty lac. Now when I calculated the profit, it was just twenty-five lacs. Not more than that.'

Cutting in, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Let me take over at twenty - five lac. Will you ?'

Shanta Ram said laughingly, 'How can I ? Over the months L.C. was opened in the bank. Let's figure out the bank commission, the interest of the money, the remuneration of the workers and other miscellaneous expenditure - who is going to bear all this ? What I mean is - subtracting all this expenditure, the profit is just twenty - five lac. How can I let you take over at twenty - five lac ? If you want to take over, three million as food for the idiots; one million as bank commission and interest for three months; keep aside the workers remuneration; but add half a million as miscellaneous expenditure, two and a half million as my net profit and one million as gifts to the

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higher authorities. In all eight million. If you are ready to give me eight million, I will let you take over. Will you ?'

Kisun was inciting Mahesh Kumar. He said, 'Mahesh, take over at seventy million. You will make hundred percent profit. You don't have to worry over it. Do you know ? The price of cement is rising in the world market. When the price of cement is going up in the world market, the cement factories here also are bound to raise the price. In case they will not, we know how to do it ?'

'Shanta Ram's cement has already arrived under the old price. Keep the cement in the godown just for one month, the price will shoot up by fifteen to twenty percent. Then your net profit will be eight to nine million. There is nothing to worry about. Remain assured. The cement factories here cannot even meet thirty percent of the total need of Nepal. So seventy percent of the need will be in your hand. We will fix the rate somehow or the other. Don't hesitate! Take over!'

Mahesh Kumar said, 'Kisun! how about fifty-fifty ? If you agree, I will take over.'

Kisun accepted instantly. Shanta Ram makes a profit of lacs of rupees immediately. Listening to these people, I was just bewildered. I felt as if it wasn't serious business deals they were making. It looked as if they were just indulging in commonplace gossip games.

Heaving a sigh, Shanta Ram said, 'When shall I get the money ?'

Mahesh Kumar and Kisun exchanged glances. Mahesh Kumar took out a check-book and wrote a check of rupees one million in favour of Shanta Ram as an advance money.

Right at this moment, a man entered the room. I recognized him instantly. He was Mr. Sharma. He is about forty-five or fifty. I greeted him respectfully. He took the

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chair by me. He was in government service a few years back. I had known him, as government servant. He has served in various capacities : an Undersecretary, a co-secretary as well as a Director in some departments. So far I know he was known to be an honest and expert administrator during his days. I asked him if he was spending his retired life in the business field.

No sooner did Mr. Sharma take his seat than he opened his brief case, took out some papers and handed them to Shanta Ram. Shanta Ram went through the papers carefully completely absorbed. Mr. Sharma turned towards me and said, 'How are you, friend! Any business here ?'

'Oh! fine! thank you! I have just come to see Mr. Mahesh Kumar.'

'Are you in business yourself ?'

'No, nothing yet.'

'You should do something.'

'I am thinking. Well! Nothing can be done overnight.'

Shanta Ram broke in, Mr. Sharma! do you know him ? Oh! Mr. Sharma knows every Tom, Dick & Harry in Kathmandu. Don't you ?' And went further, 'They are not accepting three lac ?'

'No sir!'

'Then how much do they want ?'

'One million.'

'Oh! for one million ? ... just for that much of work ? Well! we will not undertake this business. Leave it! Let someone else do it.' said Shanta Ram irritatingly, 'They think we have nothing else to do, so we run after them.' he added, 'I do not need work. I am not going to pay one million. Two years before, one of my colleagues managed one lac. Last year, some other businessman managed it one lac. Last year, some other businessman managed it one lac.'

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Last year, some other businessman managed it for at two lac. This year I am going to pay three lac. Why do they not consider me ? Leave it, Mr. Sharma, we will not in for this business.'

Sharma said gently, 'We have collected pulses from all parts of the country, deciding that this time we will get the license anyhow. If somebody else gets the license, then he will fix the price. Then we would be forced to sell our pulses at his price. We cannot store our pulses in godown for one year. Moreover, we have taken two lac. US dollars as an advance from the party in Singapore. So in my opinion, we must get the license anyhow. We cannot afford to let anyone else get it.'

Sharma's logic put Shanta Ram in a difficult position. And he was forced to reconsider the matter, taking back what he had blurted out in temper and emotion. Following a moment's contemplation, he said, 'They are asking one million for all - from top to bottom ? Don't we have to pay any extra money ?'

'Yes! No extra payment. I think so.'

'Well! if you are determined, O.K.! Fix it at eight lac. But they should issue the export license immediately.'

Sharma said, 'Alright sir! I will try. I hope, they will agree at that. Now, sir, let me go.'

Sharma took leave of us all. As Sharma got out of the room I asked Shanta Ram, 'Mr. Shanta Ram! do you have partnership with Mr. Sharma ?'

'He is my servant' he replied laughing,

'Servant'! I said in amazement,.

'Yes, yes, servant ! He is on my office staff. He looks after my official business. He is one of my old friends, too. He has already retired. His pension could not maintain his family. When he told me about his hardship, I

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had sympathy for him, I employed him. I give him a handsome salary.'

'How much is his salary ?'

'Eighteen hundred per month. Beside, I have given him a vehicle for official trips. I have let him deal in financial matters. He is a very honest fellow.'

Sharma is a stupid guy! I said to myself While he gets eighteen hundred, he is helping others make eighteen lac. And moreover, how could a well - known administrator like him go to a businessman and accepts to agree as his servant ? Shame!

To satisfy my curiosity, I asked Shanta Ram gently, 'Mr. Shanta Ram! as you have not obtained the citizenship of this country, how do you run your foreign trade business ?'

As he heard me utter these words, he came to a violent temper and croaked, 'Are you a fool! What are you talking about ? Nobody has so far asked me such a question. Who are you to ask me this question ?'

Though he lost his temper and abused me, I didn't care and didn't think about it. Trying to cheer up myself, I said, 'Mr. Shanta Ram! maybe I am a fool! Maybe I am an idiot! But I am not asking you this question out of any ill-feeling. If you didn't like my question, I would take it back. Please do not feel it otherwise.'

He said animatedly, 'Who is a citizen here ? Who is not a citizen here ? Those who have money, are citizens here. Those who have no money, are not citizens here. Understand ? Do not make mistake to think that the Rungta, the Agrawal, the Duggad or the Phuggad, or the Raunihar or the Phaunihar, the Kebdiwala or the Tibdiwala are the citizens of this country. Do you think they have their social and marital relationships here ? No, they don't. They have only their business here.' He further said, 'This

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country is only a money making place for them. When they make enough money, they take to their heels! Their house here is only for show, and for saving the money that is a squandered on rent. Go to India, then you will know where they belong to, and where they have their home and family. So I suggest you never try to know and ask anyone whether he is the citizen of this country or not. Allright! Hum!'

Trying to pacify Shanta Ram, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Shanta Ram! calm down! you have blood pressure, you should not talk too much. He did not ask this question out of any ill-feeling. As he did not know you, so he asked, there is nothing wrong.'

Shanta Ram did not get pacified. He went on more animatedly, 'Do you know who developed the foreign trade here in your Nepal ? Can you say the foreign trade was the same ten years before as you see it now ? Never. The money that you see in the market today is just due to us. Go and check the government records you will find, how much advanced foreign trade has been made in this country within past ten years. And it is we who taught the Bhotias here how to do the foreign trade business, you know! Today we have made your Kathmandu another Hong Kong. And you are questioning me whether I am a citizen of this country ? Hum! very well!'

Cutting in, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Shanta Ram! don't talk too much. You don't know who is he. He didn't ask you the question in negative sense. You try to understand him. Don't talk too much.'

Shanta Ram said again complaining bitterly, 'The way he talked is objectionable. I can't remain silent. I am not living in this country for nothing. They have requested me to live in this country. I pay twenty-two million rupees as income tax every year. And there are many like me who pay as much income tax as I do. Add all the income taxes

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that we pay, it comes to billions of rupees. So we are the People who fill the state treasury here, you know! We are not living in this country for nothing ?'

Trying to stop him, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Well! well! it is enough now! You pay twenty-two million because you make millions. You have not done any favour to this country. Rather this country has done favour to you. Let's stop now.'

Shanta Ram turned towards Mahesh Kumar and said, 'What did you say ? This country has done favour to us ? On what ground you say so ? Prove it!'

Mahesh Kumar had tried to put an end to the argument, but he only took my place and had to take the brunt of Shanta Ram's rage. Perhaps Mahesh Kumar had felt so bad over Shanta Ram's unkind and rough treatment towards me because I had come to Mahesh Kumar's office as his guest.

Reminding Shanta Ram of his past days in Kathmandu, Mahesh Kumar said, 'Today you have made a fortune because of the blessings of Pashupati Nath. Don't be proud! This country has definitely done favour to you. Don't think otherwise. You have to accept it that you have spent the happiest days of your life here in Kathmandu. I myself pray to Pashupati Nath for blessings that I may spend my whole life in this kind of business here. There is no country in the whole world where you can collect currency notes as easily as you can collect here.'

Shanta Ram kept quiet for a while. Kisun supported Mahesh Kumar and added further, 'We shall have our job done and make our fortune before these people here become conscious.'

Following a moment's silence, Shanta Ram said, 'The important authorities here felt our importance to uplift

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the living standard of this country. That's why we are here. We work here in the way that could be beneficial to both sides. Don't make mistakes to think that we are working here only for our own benefit. What do you think of the economic policies of this country ? I can say, it is a house made of sand which can fall apart any moment. So to cement this sandy house they need our cooperation and our presence. Moreover, you have asked me whether I am a citizen of this country. I want to make it clear to you. Listen! They had offered me this country's citizenship twice. But I didn't want to obtain the citizenship right away. Only last year I became a citizen of this country when they put an end to the bonus system in export license. So I have rights as you have in this country, ou see! I am a citizen of this country so long as I want to be. So, I am a citizen of this country now. That's all about it.'

I said laughing, 'This is what I mean. You must have been carrying out your foreign trade business as a Nepalese citizen. I didn't mean that you were doing your business as a foreigner. You misunderstood me and got angry with me for nothing.'

Supporting me Kisun said, This is his weakness. Moreover he has blood pressure. He gets angry suddenly. Please don't mind if he had said anything while in temper. We businessmen should not indulge in temper and emotion.'

The telephone rang. Mahesh Kumar received and handed the receiver to Shanta Ram. It transpired, an ex-minister has come to see Shanta Ram. He is sitting in his office. Receiving the information, Shanta Ram and Kisun left immediately.

Shanta Ram left without saying a word to me. Only his eyes spoke. I found money power throbbing in shanta Ram's fierce eyes. If I were not in Mahesh Kumar's office

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and seated with him, I would have been damned to hell by him. Well! What can we do ? We have to put up with it all! Let it be.

Mahesh Kumar said, 'Oh! you raised that issue with Shanta Ram in vain and had this argument.'

I said, 'This is an issue that always keeps pricking my mind. I raised this issue with you, too, remember ? But you didn't say anything.'

He said laughing, 'Yes! yes! you had raised this issue with me, too. But I didn't say anything in reply, because I didn't feel it necessary to tell you anything about it. And until I tell you, you will not know. If you didn't know, my business would remain a secret. Most important thing for a businessman is the secrecy of his business. If this secrecy is divulged, you are done away with.'

'If so, I don't want to listen, too.'

'Yes! not to listen is better, you know!' said Mahesh Kumar, 'I am an Indian citizen. I am now. I shall remain so tomorrow. I don't want to get an illegal citizenship like Shanta Ram's. If such a need arose, I would give up my Indian citizenship and obtain Nepalese citizenship honestly. I would never put my feet in two boats.'

'Yes! very good idea!'

I am of the view that here we are allowed to enjoy a good deal of freedom to carry out our business. And the people of our community here have also extended us a lot of help and cooperation. We have been enjoying cooperation from all quarters. Now we are so mixed up that nobody can raise his finger at us.'

Putting emphasis on his proposition for a new undertaking, he said, 'It would be excellent if you join us. You have seen Shanta Ram's pose and showing off. This is nothing but the power of money, you see!'

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'Mr. Mahesh Kumar! one should think over seriously before going in for action about anything. Moreover, anything that involves going against government rules and regulations is more risky. So at the moment, I am not in a position to say 'Yes!' to your proposition.'

'If you are not convinced after so much of my suggesting and counselling, it's alright! But you please! think coolheadedly over my propos and give your reply after one or two days. O.K.?'

It is hours since I have been to Mahesh Kumar's office. Now wanting to move, I said, 'So, Mr Mahesh Kumar! allow me to move now!'

He said, 'Alright! you think over my plan and let me know by tomorrow.'

Getting up to move, I said, 'Many thanks for coffee and for so much of information that I received during my few hours sitting in your office. Thank you for everything.'

When I was moving towards the door, he said, 'Please! do not mind Shanta Ram's reactions. And reply me by tomorrow.'

'Never mind! It's not such a serious matter.' I said and got out of the room. In the outer room I saw three Nepalese working on their respective tables. Among them, I saw a girl whom I knew very well. Miss Shashi Rana is an M.A. in economics. However, she had been out of employment for a long time. When I saw her, my footsteps naturally moved towards her table. I said, 'Hello! Miss Rana. Are you working here?'

'Namaste! nice to see you here. Yes, I am working here nowadays. And how about you? Any business here?'

'Oh! I have just come to see Mr. Mahesh Kumar. And now moving. How long have you been here?'

'About three months. I was out of employment for a year. Finally I am employed here.'

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'Good! I am glad to see you here. Alright! see you.'
'Namaste!'

I was on the road. But my mind was in Mahesh Kumar's office. The issues discussed there reeled in my mind. Mr. Mahesh Kumar who was served so devotedly by a 'Bahadur' Nepalese, Shanta Ram who was served by an experienced Nepalese like Mr. Sharma. Business of millions of rupees by just power of mouth. All this was mystery. I had failed to grasp the realities in them.

In front of me the signboard Bishal Bazar, the Supermarket. I had not gone in since the day of its inception. My footsteps moved naturally and effortlessly into the supermarket. I gazed at the glittering world around. 'We have made your Kathmandu another Hong Kong' Shanta Ram's impudent sentence rang in my mind.

Wednesday

'What happened! What's wrong?'

The words echoed in my ear. I woke up with a start! Before me stood my unnerved younger brother. He again asked, 'What happened? What was the matter?'

I could not think ...Nothing was coming to my mind

Why was he asking? There was nothing that I could tell.

I looked at the clock. It was quarter to six. Usually I wake

Up at six. According to my waking time, the difference was

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Just fifteen minutes. Raising my head from the pillow, I

Said, 'Why? What happened?'

'With whom were you talking The asked with curiosity, 'When I entered the room, you were saying 'Namaste, sir! Namaste! Didn't you recognize me? Did you forget me you were saying? With whom were you talking?'

My brother put me in a surprise with his queries. I didn't remember talking to anyone at this hour. Moreover, in the early morning hours, there was no possibility of meeting anyone, too. Maybe I had a dream, and in dream I was talking to someone. I tried to remember the scenes of the dream. And the scenes of the dream started appearing in my mental vision. 'I had a dream.' I said to my brother.

My brother said laughingly, 'What sort of a dream did you have in which you had to say 'Namaste, sir! Namaste!'

Sure, you must have had meeting with some very important person.'

'Yes, yesterday I had met a very important person in a restaurant. He said he was an ex-minister. And he was a minister not once but several times. And the ex-minister had assured me that he was going to be minister again. And I had a dream of the same minister.'

My brother took interest in what I was talking about and came to take his seat on the bed. I pulled up my leg

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and let him sit. My brother said, 'Have you been to some hotel last night.

.'Yes! Dhurba Nath had invited me to some restaurant at New Road for dinner.'

My younger brother used to come home late in the evening. He was then preparing for his exam. And our meeting time was in the morning. And he used to chalk out our programme for the day also during this time. When he heard the name of one whom, he knew, he said, 'Mr. Dhurba Nath, you said ?'

'Yes! He had promotion. So he had invited me to dinner.'

'Only two of you?'

'Yes! Only two of us'

'Then which minister you were talking about?'

Now he was compelling me to tell him the whole story about the incident that had taken place the previous night. Our tea was yet to arrive. We were waiting for our tea. The incidence of the previous night was still fresh in my mind.

To celebrate his promotion, my friend Dhurba Nath had invited me to dinner in one of the good restaurants in town. All of a sudden he dropped at eight o'clock in the evening and said, 'Let's go to some restaurant. I am free this evening. From tomorrow I will not be free for fifteen days. And you will mind it if I make it later on. So I have decided that we should go this evening.' he said. I was put in a dilemma. Anyway I couldn't refuse his invitation.

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When we reached the restaurant, it was nine o'clock in the evening. The restaurant was packed with foreign tourists and Nepalese guests. We could not find any unoccupied table. We went to the reception and told the receptionist about this. He showed us a table where only one guest was sitting. Three seats were unoccupied. We went towards that table and asked the gentleman for permission to sit. He first looked at us from head to foot. Then glanced around. When he did not see any unoccupied table, he let us sit.

There were three plates on the table. One in front of the gentleman, two in front of us. In front of us there were two empty glasses too. The gentleman in front of us was clutching one glass with about half a peg of whisky. While he was clutching the glass with his right hand, with his left he was holding a king-size cigarette. He was concentrating his attention on the other part of the restaurant. But our attention was concentrated on him. My friend and myself were guessing in various ways about him. But I failed to make out whom and what kind of a person he was, although he looked to be an important personality. Though in language and appearance he was a Nepalese, it was difficult to make out who he actually was. At times we both looked at each other and tried to make out about the gentleman. We talked without language, I mean, talked in sign language.

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The waiter came to the table and asked for permission to take the empty plates. He signaled the waiter to take the two empty glasses also and ordered for another peg.

Now the table was cleared of all things except one ashtray and one glass in the hand of the gentleman. The gentleman who looked to be civilized, calm and quiet pressed his burning cigarette butt on the ashtray and lighted another one. I said to myself 'How long an overseas journey this 555 cigarette must have made to come to this country for the enjoyment of such people? And which country did manufacture that musical lighter which also was affording him a short-lived entertainment?'

After waiting for a few minutes, the order-keeper came to our table. My friend ordered his favorite vegetarian dish when the order-keeper told us to wait, as it would take sometime to prepare the dish. Then we ordered tomato soup over which we could pass our time.

The gentleman in front of us now started look in at us. His eyes were bloodshot from alcohol. He smiles at us. In return, we too smiled fulfilling our formality. He didn't say anything to us. He wanted to speak but he couldn't open his mouth. Because we both were strangers to him.

We struggled to empty our soup plates. Whereas he relished his wineglass. He kept on ordering peg after peg. But before we could finish our soup, our dishes

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arrived. As if to counter our order, he ordered chicken chili. When the gentleman ordered another peg, the order-keeper came to inform him respectfully that there was no more Scotch whisky in the restaurant, and asked whether he should serve country liquor?

The gentleman looked at the order-keeper from head to foot, then said, 'You don't know that I never drink homemade liquor? If I used to drink homemade, I would have drunk already. You bring scotch anyhow. If you don't have here, bring from outside.'

He requested respectfully, 'Our stock is finished. It is now ten o'clock in the night. Scotch is not available anywhere.'

He didn't listen to the order keeper's request and emphatically insisted on his demand, 'I want nothing else but scotch. Get scotch wherever you can get it from. I don't care. You should have told me about it already. When I am sitting in the restaurant, occupying my table, you can't say so. Open the store of the restaurant and bring me scotch.'

The order-keeper went back. We were busy having our dinner. Suddenly he addressed us and said, 'Nonsense! They say they don't have drinks when I am going on with my drink. Let them get it from anywhere. We customers only want to get our drink. What do you say?'

We had no concern with him to reply his query. He was unknown to us. Moreover, he was drunk. So we just responded him with our smile reluctantly.

He went on saying, 'No matter how late it is, I am not going to get out of here without my full peg. You know! I never have my drink incomplete.'

The supervisor of the restaurant came imploring, 'It is half past ten, sir! Unfortunately we don't have anymore scotch. Please! We beg your pardon for tonight.'

. Dashing the glass on the table, he said, 'You can't say 'No scotch'. Bring me scotch. Your concern is money. MY concern is scotch. Let it be ten, let it be twelve. I don't care about time.'

'Please! Sir! We are helpless tonight.'

He now started shouting, 'I don't want to listen to you. Tell me whether you will give me or not T

Now our table attracted the attention of all the guests of the restaurant. Everyone started staring at us and we felt ashamed. We couldn't change our table. And our dinner was getting cold and tasteless.

In the meantime, the manager of the restaurant came with the bill and said, 'Here is your bill. You have had thirty-five pegs of scotch. Please look at the bill. We are now out of our stock of scotch. Please! Pardon us.'

He turned towards the manager and shouted at him, 'Did you say I alone had thirty-five pegs of scotch? I have two friends with me.'

'Be that as it may, it is in your bill.'

'I am not going to pay this bill until I get my scotch.' He said and snatched the bill from the hand of the manager. The argument was picking up. We cut short our dinner. By that time, some three or four persons of the, staff were seated around the table. The manager said, 'We want to remind you, you can't get out of the restaurant without paying the bill.'

Dashing his hand on the table, he said, 'Do you know who am I? I am an ex-minister. Not ordinary minister;

Cabinet minister. If you are challenging me. I will teach you a lesson. Mind you!'

The manager said politely, 'Sir We don't have. Really we don't have. We are out of stock. And it is not available anywhere. Sir! Pleases pardon us!'

Setting his teeth, he shouted, 'I was drinking silently. You drove me to speak out. Now I know nothing else. I must have my full peg, even for my prestige. Bring me scotch.'

Muttering among them selves, the manager and the staff moved towards the counter. All the foreign guests were murmuring themselves; 'He is an ex-minister of this country.' Some of them were leaving. We also were thinking to leave. Unfortunately we happened to come to this table.

He was telling us, 'See! These people are bragging! If I want, I can close this restaurant tomorrow. They buy scotch in black market and charge twenty-six rupees and

fifty paisa per peg. And they think we don't know. We pay as much as they charge. Even then, we don't get it.'

We looked at each other. We were not going to respond to him. His bill dropped from his hand on the table, I could see the figures of the bill 'thirteen hundred and fifty rupees and twenty-five paisa only'. I wondered how could it be, So I started to figure out in my- mind. By the rate of twenty-six rupees fifty paisa per peg plus one packet of 555 cigarette, rupees twenty-five, snacks and dinner - all together can certainly make the bill of thirteen hundred and something.

Shocked by the amount of the bill, my brother interrupted, 'A man spent thirteen hundred and something in one evening?

My brother is a student. He gets sixty rupees per month

As pocket expenses. He has to meet all his expenses such

As the bus fare, tea and even cinema. If he was surprised

Hearing that a man spent thirteen hundred and something

Rupees in one evening, it was but natural. He had perhaps

Not seen that much money. If they had given him the bill it would have been more.

As he was a student of economics, he asked me with curiosity, 'What is the per capita income of our country?'

'Maybe about eight hundred and fifty rupees.'

'Then a Nepalese spent another Nepalese's eighteen-month's food- money in one evening's entertainment. Right? I had no answer to his question. I couldn't explain him on this subject either. He asked me again, 'How many ex-ministers, like him are there in Nepal?'

I said off hand, 'Maybe about a hundred or so. But don't think all of them are like him.'

'No. I don't mean that." He said, 'But that one about whom we are talking. We can figure out about him.'

'Yes, that we can do.'

'So let's figure out. His expenses in one year rob two hundred Nepalese of their, daily bread.. Do you believe it?'

I did not disagree to his logical argument. But I was not to expect his whole argument either. I was just looking at him silently.

He said, 'Do you know what is the ratio of the population sustaining below the poverty-line in this country?'

I said, According to the Planning Commission, it is more than forty percent.'

'What do you mean by 'more than'? Will you clarify it?'

I found myself in difficulty to explain it. Because 'more than' could mean anything. My figures were based on the report of Planning Commission. I had no other ground to increase the percentage, so I said, 'More than forty percent means roundabout forty percent.'

The Black sun

'No.' He said interrupting me, 'Forget the cities of the country, including Katmandu. Think of the infertile and unproductive rural areas of the country, inclusive of the mountains as well as of the flat Terai region of the country. Then figure out. You will get a clear picture of the economic situation of the country.' He further said, 'I am a student of economics. I will say, definitely the percentage of the population subsisting below the poverty line is eighty percent.'

'Maybe.'

'We can't be sure of the statistics issued by any Commission. The difference between forty and eighty is like the difference between the North and the South poles. But for them it doesn't make any difference.'

'But we should believe the responsible offices also.'

'How can we believe when their statistics is just to throw dust into the eyes of the public T

He advanced the Land Reform Scheme as an example in the process of his argument. I was forced to believe in what had happened under my own eyes. He was arguing to prove that even within the time frame of one hundred years Nepal would not see a society free from exploitation. I didn't try to refute his logic. I quietly went on listening to him.

In the meantime, our tea arrived. My brother stopped his argument and with his sips of tea, he merged himself in thinking.

The Black sun

My story of the previous night's incidence had yet to be finished. He said, reminding me, And did that ex-minister, get his scotch or not T

'Oh, no! And he just started pounding the table. The poor guys of the restaurant, including the manager, had gone out in search of scotch. Perhaps they didn't find.'

The restaurant was almost deserted. But the minister was still at his table. Neither he was letting us go. The minister was still waiting for his scotch. So he was holding us in conversation and would not let us go. He was saying, 'I don't care for money. I must get what I want. I have been minister four times in this country. I have been assistant minister, state minister and cabinet minister. Other people cannot become minister just for once. But this country has realized my importance and made me minister four times. Isn't it something? What do you think? I am sure. I am going to be minister again.'

My friends must have thought that if he would introduce himself to the minister, it could be helpful sometimes. So introducing himself to the minister, he said, 'Well! When you were cabinet minister, which was your ministry sir?'

Rolling his eyes, he said, 'So many ministries, I can't remember.'

'No. I mean, when you were cabinet minister.'

'Oh Forest Ministry?'

Time was rolling away. And with it the ex-minister's condition was worsening. Realizing the situation I said,

The Black sun

'Sir! Now it's time, you should take rest and you had better go home.'

He glanced at me, rolling his fully intoxicated eyes, and

..... Said, 'Where is my
..... scotch?'

'No more scotch, sir!' I said, 'It will be harmful to you now. Do you have any means of transport?'

..... 'I have
car outside.' shaking his head and pointing
..... His hand
towards the door, he said, 'Where are you...
..... Going? I drop
you. ?'

He went on, 'Did ... you ... know.. Me? If you. Did not

Know ... never.. Mind. A When I become.. Minister.. do not forget .. to see .. me .. right! I will .. do .. Something .. for you .. hum! I have.. helped ... many.. friends.. whom

L. met.. just.. like I met.. you.. Today.. O.K.! Hum'

I was glad in my heart. At least I had friendship with an ex- minister, if not with an officiating minister. He said he had been minister four times. If my luck favored me, he would become minister for the fifth time, too. I said, 'If you would become minister again, what could be your ministry, sir?'

'I .. would .. like .. to .. work .. in .. the .. Industry .. & Commerce.. Ministry.. hum!'

The Black sun

'What can we do in Industry and Commerce Ministry, sir ?'

"Mat .. is .. the .. Center .. of .. money .. hum!"

'What service can we do there?'

'You.. will.. get.. quota.. you.; will.. license.. If ..you do.. not.. work.. you.. can.. sell.. the.. license.. hum!'

My friend was happy and said to the ex-minister, 'We are happy to meet you, sir! Now we know each other. And we hope, you will not forget us.'

'Why should .. I! If .. I forget .. remind .. me .. we met .. at the .. restaurant .

To clear my doubt, I said, 'No. I mean, now you are just an ex- minister. So we can meet you anywhere anytime. But when you become a minister, it will not be easy to meet you. There will be a crowd of people at your residence and office; there will be your bodyguard and driver in your car. How can we have time and opportunity for private talk with you, sir?'

'You.. are.. right.. but.. there.. is.. a.. way.. you.. know! We.. are.. The ... representative.. of.. People a like..You..know! We.. are.. free.. we.. can.. meet ..and..talk.. everywhere .. you .. just .. say 'I .. have private .. with .. the.. minister'.. L. will.. spare.. time for.. you.. don't

worry! .. Hum?

By his suggestions, my doubt cleared off. It was now half past eleven in the night. The restaurant manager came to the ex- minister and said respectfully, 'Sir! I

The Black sun

tried my best I sent my whole staff to get it. But it is available nowhere. Excuse me, sir!'

Meanwhile I added, 'It is enough now. Sir is not going to drink anymore. It will be no good to him! And it is quite late, too.'

He glared at me, smiled drunkenly and brawled, 'O.K if .. the friends.. at .. my.. talks .. say.. so .. all right where.. is.. my.. bill ?'

The manager folded his hands and said, 'I have already presented the bill to you, sir! Sit should be with you, sir!'

There was no bill on the table. The minister was taking out all the papers and currency notes from his pockets and putting them on the table. But the bill was missing. The manager fetched the duplicate bill. The minister pushed the money that was scattered on the table towards me to pay the bill. There was about twenty or twenty-five thousand rupees. I paid the bill and returned the rest of the money to the minister. The minister murmured again, 'Let me pay.. the .. bill .. of .. these .. friends .. also .. take the.. money.. take.. hum!.. all right! .. hum!'

'All right! thank you, sir!' said the manager and moved towards the counter.

We could not dare refuse the offer the minister was making to pay our bill. My friend was just looking at me but could say nothing. We realized somehow that our friendship with the ex- minister was being strengthened.

The Black sun

Now I persuaded the minister to go home. When he tried to get up from the chair, following my request, he just dropped back in the chair with a thud. I thought 'He is now quite drunk!' We should get him out of the restaurant. I signaled my, friend. We both held him by the arms and lifted him up the chair and slowly took him out on the footpath. The road was almost deserted. Just a few cars were seen passing by. I said, 'Where is your car, sir T

With difficulty he showed us his car and said, 'This-.. is

my.. car.'

Now it was difficult for him to find his key. Finally he found the key and handed it to me and said, Unlock.. the car .. please!'

I examined the key. It was the key of the car. I unlocked the car and said, 'Where is the driver?

'No driver

'Who drives the car?

'Who drives.. ?.. I drive.. hum?

I didn't believe that he could drive. How could he drive when he can't even know the key of the car ?

I requested him to sit in the car. When he tried to enter the car, pushing my friend aside, he knocked against the door and fell down. We both helped him get up and requested him to sit in the car. This time he embraced the door of the car and kept hanging on it. Now we realized that it was dangerous for him to go home alone. So we decided not to send him alone. My

The Black sun

friend went to the manager, brought him along and showing him the car of the ex-minister, said, 'This is the car of the minister. As He is not in a condition to drive, it will remain here. Tomorrow his driver will come to take the car. Please! Take care of it. We will take him home in our car.'

The manager assured us about the safety of the car. I requested the minister to sit in my car. Starting the car, I asked, 'Where shall I drop you, sir ?

Waking up from his drowse, he murmured, 'Hum!.. take

me .. Tapathali .. O.K. .. hum! ..'

When I was passing by Bhadrakali, he said, 'Stop!'

'Why sir? I asked.

'I want .. to .. make .. water .. you .. know .. hum!'

When we heard him say this, we followed suit. We also felt like making water. So all of us got out of the car. The minister went to the roadside, zigzagging his way and hardly holding himself upright. We went to the other side of the road. When we returned to the car, we didn't see the minister. So we went to look for him. When we saw his condition, he made us laugh. But we also felt pity for him! As he couldn't unzip his pant, he made his water in it. We dragged him to the car. He stood up and brawled, 'See ... this ... flag-post.. ?

'Yes sir! we see.'

'L. knocked.. it.. down.. it.. hum.'

'Then what happened, sir said my friend.

The Black sun

'What happened.. ? .. accident! .. five thousand.. rupees in.. the.. workshop.. damn it! .. all right! .. never.. mind!

'Nothing happened to you, sir?' said my friend.

'Should .. anything .. happen to .. me .. how .. could you .. meet .. me .. tonight ? ha-ha-ha!' He laughed drunkenly.

'No. I mean if you were hurt?

'No. I .. was .. O.K. .. damn .. it! .. hum!

'How did you go home then, sir?' Tasked my friend.

'I ...do.. not.. know.'

We came to know that this kind of incident were almost a daily routine for him. When he told us, we were laughing on one hand; on the other hand, we felt so sorry to know

that persons of such a high position should behave this way! ,

It was too late in the night. We were not interested in his mutterings. However, he was going on talking in his own way. We were trying to stop him. Meanwhile a vehicle stopped in front of us. Three of the four persons got out of it, came to us and said, 'What are you doing here?

They were police patrol. I told them, 'We are going home and we have to take this gentleman also to his home.'

The Black sun

One of them said, 'He looks to be a drunkard. Who is he?

Another man said, 'If he is a drunkard, leave him with us.'

Still another said, 'Our duty is going to be off. Let's take him along.'

My friend was holding the minister. I said to the police, by the way of explanation, 'But he is not so bad a drunkard.'

One of them said, 'How a drunkard could be good or bad?

Another said, 'Who is this discriminating good or bad drunkard?

Still another said, 'Let's take, him along the drunkard.'

'Yes, let's us take this guy also along.' said another and held me by the arm.

They dragged me by the arms to their van before I could say anything. The man saluted the officer who was sticking his head out of the window of the van and said, 'Sir! Drunkards.'

The officer asked, 'Whose car is that?

Before I could reply, they said, 'It belongs to. These drunkards, sir!'

I said, 'The car is mine and I am not a drunkard.'

And there was contradiction between the policemen's statements and mine. The police officer got out of the van and came up to me and said, 'Is that your car?'

'Yes!'

The Black sun

'Where are you coming from T

I told him about our dinner party at a restaurant and about the person who had his drinks a bit excessively, and we just wanted to help him, taking him his home in our car. Meanwhile, the remaining three policemen came to the van dragging my two colleagues, my friend and the ex-minister. The ex-minister was brawling, 'You.. didn't .. know .. me .. hum! .. you .. didn't .. know .. me .. O.K.!

hum! .. police.. ?

The policeman carried out their duty, no matter who he was. But the police officer happened to know the ex-minister. So he said, 'Oh! you sir ? Why so late T

'Look, officer! .. just .. from .. restaurant .. you know! some .. drinks .. with .. my .. friends .. go .. home .. you are .. also .. friend ... hum! ... go.. home.. any more ... questions ?

'No. sir! you can go home.'

'All right! .. thank.. you! Good night!..'

The policeman led my friend and the ex-minister towards my car.

Ordering the men back to the van, the officer said, 'Please! excuse us! It is our duty to protect you. And I hope you will take care of the gentleman. Good night.'

Saying so, the police officer moved towards his van. After 9 moment, the police van disappeared. I also moved towards my car.

I was not in a mood to talk. I told my friend to put the ex- minister in the car and drive away. '

The Black sun

After sometime, the ex-minister waved his hand to stop the car. I stopped the car in front of a grand bungalow. The ex-minister got out of the car with difficulty and said, 'This.. is ... my.. hut.. you.. see!.. this.. is my.. hut.. hum!'

I said, 'When did you build this bungalow, sir ?

He said again, 'This .. is my .. hut .. say .. hut .. not bungalow.. bum!'

My friend said, 'When we meet again, we hope, you will know us. You will not forget us.'

Turning toward my friend with difficulty, he said, 'Why I .. forget .. you ? .. you .. gave .. me .. so .. much .. help hum!.. thank.. you!.. thank.. you.. very.. much.. hum.

He further went muttering, 'It.. is.. too.. late.. night ..sorry!.. I cannot.. give.. you.. tea.. in.. my.. hut.. hum! my.. hut.. please! come.. in.. the.. morning.. we .. have tea.. together.. O.K.? hum!.. thank.. you. thank.. you very.. much.. hum! ...

We could not say anything in response. He said again with emphasis, 'Come.. you.. must.. come.. hum!.. sure come.. otherwise.. L. do.. not.. have.. my.. tea.. O.K. thank .. you.. good!'

Accepting the invitation, my friend said, 'What time shall we come to suit your convenience, sir!'

'Well! .. come .. between .. eight and .. ten .. you .. are welcome! ... hum! .. come .. sure O.K. .. good .. night...'

The Black sun

As he was insisting on his invitation, we were compelled to say 'all right sir!' Along with the ex-minister's bidding 'good night!' I started and drove away.

I had to drop my friend also. So I drove home via my friend's house.

My brother asked me, 'When did you return home? Was it too late? I didn't know your coming?'

'It was too late night.'

'What was your dream?'

'My dream! Oh! What else could it be? It was the dream of the same minister - 'the minister is sitting in his car and the national flag fluttering on it. The car enters the compound of a big building. I stand at the gate of the building. I expect that the minister will say to me 'How do you do!' and the people watching from all around will see it and my prestige will soar up. But when the minister passes by, he cuts me dead! He does not look towards me, and does not speak a word. I think. Maybe he 'didn't see me. I would go to see him in the office.' I followed him. When I get near him, he enters his office room. The door of his office slams before me. Now I went to stand in a queue to see the minister. By turn the man standing in queue is meeting the minister. I am standing in the queue for hours. But my turnstile appears to be far away. So I decide to slip ahead and enter the minister's room. And I think - When the minister will see me he will surely welcome me warmly! When I go in

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front of the minister and greet him with 'namaste!' folding my hands, he doesn't respond to my greeting. The minister is seated on a soft leather swivel chair. However, convincingly I am describing our meeting and introduction, he is refusing to recognize me. Meanwhile you awakened me.'

Following my description of the previous night's incident and that of my dream, he said, after a moment's silence, 'You had a realistic dream, you will find the same thing in practical reality what you found in your dream.'

'I think so.' I said, 'However, in pursuance of the last night's conversation, our friendship must continue to be deep and abiding. But I am not convinced that it would turn out to be so.'

'What's the use of having friendship with such corrupt people?' said my brother.

I said, explaining, 'There is no question of corrupt and un-corrupt. What you think corrupt, he might think -as un-corrupt. Let that be as it may. We have no concern with his personal habits. We have concern with how much good deeds he performed for the country.'

We had yet to finish our conversation, my friend dropped hurriedly and said, 'Oh! you are still in bed ? It is late already.'

I said laughing, 'I am telling my brother about the last night's incident.'

The Black sun

Reminding him, I said, 'Do you remember what he said last night ? He is not going to have his tea until we see him.'

I remembered the ex-minister's invitation. My friend had come to me to go to the minister's house together. I couldn't refuse him. I told my friend to wait for a while until I get ready. I went into bathroom. Meanwhile my brother **got** more information about the last night's incident from my friend. I finished my morning business as fast as it could be possible and got ready to go to the ex-minister's house.

When we reached into the compound of the ex-minister's house, we were frightened so much when we saw a furious looking Alsatian dog of the minister. So we couldn't move forward towards the door of the house. I started glancing around the compound. I saw yesterday night's car in the open garage. Drawing my friends attention towards the car, I said, 'See! Yesterday night's car there.' My friend wasn't surprised. I could see it in his facial expression. He was looking at the grand multi-storied building. Nobody was to be seen around except the dog. I was looking up at the windows once a while.

After a long time, a man appeared there with two bags in his hands. The man appears to be like one of the nunister's servants or couriers. We moved towards him and asked, 'Hello! are you one of the inmates of this house T

'Yes! what do you want ?'

'Is the minister at home ?'

The Black sun

'Maybe he is at home.'

'In case he is at home, will you please convey to him that we have come to see him T

'Of course!' he said and went into the house.

After about fifteen minutes, the same man appeared in front of us. We moved up to him and inquired, 'What did the minister say ?'

Sorry! I forgot to inform the minister,'he said and went back. He returned five minutes later and said, 'The minister is in the bathroom. Please! wait for a while,' he said and went out of the compound.

The minister was at home. We were hopeful of meeting the minister sooner or later. We kept waiting. Nobody had yet appeared there. Both of us started.guessing and calculating about the house. I said to my friend,'What this house should have been built, can you guess?'

'Well! It looks new. Look! Everything is new.'

'Can you also guess what should be the area of the plot on which the house is built?'

'Say, about five thousand square feet.'

"the house is three storied. So the total square feet is fifteen. Isn't it ?'

'Yes! Fifteen thousand square feet.'

"Then if there would be fifteen family members in the house, every person would have been allotted one thousand square feet of space. Now how much money could have gone into constructing this house ?'

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'Well! I have not yet got chance to see inside of the house. Taking a look just outside, one can guess at about one and a half million rupees.'

While we were still talking, the same man appeared again with a bag in his hand. Coming up to us he said, 'Have you not yet seen the minister? I will inform him soon.' He said and proceeded hurriedly. After about two minutes, he appeared again. He signaled us to go into the house. He showed us a room. We went into the room. It was a fine sitting room. But it was empty. The same man appeared again and said, 'Please! take your seats. wait for a while. The minister is coming.'

We moved towards a long sofa and took our seats. The door of the sitting room was now closed. Just we two were sitting in the room. We were afraid of talking about anything there. Both of us were silent. We were just observing the decorations of the room.

About fifteen minutes later, breaking the boredom of the room, the minister appeared in the room. We both got up to greet him. He came and took his seat on the single sofa nearby us. In a cheerful and happy mood, he said, 'Sorry! I made you wait so long. How are you!'

We looked at each other. He could not at all recognize us. We should have inquired about his health than he about ours. He was treating us very diplomatically without recognizing us fully.

After a while, both of us said at once, 'How are you yourself, sir!'

'Well! I am alive!' He said, 'What can I do for you

The minister did not recognize us. However, he was acting effectively and successfully. Perhaps as he could act so effectively, he had been so successful in his life. Reminding him my friend said, 'Sir! You had invited us for tea yesterday night. You remember?'

'Oh! Yes, yes, of course!' He said rolling his eyes in other direction, 'That's why I am waiting for you.'

He pressed the nearby calling bell. A servant entered the room. The minister ordered three cups of coffee and went on, 'Last night you helped me very much. I am very grateful for that. Whenever there would be anything that I could help you, please! Tell me. I will help you. No problem.'

When we heard these words from the minister, we were so happy! Although we could not hope anything from him immediately. We, however, said, 'Whenever we would have something to trouble you, we would definitely come to you, sir! We could turn towards none but you, sir!'

'Yes! Tell me without any hesitation.' He said, 'I will do for you what I can.'

I took this opportunity and told him about my dream that I had last night. I also told him about his refusal to recognize me. When he heard me say this, he laughed heartily. And he said laughing, 'Now you say, did you find me just as you found me in your dream? Your dream is wrong!'

As he was talking with proof, I was compelled to agree with him. By the way, I asked, 'What do you think you will be minister again, sir?'

'Well! I can't say definitely when, but I will be, for sure. See the ministers of today! They are capable of doing nothing. How long, so you think, they will run the government effectively? Finally we have to take over for the good of the country. I am sure of that.'

Putting emphasis on his opinion, he further said, 'Now see! In my place, in the Ministry of Forest, they have brought a man who was a dealer in timbers. Now, say, will he forget the taste which he had already enjoyed? Never.' He further said, 'Until last year, the owners of the woodworks of Kathmandu thronged his house for teakwood. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have heard, once, he had exported the whole lot of the teakwood of the district as the product of his own private land under the sanction of the government to this effect. I had examined the case when I was on a tour in that district. What I had heard was found to be true.' He further said, 'There can be a number of things which cannot be proved by documents. But they are impressed on the hearts of the people which cannot be avoided or checked. Now, say, if a businessman like him gets a chance, will he spare the forests of Nepal?'

He was describing things which were beyond our understanding. However, we couldn't change the subject of our conversation. We went on listening his version on the subject. He went on, 'In my time, I had adjusted

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things carefully and thoughtfully within the framework of the policies, rules and regulations to protect our forests.' He further said, 'Now, see! They are destroying and exporting plot after plot of our forests. The timbers are not being supplied to our village and cities at the least. They are being supplied to India. If they went on through this process for some years to come, Nepal will have to face natural catastrophes!'

He further went on, 'Yesterday a man came to me and said, 'Sir! please, I request you to recommend me to the present minister. He is issuing orders for the export of firewood. I don't need much. Just two hundred trucks of firewood will be enough. If I could take it to the near Nepal-India railway station, immediately I will get five hundred Indian rupees per truck. Thus I can make one hundred thousand Indian rupees without investing a single penny. Please, sir! I request you for your recommendation!' I said, 'Look! I have nothing in my hand. Though I recommend you, they will not do what I say. So I am helpless to do anything in this matter.' Now it goes without saying that they are behaving as they pleased.'

After a moment's silence, he said enthusiastically, 'How long will they carry on like this? They will be forced to call us back.'

I said in the context of the minister's points, 'Isn't there some government office to look after such matters in case they acted as they pleased?'

'Yes! There is. Why not?'

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'Then why don't they look?'

'They look and see. They have not closed their eyes.'

He put it in such a style that all of us laughed. Meanwhile coffee arrived. We found that the hot coffee of the minister's house had a new taste. Changing the topic, our conversation now centered on the coffee. We were told that the coffee was imported from London. And we also found that he had much flair for foreign goods. When he asked for our introduction, we introduced ourselves to him. We also gave him information on what we were doing and about our families. I took this opportunity for getting information about the minister himself. So I said, 'How many children do you have, sir!'

All together we are eight. Here, besides the servants, just four.'

'Where are the others?'

'Two are in the village. Two are abroad.'

'You mean, only two children are in the village?'

'No. My wife is there.'

'Then you are alone here, sir?'

'No. one in the village, two here. Now I have three Mrs.

Surprisingly I happened to say, 'Oh!.' But he was answering my queries in a very natural and easy fashion. I asked again, 'The two abroad are your children ... gone for study?'

'Yes! One son, another daughter. My eldest daughter studies in London. My eldest son studies in Darjeeling,

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India.' He said in seriousness, 'Next year -I am sending my son also to London.'

We were satisfied by the talk we had with the minister. He appeared to be frank in many matters. During our talk, we didn't feel that we knew the minister just the previous night. We felt as if we were old friends.

He went on, unfolding his old days, 'During my days, I didn't do anything wrong. I worked hard for the country and people. However, I am a people's representative. So I am a public servant, My duty is always to think for the public good. Yes! I worked according to this principle, you know! And nobody complained about anything during my days. Isn't it my luck!' He went further, 'I always worked maintaining the balance from top to bottom. So I always finished works without going against the policies, rules and regulations. In case there was something wrong, I could adjust it skillfully. So, think for yourself, can anybody point out his finger at me as a corrupt? No! Nobody can. I am fully confident about it. That's why, I say this country needs me again.'

While our conversation was still going on, a next round of coffee arrived. We were busy drinking our coffee. He was still going on with his version and opinion. It was quite late by then. The minister also must be thinking that with the finishing of the coffee our meeting also should be over. So he now kept silent. We finished our coffee, and asked the Minister to permit us to move.

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Meanwhile the Minister said, 'Please! drop once again. We are friends. Don't think otherwise. Nice meeting you again. Thank you for coming!'

Getting up to move, my friend said, 'We will come again and have nice talks like this. Sir! we think, you are at home in the morning all the days. Are you sir?'

'Yes! all the days. Drop any day. You are welcome?'

His flattery impressed me for a while. But the underlying artificiality pricked my heart. Meanwhile, bidding goodbye to the minister, we moved out of the room.

Thursday

I was thinking of going to Pulchowk in my car- Let them have a look, before my morning meal. But I couldn't. I didn't like to hear my wife nagging - 'What a nice taste! Always eating cold food. Keep going with it!'. So I decided to go out after taking my meal,. I was happy because a single advertisement in one of the Govt. dailies had sufficed to sell out my car. I was in hurry and so willing to demonstrate them my car. I had washed the car engaging my whole family. Now it was shining. And I had to go to the 'Dorje Sadan' villa. According to our talk over the phone, 'Dorje Sadan' villa must be somewhere around the Pulchowk crossing.

I was thinking - 'They have given me address as 'Dorje Sadan', but the name given is as 'Chhiring'. How is it ? Maybe it is Chhiring Dorje' - the man's name. And

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the house is named by the surname 'Dode'. So it is 'Dorje Sadan' the name of the villa. As they have phoned me early in the morning, they must be badly in need of a car. So I decided this time to sell the car even at a lower price by a couple of thousand rupees.

I was in a hurry to get to Pulchowk. I hurriedly had my meal and changed and set out for Pulchowk. I was thinking on the way 'What price should I set on the, car ? If I set too high a price, they wouldn't buy. If I set too low a price, I would go into loss.' So I decided not to set a price, this time. If they forced me to set price, I would-just- say' you know very well the price of the car manufactured by the same company. And this is more than ten years. Old car. So you set the price yourself.' If I say so, they would be compelled to set some price themselves. If their price come into the range, even less a couple of thousand rupees, I would throw away the thing.

When I reached the Pulchowk crossing, I stopped the car and asked a pedestrian, 'Excuse me' sir! Where is 'Dorje. Sadan' villa ?'

He stopped and thought for a while and, said, 'they say, it is here at Pulchowk.'

'Yes! They have told me too. It is just around this Pulchowk crossing.'

He said immediately, 'Oh! The smuggler Dorje ? Yes! it

is here at Pulchowk. Go this way, on the right hand side, you will see a big multicolored bungalow. That's, it.'

The Black sun

I thanked him and moved towards my car. The name I had heard was only Chhiring Dorje. I hear, now it is 'Smuggler Dorje', Only, 'Dorje' was not known to the people. My impression about the man who had telephoned me in the morning has undergone a drastic change. My mind couldn't imagine, the real image. Various questions arose, in my mind - what kind of a man this Dorje must be? What should he look like in his physical features? What kind of outlook would he be holding? What kind of treatment might he meet, out to me? And so on.

In the meantime, I reached my destination. The gates had the sign 'Doraj Sadan', the name of the house. And near a letterbox and also a sign 'Beware, of dogs.' I shut off the engine and started blowing the horn. A man came out of the door and said, 'Who do you want, to see?'

Mr. Chhiring Dorje. Can I?'

Mr. Chhiring or Mr. Dorje?'

He put me in confusion. I had thought that 'Chhiring Dorje' was the name of one person. But the man who had phoned me in the morning was Chhiring, so I said, 'Mr. Chhiring.'

'Well! I'll ask Mr. Chhiring and come back. If he wants to see you, you will see him,' he said, 'Where do you come from?'

Tell him, the man who talked on the phone this morning wants to see him.'

'O.K.' he said and went inside. According to him, I can see only Mr. Chhiring, and not Dorje. The man I met at the Pulchowk -crossing gave me a single word and that made me eager to see Mr. Dorje.

The man I met-first, opened the door and welcomed me inside the compound. I drove my car inside. The same man told me to sit in the outer open sitting room. I sat on one of the leather chairs lined up in the room. This sitting room was fully decorated with flowers, ferns and creeps on three sides as if it were a garden.

A young man entered the room and said, 'Good morning! Was it you on phone this morning?'

'Yes, good morning! Are you Mr. Chhiring?'

'Yes,' he said and came up to me to shake hands. Sitting in the chair by me, he said, 'Is this the car?'

'Yes, it is.'

'It is a very old car.'

'It is not very old. But old indeed.'

'What price have you put on it?'

'It is an old car indeed. What price shall I put? You examine it and put price yourself I have repaired the engine and replaced the tyres.'

Asking for the key of the car, he said, 'Let's go and see.' Both of us moved towards the car. He sat in the driver's seat and started the engine. I began to glance around the compound. Suddenly, I saw four shining sleek new model cars in the open garage. Compared to these cars, mine is nothing but a junk. I felt ashamed. I said to myself, 'Why do they buy a car when they

already have four cars?' I found no answer. After examining, both Chhiring and I returned to the sitting room. My head drooping with shame, I was notable to say any thing. I could not even say. Did you like the car?'

He himself asked, 'What is the price?'

Interrupting him, I said 'Do the cars in the garage belong to you?'

'Yes, they are our cars. These are the favorite cars of Mr. Dorje. They are used by Mr. Dorje alone. He wants to buy a new car for his manager.'

'Who is Mr. Dorje?' 'Curiously, I asked, I had the impression you are Mr. Chhiring Dorje, your name is Chhiring Dode and the home address as DorJe Sadan.'

'Mr. Dorje is my boss. I am his secretary.'

'Oh! Mr. Dode lives in this very house?'

'Yes, he lives in this house when he is in Kathmandu.'

'You mean, he lives in other places too?'

'Well, he owns houses in New York and Hamburg, too.' 'Mat means, most of the time he lives abroad?'

'Say, most of the year. He comes back to Nepal eight or nine times a year, and stays here for a week or two.'

'Where is he now?'

'He is here.'

As I was gathering information about Dorje, my curiosity arose to see him. I was not sure I could see Mr. Dorje first by expressing my desire to Chhiring.

How I said to Chhiring gently, 'I would like to see Mr. Dorje. Could I?'

He didn't understand me and said, 'I can deal in this toatter myself. He has delegated me full power to deal in tuch petty matters. You don't have to talk to Mr. Dorje.'

I understood him fully. But he didn't understand me what I meant. Changing my mode of talking, I said, 'This, a pretty old car. Perhaps Mr. Dorje wants a better one his manager. If I know the maximum price he would willing to pay. I would talk to my friends. They have t r cars than mine.'

'It depends upon the type and the condition of the, -car. If the car is good, we can pay maximum one lac rupees.' So much money can buy five or six cars like mine.' I said to myself The mission I had rema ' ined un fulfilled,

I came to know that Mr. Dorje was not an ordinary man. He had houses in Europe and America. My desire 'to see him grew stronger. I was just thinking how .I could see Mr. DorJe. I asked myself, 'Mr. DorJe, who lives most of

The year in Europe and America has, his house and garden decorated in European style., But then this- is only my observation of the external decorations. What, the internal decorations would be like? I could not even imagine.

But the talk between Chhiring and myself had made it clear that my car was not good enough for them. So I decided not to try to sell them my car. I gave up my

original purpose. I now had a new purpose 'to gather information about this house and the atmosphere inside it.'

Addressing Mr. Chhiring, I said, 'By your accent, I guess, you are from Darjeeling, India. Aren't you?'

'Yes, from, the same region. I am from Kalimpong,'

'How long have you been here in Katmandu?'

'About, two years.'

'You mean, you are with Mr. Dorje for the last, two Years?'

'No. one and a half years.-: Before that I taught in a boarding school. I worked in that school 'as a teacher for six months.'

Now I made the situation in Kathmandu as a point of discussion. With him and said, 'Yes, it is difficult to live in Kathmandu as a teacher. It must be your own experience. What have you to say about it?'

'That's Why I left the teacher's job., Though the boarding school where I was teaching was quite good and I was getting pretty good salary. But the six hundred and fifty rupees was not enough for me. Because with much money, one couldn't meet the living expenses required by the standard of Kathmandu today.. But you have to live anyway.'

'Here with Mr. DorJe, you must be doing pretty well, drawing handsome salary?'

'Yes, indeed. I have been given free board, lodging and, vernacular facilities and handsome salary. And there isn't much work to do.'

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Though he put his case in a simple manner, the importance of Mr. Dorje was growing ever more.

Contriving a trick for meeting Mr. DorJe, I said to Miring, 'I would like to see Mr. DorJe very much if I could. I have heard hesitate. Today by chance, I happened come to his blouse. If we know each other, it is possible I might also be of some help to him sometime.'

He didn't say a word for a while. He also didn't promise to arrange my meeting with Dorje. Nor did he say it was impossible.

After a moment, he said, 'Well! It is better to know each other. But the deal of the car through which we came into contact with each other has failed to materialize. So, your wish to see Mr. Dodo also may not materialize. I can't say anything definite now.'

Soliciting Mr. Chhiring humbly, I said, 'Mr. Chhiring, now we know each other. It is definitely a good thing to help each, other when we are already friends. And friendship' is a good thing.' I further said, 'I heard his name long ago. And over a long time, I have been looking forward to meet Mr. Dode. Actually speaking, I haven't come here just, to sell my car, but also to see Mr. Dode. So Mr. Chhiring; please help me! If you would help me my long - time - wish to see Mr. DorJe will be definitely fulfilled.'

Listening to what I said, he was for somewhat dumbfounded, and could say nothing. Maybe, he thought

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'Who is this fellow? Why should he see Mr. Dorje?' and so on.

Clarifying his doubt, I said, 'Mr. Chhiring, please! You tell Mr. Dorje just this. Tell him 'some local gentleman wants to see you. And he says he would like to help you. What do you say? Should I -bring him in or not Of he says 'yes', take me "to him, if he says 'no', it's alright. I will not sevhim. But you please take this much trouble for me, won't you?'

Allright, if you are so keen to see him, I will tell him Be seated for a while,' he said and got out of the sitting room and moved, towards the garden.

He came back after about ten minutes and started making queries about me, 'What is your name, please? Where do you live? And what you do? I answered all the queries of Mr. Chhiring one by one. About my job, as I was doing nothing at that time, I said, 'I am not in any particular job.' I also added that I was looking for a good job. He went back, leaving me alone there again.

After five minutes, Chhiring came back and said in a cheerful manner, 'Let's go. But Mr. Dode cannot give you much time.'

Both of us moved out of the open sitting room towards the garden. I felt very grateful to Mr. Chhiring. And I was sure, Mr. Chhiring must have done some white-washing too on my case to convince Mr. Dode that the visitor could be taken into confidence. Otherwise, it would not be possible for me see him.

I didn't have any special business to see Mr. Dode. My only business was my curiosity to know what kind of a man Mr. Dode was. In what style and manner did he live? And how much did it tally with the adjective -'smuggler', that was added gleefully to his name by the pedestrian?

We entered a big hall. I came to know this was the main sitting room. Mr. Chhiring told me to sit for a while here and went into, the interior room attached to the sitting room. This sitting room is lined up with deluxe sofa sets all around. In the centre is a fireplace. And the walls all around the room are decorated with idols and figures of Nepalese art style and Nepalese handicrafts. And the flooring of the sitting room nearly done with the Tibetan woolen carpets.

After a while Chhiring appeared and signaled me to center the room. I did but I didn't see any Mr. Dorje there. I saw a man sitting alone on a single sofa. I knew him very well. I thought he too might have come to see Mr. Dode. Turning towards Mr. Chhiring, I said,'Is Mr. Dorje further inside?'

For a while my question put Mr. Chhiring in confusion. And made me speechless. After a moment, he said, 'He is Mr. Dorje.'

it put me in confusion. Pointing towards the man as Mr. Dorje whom I had known rather immediately but didn't take for Mr. Dorje.

Mr. Dorje was the man whom I had known for the last eight years. He had entered Nepal as a Tibetan refugee. As he didn't know Nepal language then, I helped him to learn it. I had hired a room for him in a narrow and dirty lane of Kathmandu for two hundred rupees per month. Those days, we used to meet each other here and there in the street. For five or six years I had -not seen him. Today he is being introduced to me as Mr. Dorje.

Moving closer, I said, 'Are you Mr. Dorje? Do you know me?'

'Why not the said calmly, 'Take your seat, please!'

I was happy that he knew me. Mr. Chhiring who was standing at the door was gestured by Mr. Dorje to move out. Now Mr. Dorje and myself were left alone in the room.

Reminding Mr. Dorje his old name, I said, 'Isn't your name 'Dukpa?'

'Yes!'

'How did it turn to be 'Dorje?'

'Dukpa Lama has already died in the narrow and dirty lanes of Kathmandu. This is Dorje who is alive.'

Hearing him, I laughed. He joined me laughing and said, 'The days of Dukpa were the days of misery. Now the days of happiness are the days of Dorje.'

We knew each other, but we did not have close intimacy between us. When he came to Nepal from Tibet via India, he could not speak Nepali at all. I happened to meet him at one of my friends house. Then he used to

speak English mostly. He could understand Hindi, but could not speak. He must have had some money to keep himself alive. When he was staying in that narrow lane where I had put him, we used to meet on the roadside now and then. But what he did to survive, I never asked. My knowledge about him was that he was only one of the Tibetan refugees in Kathmandu. When I met him in such a position all of sudden and failed to recognize him in Mr. Dode at once, it was not unnatural.

I asked him quietly, 'Mr. Dorje, how did you make such a fantastic progress?'

Cutting in, he said, 'Let's drop this discussion. What do you like to drink, beer or whisky?'

'No, thanks! I do not drink,' I said, 'just coffee. Will do.'

'Only coffee?' He said and ordered two cups of coffee by the intercom. He went on, 'What are you 'doing these days?'

Nothing. So to say.'

'How do you survive in Kathmandu doing nothing?'

'Well!' I have to depend upon domestic resources and survive some how.'

'But survive how? Kathmandu is getting more and more expensive than Europe and America-, Isn't?'

'Well! You have to pull on anyway. We do not live to eat; we eat to live here. I mean, we do, not eat for taste, enjoyment and nourishment, we eat for sustenance and just for survival. So just a little is sufficient.'

Perhaps, satisfied with my explanation, he said cheerfully, 'You are right! I have seen such poor days myself. I mean, food is more expensive in Kathmandu than in other places.'

In the meantime, the telephone rang. He received the phone, 'Hello! Dode speaking. Good, morning! Superintendent Saheb, any news? Oh! Is he arrested?'

..... Where? At our airport?.....It could not be at Bangkok airport!... without collecting the suitcases did he go to the

.....City ?

.....I am waiting for telex from Singapore bad... news! Thank you! O.K., bye-bye!'

He then turned back towards me and said, 'To use inexpensive hands for such an important task is very risky,'

Though I was not acquainted with the real situation, I could guess what must be going on. So I said, 'What a fool he is!'

He must have found, himself under a sort of compulsion to respond to my curiosity, so he said, 'That's what I mean. An expensive hand' as he was, he must be in a hurry to get to the city and enjoy the night life of Bangkok.....and got arrested! 'And it's been reported here by the INTERPOL just today. I got the information in time. But what can I do now?'

I said 'pressing my sympathy to him, 'What was the Amount?'

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Stretching his legs over the coffee table and putting both of his hands over his mouth, he thought for a while and said, 'No, not so much, could it reach Singapore, it would fetch half a million U.S. dollars. As it failed to reach the

Destination, our loss amounts to about one million U.S. dollars as the cost of the stuff plus about half a million U.S. dollars miscellaneous expenditures. Total about one million U.S. dollars.'

I said quietly, 'What was the export item?'

He paid no attention to my question. He just kept lying on the sofa. After a while, he called Chhiring by the intercom, and said, 'Contact Singapore, and tell the party that the stuff will not be reaching there for sometime. And send message to the place where we got the supply from, understand? Within a week, the same amount of the stuff must get ready.'

'The staff is not getting to Singapore? And where is Gurung?'

'Gurung is; arrested at Bangkok airport. INTERPOL has informed here. I got the news just now. But what can I do now? So we have to send another lot of the stuff immediately.'

Chhiring said, 'One of our colleagues had sent us news sometime back that he could supply us the stuff worth one million U.S. dollars. Shall I book it?'

'Yes, go ahead! And place orders to our supply places also, understand?'

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Chhiring got out of the room. Dorje was thinking over his problem. Meanwhile a trunk call came from Calcutta, talking over the phone, 'Hello! Dorje speaking yes, Kathmandu O.Kyes, Dorje speaking has it been

..... dispatched ?
..... isn't the ship direct to Germany ?.....
..... alright!.....very good! thank you! now you can come to Kathmandu O.K.! ... bye!

Heaving a sigh, he said, 'A headache is over!'

I could not understand what he meant. He was not talking to me open-heartedly. Whatever I came to understand from his talk, I could not discuss it with him. He was still hesitating to answer some of my questions. When I was sure he would not answer the questions, I took up another topic and said, 'Mr. Dorje, I have heard that you have business in New York and Hamburg, too. How is the business there?'

'How did you come to know?'

'Mr. Dode, you are taken to be a big businessman. Many people must have not seen you. But they have heard' about you and they know your name. So it is not difficult to know you certainly.'

He was shocked to hear me say this and said, 'Oh! Have I come into publicity so much? Then I may be in trouble!'

'I don't think you may be in trouble! Publicity is a good thing.'

'I mean, I can't make as much money when I am in publicity as I could, when I am not. ' I had the impression that only the big hotels and the police knew about me. So, you mean, you have come to see me because of this publicity?'

In order to clear his doubt, I told him about the reason of my visiting him in detail. I told him about my talk with Chhiring and the deal of the car. And also informed him on Chhiring's dislike of my car.

'Though the car-deal failed to strike, I wished in my heart to see the owner of this house at least. So I am here with you,' I said.

When I told him the reason of my seeing him, he said, 'Yes, I have business in Hamburg and New York, too. I have set up salesrooms of the Nepalese handicrafts and Nepalese and Tibetan carpets there. I have to look after everywhere. Most of the year, I have to live in these places. I have rented small flats. And my family lives out there.'

'So then, you have obtained your citizenship also there, perhaps?'

'No. I am a citizen of this country. You have to go through a very difficult process to obtain citizenship in the States. It is really difficult. It is not like here.'

'Oh! Have you already obtained your citizenship here?'

'Well! You should know, how can I deal in such a big business other wise? I am already a citizen of this

country. This is how I got opportunity to deal in such a big business here.'

He changed the topic of our conversation and said, 'Are you willing to work with me? We are old acquaintances. And you know everything about my old days. No matter how rich I would be as Dorje Saheb', but before your eyes I am Dukpa'. Your mind will undergo a change when you will work with me. So, will you join me, taking me as your friend? If you will, it will be greatly beneficial to you.'

I had not gone to see Dorje for a job. I had gone there to get information about his activities. That's all. Now I think I had my mission fulfilled. So I can be clear, to some extent, to my point. I, therefore, said, 'Look, Mr. Dorje, it is not enough to say 'I will work'. Time and situation also should favour you. Moreover, I don't have capital. So how can I carry on so big a business in collaboration with you? It, sounds, you are just joking with me! So this business neither I can do nor you will make me do.'

Dorje, said to me by way of suggestion, 'Just say, you will work with me, the rest I will take care of. I have been looking for a local person like you,' he went on, 'Moreover, you are my old acquaintance. There is no reason why I should not help you. In this line of business you can't be successful just by money alone. It requires a great deal of skill. And tact getting cooperation from people,' he further said. ' If you want to come into this line, you need a great deal of guts and devotion, too. If

you possess these qualities.' fortune would roll into your home with the blinks of your eyes as if by magic., I assure you! Moreover, this an easy business in this country. And this facility will not continue forever, mind you!'

He went on, 'Look! You know very well, when I came. To Kathmandu, I was a wretched fellow! You helped me then. Today see, I worked upto this status! So you have to get determined and work hard, situation builds up before you. So situation doesn't build you up, you have to build up situation.'

I understood what Dorje was saying. He wanted to carry out some business'scheme with my help. He wanted to make more money. The money making'business also seems to have narcotic effect. If the, effect gets you, it have no limit. Dorje seemed, to have made seems millions already. ' But he was still going on with the business as usual. I did lot want to go ' against his scheme. Encouraging him, I said, 'Mr. Dorje your idea is hundred percent correct. We have. to build up situation.. If we, let situation build us up, then we can do nothing.'

He felt attracted towards me. At first, he did not want to tell me anything. Now he was unfolding his secrets before me. One after another.

Meanwhile, a young girl entered the room with a coffee tray in her hands. She put the tray on the tea table in front of us. By order of Dorje. She had made

coffee for both of us. We started sipping our coffee. And the girl got out of the room.

Sipping his coffee, Dorje said, 'Look! I would like to present before you an example how this business is to be carried, an example which is deeply related to my life. You too have asked me about my progress. So I don't want to hide anything from you, as you know everything about my Past life in Kathmandu. I would like to tell you about an incident that had taken place in my life some years ago.'

'Mer loafing around in the 'narrow and dirty lanes of Kathmandu, I used to go to a restaurant to have my drinks in order to relax my mind. In this restaurant, I made many friends. One day I saw, suddenly a German sketching a drawing. We started conversation., 'Following a long conversation, we made friends with each other. He told me that he would explain to me in his hotel room about the drawing that he was sketching.'

'I went to his hotel. He showed me an idol of a god. And showing in the drawing, he said, 'This is in here. These are the doors in the temple, this is the way they close the doors, and the temple-keepers stay there, from this hour to this hour, he explained me everything in a scientific way and handed me a paper written to that effect. If this idol could be handed over in, Kathmandu, fifty thousand rupees would be paid; if it could be sent to Germany, three hundred thousand rupees would be paid immediately.'

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Who-didn't have, even fifty rupees in my pocket, started surveying Around the temple. After many days efforts the idol arrived in my room. One man who had helped me 1, Paid him one thousand rupees with the money the German paid me according to our agreement, I started my business. Later on I went to Germany in connection with this business. There I learnt that the same idol was gracing the drawing room of one German friend as a chief attraction. I discussed with him about the idol. I came to know that French had sold him the idol for one hundred thousand Deutsche mark. When I asked him that how many would ask if somebody offered to buy the idol.

He said he would sell for six hundred thousand Deutsche mark. I set out for New York and in New York I settled the deal on the same idol for half a million U.S. dollars'. Later I took the idol to New York and sold for half a million U.S.dollars. Now say, are there any limits in this business? It might be possible that the idol could further have been sold at still higher prices. The idol that just fetched one thousand rupees, I sold the same idol twice. Everything I made maximum profit. Actually speaking, it was that idol that had changed my life and put me on the right track.'

He went on, 'Perhaps, you don't believe, we have got cooperation from all , quarters. Moreover, almost all those so-called prominent figures in Kathmandu are involved in this illegal business. In this business you see

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fortune rolling! and in money you see prestigabloomng! Think and explore in Kathmandu, you will find those who go by in shining cars, you will see in their eyes illegal business

Shining, too. Some carry out on a small scale, some do it on a large scale. This is the only difference.'

While he was still talking, the bell rang in the intercom. Receiving the phone, 'Hello! BabuSaheb! Send him in.' Before Dode put receiver back, a gentleman entered the room.

'Welcome! Babu Saheb, welcome!' said Dorje welcoming the gentleman, 'We are meeting after ages, sir!'

The gentleman took his seat on the sofa just opposite me and started staring at me. I was sure, he did not know me. But I knew him. Because he is a well-known social activist. Babu Saheb is a house-hold name in the western region of Nepal. He was well known to many people in Kathmandu also. There could be no prominent social service institutions to which Babu Saheb had not made some contribution. I used to admire him and respect him. But finding him here, I was a bit puzzled.

Introducing me to Babu Saheb, Dorje 'Here, he is my old friend. He is going to work with me introducing Babu Saheb to me, Dorje said,"You can say, Babu Saheb is our patron. It is his help that has made our work possible. And let me tell you this also, with his kind help had the honour of becoming a citizen of this country.'

Dorje's free and frank compliment put Babu Saheb in a bit odd situation. Trying to cheer up his blushing face, he said, 'Oh! No, Mr. .. Dorje let me ask you, how can there be any difficulty to secure citizens ' IP for a. man born in the Himalayan region of the country?'

Strange! It is your birthright to have citizenship of this country.'

Babu Saheb did not like to hold talks with Dorje in front of me. So he expressed his intention to DorJe to have talks in secret. DorJe told me to wait for a while and both of them moved into another room. About fifteen minutes later, Dorje came back and said, 'Babu Saheb left. It is pretty difficult to keep these people in arrears. They work like a coward, but demand the lion's share.'

What he meant, I did not understand. And there was no point in asking either. I had no business at all to discuss Babu Sahib's affairs. So I remained quiet.

Dode further said, 'When I come to Kathmandu, in my sojourn of one week here, I have got to spend at least three to four hundred thousand rupees, distributing to people compliments and presents. But I am satisfied that they work as good as I pay them.'

I said, encouraging him' 'It is good to have the capacity to give to others. Moreover, when they owe you so much, they have to be honest, too.'

Before I finished, he said, agreeing with me, 'You are right! The people here are very innocent and simple. Give them a meal, they will keep saluting you all day

long. So if you could give them and feed them, they would regard you as they regard their parents. Moreover, they become so faithful to you as a dog is to his master.'

The last expression of Dorje was objectionable and was unacceptable to me. It pricked my heart and mind. My inner conscience revolted against Dorje. But in a room where only we two, Dorje and myself were sitting, to revolt and express such feeling could be just crazy! So collecting myself, I said politely, 'Mr. Dorje, will cuse me! You live in Nepal and as a Nepalese citizen you are known in the World, too., How could you look down upon the people of this country ? I. Didn't understand!'

He replied, 'No. you'didn't understand me'. I am not looking down upon them. I am just dingle? Examples of their honesty. So what I mean is, the, people here are very honest. Let's drop this matter now; Let's talk business.

Dorje realized my feelings and tried to change the topic of our conversation.'

I too realized it was useless to argue over what I felt and belived with him alone. Whatever experiences. Had gained, he expressed them artlessly. "I individuals, cannot represent one another in a society which is composed of irresponsible persons. Everybody is dancing to his own drumbeats knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally, or unintentionally.

I did not show interest in what Dode was saying. However, he kept on talking, 'You TN and to grasp the real thing. Our business is not like, of those, 'Marwaris'

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who are driving this country to a state of bankruptcy. We do not create article al scarcity, and manipulate market prices. We do not obtain import, license on five percent and squeeze out hundred percent from the common people.' He further said, 'we do not cause loss to the state treasury. Out business is fair. We bring into use the rotting away grass and plants growing in the, forests of the mountains. We fix prices only upon, unproductive and valueless stuffs which' is profitable to everyone. Those who work in this line, they always go on reaping profits, only profits.'

Comparing his business with other Look, we never do such business, which is harmful to the country! We never deceive the country forgetting our duty and responsibility and putting our signatures blindly just being greedy of money you see! We do not put honey in the mouth and dagger in the pocket like the so-called people's representatives. Out business is straightforward. So there is no reason at all, why anyone should have hesitation to come into this line of business?'

Now it was clear to me how Dorje thought and acted. He put everything frankly and boldly. He seemed to be fully satisfied with his work. He also appeared to be bragging that his line of, business was more genuine than that of others. In my view it seemed pointless to question him anymore. So I just kept on listening to him.

He went on' People here have no courage, or say, have no intelligence. But, I must say, because of this situation, I could become Dorje from Dukpa. Just within

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a few years I could make so much progress. So, from my personal viewpoint this situation is fruitful and necessary. But I wish that other people also should make as much progress as I have made. Some highly placed people are already involved in this line. That's why I ask you to shut your eyes and join me in this line of business.'

I listened to him unperturbed. I was not in a position to refute. Nor could I accept his proposal. No matter how frank and bold he was, after all, his line of business was definitely illegal. In order to make this sure I quietly said, 'Mr. Dorje, this line of business which you ask me to join, I suppose, is against the law of the country. So it would be difficult for me to join you. Sorry! Moreover, it would not always be possible to escape the dragnet of the law-enforcing people.'

Interrupting me, he said, 'Could you tell me when and where any working in this line has fallen into the drag-net of the law-enforcing people?'

'I have sometimes read in the newspapers.'

'Do you think that the people fallen into the drag-net were like us?'

'That I can't say.'

'Then? Look, they are ordinary workers whom we can rescue from the dragnet within one or two weeks' time. Sometimes it is just a drama to show that they are busy doing their duty. So it is all an acting ... throwing dust into the people's eyes to prove that the Law keeps its eyes wide open upon the people acting in this line,

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too,' He further said, 'Some people who were supposed to be active in this line and were taken into the drag-net, are now languishing in jail and are doing SO just under a design. Those who are actually active in this line can never be swept into the drag-net. I bet and challenge!'

Dorje added, 'In our gang the setting of personnel is near perfect. In our present situation, we are given protection from all quarters. Nobody can touch us. Do you know some months back a person who was arrested with the stuff valued at rupees half a million, is now seen moving around freely?. Law did not stand in his way. Now tell me, can the government control this business? Can the Govt. stop it? He further went on, 'I assure you and make it clear to you that it cannot reach us. So, what you think as illegal is legal because in the eyes of the Law we are always clean! We are good! We are noble!'

I did not want to take stand against Dorje's opinions because he advanced his logic vis-a-vis- the present situation in this country. Rather I tried to see whether Dorje's views and opinions fit into our present day society. I found they fit very well!

It was now pretty long time since I arrived at Dorje's house. My curiosity which drove me to see Dorje was fully satisfied. I got an opportunity to understand him from the closest possible range. The kind of curiosity, which aroused when I first heard his name, now turned out to be ordinary. Yes! When one gets acquainted with the real life, things really do not look so strange! They are plain and simple!

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Asking Dorje for permission to take leave, I said, 'Mr. Dorje, I took much of your time. We had opportunity to renew our friendship. I will come back to see you sometime. Now allow me to go'

As I did not accept his proposal, he started repeating it. He requested me to join him time and again. I said this much, 'Mr. Dorje, I will come back to see you. So far as my joining you is concerned, let me think over it. I will come back after some days.'

He could hold me no more. Finally he said, 'Do come please! You are always welcome!'

Taking leave of Dorje, I got out of the interior room. I saw four or five persons sitting in the outer sitting room. I suddenly found myself gazing at those faces. The eyes of these unknown faces make me their target. I was looking for Chhiring. So I glanced around the sitting room. But he was nowhere to be seen.

Chhiring was talking to someone in the garden. When he saw me, he came up to me and, wearing strange sort of looks on his face, he said, 'Oh! you got so much time with Mr. Dorje. So many people are waiting to see him. How was the talk? Fruitful?'

'Yes, as you say.'

'Then come every now and then.'

'Let's see, how things go on.'

'Why only see? Come definitely please! My boss never takes so long a time with the visitors. The maximum time a visitor gets is ten minutes. The way

you held your talk today, I can guess, you must have chalked out a very special plan.'

'No we haven't prepared any plan.'

'Whatever it is, you come sure.'

'Alright!' I said smiling, in formality.

I got out of Dorje Sadan and was on my way home. All along the way I felt as if I were still in the closed door session in the half-lit room of Dorje. In my mind questions were arising which could have found no answers! The questions of REALITY, INTEGRITY and MORALITY.

Friday

I was waiting for Bikram all the morning. Yet he didn't I could not go out either as I had 'turn up. Given him the word. It was time for the morning meal. I decided, if Bikram did not turn up by the time I had my meal, I would

Go out.

Bikram a young man who was brought up in Kathmandu. Since boyhood, he had been struggling to stand on his own feet. Though young he holds mature views on life. When he talks, he presents himself wholeheartedly. Actually, I like to talk to him. When I meet him, I get a great relief. However, I have nothing to get from him. We are just good friends. In fact, he is a friend of my younger brother. So he addresses me 'brother. Though I

treat him as a younger brother, I have accepted him as a friend.

He works as contractor. He has been working as a contractor for the last twelve years. As he considers construction work as a very important field in a developing country like ours, so he joined this line. He started his contractor's career with small scale building works such as building small houses and huts and renovating temples and the like. Gradually he developed his skill in construction works and started building roads, culverts, bridges as well as big buildings. According to him, the most profitable business in this country is construction work. Generally, he is one of the few contractors who show a degree of honesty and moral character in their dealings. At times, he has expressed his inability to remain clean while working in this field.

I meet Bikram very often. When we meet, time takes to wings. We do not know how many hours have past. Bikram is frank- a good talker. When he talks, he talks with full enthusiasm and sprit of the moment and with total relaxation of body and mind making the atmosphere pleasant and exciting. That's why I always long to have a chat with him.

After meal, while I was changing, I suddenly heard a loud laughter in the drawing room.

'Namaste!' said Bikram getting up from his seat. Pointing out to the gentleman, sitting with him, I said, 'Sorry! I don't know him?'

'He is an engineer and my friend. We work together. I wanted him to know you. So I brought him along', he said introducing him to me.

Tirtha had heard my name. And he wanted to see me for a long time. So Bikram had brought him along. Though Tirtha is a civil engineer, he had developed respect and liking for me. That's why he had wanted to meet me over a long time. And I felt this spirit in him at the very beginning of our talk.

Biktam talked so much about Tirtha. I came to know, Tirtha was one of the few gentle and honest engineers. He was trained as a civil engineer in India and had been in service of the government of Nepal over the past ten years. He however faced one problem: his promotion. Among his colleagues, he is the one assistant engineer, who had not become superintendent engineer. He has the ambition of becoming a divisional engineer. But he told me, as he had no one in the power structure to back him, he couldn't get his promotion. I wanted to know more about Tirtha, so I said, 'Mr. Tirtha, how many different offices you have been to so far as an engineer within the time-span of ten years.'

'After returning from India, I was commissioned to Water Supply Division. Working three years in the Water Supply, I had gained useful experience. But then I was transferred to Irrigation Ministry to work in different projects under the said ministry. The experiences I had gained in the water supply went waste because experience in water supply is useless in the

irrigation. It takes some years to gain experience in a new project. I failed to show any ability in the irrigation because I was new there. After two years I was transferred to the Department of Electricity to work in the hydroelectric project under the said department. Afterwards I was transferred to Roads Department, to Local Development Department and now to Housing Department. Wherever I went, I was new there. When I started gaining experience I was kicked out like a football.

He went on, 'It is strange to know that the higher authorities think that the engineers have skill for engineering. To become skillful, you have to work in a project for some years. Only then, you really become skillful and you can contribute something solid to the project: They do not understand the fact. But they are expert in saying you are not showing skill though you are skillful,' He went on: 'If I had someone in power, I would have become chief engineer by this time. The logic is simple, if I had opportunity to work in the same department and project for a long time, I would have gained valuable experience and on the basis of that I would have got promotion. But it was not to be. At every place, the, office was new to me and I was new to the office. It has been going on like this from the very beginning upto this day.'

Trying to grasp his situation, I asked, 'Isn't it good to go to different offices to gain experience in various fields?'

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Ridiculing my idea, he said 'Yes, you gain hell of a experience! That's why Public Service Commission does commission the veterinary doctors to human health services and the candidates who have their training in horticulture are commissioned to the Department of Culture. Isn't it an excellent opportunity to gain experience?'

Tirtha heaved a sigh and searched for a cigarette in his pocket. Meanwhile, Bikram handed him a cigarette. Pulling on his cigarette and puffing the smoke until the room was pretty smoky, he said, 'What is your impression so far as I know, there is no solid and abiding policy. There are no rules and regulations here. Favoritism reigns supreme in the administration. Who cares who is capable or it capable? There is no inquiry. There is no discretion'. He further said, 'Anyone can do anything to anyone. There is no place where your complaint is entertained. In fact, I am fed-up and I do not want to work in this country.'

An able and responsible man like him expressing his frustration and dissatisfaction in this way made me feel sad. It was but natural. I had never met him before. He poured out his frustration in this very first meeting of ours. However, I cannot help him or readdress his grievance except expressing my sympathy for him. He knew it very well. Yet he said, 'My father had advised me, 'If you like to survive in this country, you would have to declare 'the crook' as 'fair' and 'the black' as 'white', but you shall never do so!.' He further advised,

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'Never try to gain anything resorting to unfair means. If you did so, you would be deceiving and hurting the nation'. Tirtha then said 'Just respecting and obeying my father's moral advice, I have never resorted to any kind of malpractice's for my personal gain. As a result, I am the one who has to take the back seat among my colleagues.'

Bikram then said, 'Yes, he is perhaps the most honest engineer I have ever met. I have also been working as a contractor for more than ten years. I have seen business of engineers and our selves. But I have not found one like him upto this date.'

Addressing me, Bikram said, 'Perhaps you know, I had undertaken a construction project of further building a hospital some years ago in eastern Nepal. The contract was of rupees six lac. Out of that the engineers squeezed rupees two and a half lac. I was the contractor, but I was not satisfied with the construction work of that hospital. But what to do? You can't help. If you do not follow what they say, they will not pass the building plan'. He further said, 'I have already told him about it. But engineer Tirtha would not do so. It's all right! We would follow what he would say.'

Referring to the context of Bikram's case, Tirtha said, 'These days, I am commissioned to the building construction project whose contractor is Mr. Bikram and this project is under Housing Department. When Bikram proposed to lay only three feet ordinary foundation instead of four feet concrete foundation and save rupees

forty thousand of which half would be my share, I flatly refused. For I never think of resorting to unfair means to make money. And I have never done so'. He went on, 'Because of this weakness, I have never been able to present my compliments to the higher authorities. They have got nothing from me. So I am declared unfit and unskillful.'

Consoling him, I said, 'Mr. Tirtha, this is a matter of individual nature and principles. Those who have made fortunes today by unfair means, they must have been thinking themselves as clever and intelligent. But time will come when they will have to die crestfallen. The way you have been abiding by the principles as advised by your august father should be a matter of pride and self-glory for you! The God that comes down professing the truth will be continuing forever; the good that is derived by professing the truth, is momentary. So the way you have embraced the truth, is your victory, not defeat!'

I added, 'Don't worry! Though they have made you suffer for some years; you didn't get your due promotion that you deserved; you have not been commissioned to proper field of work on permanent basis. However, don't be impatient. That day will certainly come when these corrupts will be drowned in the river of public hatred. They will parade on their face and chest with bare feet. And the soil of this land will take due revenge in due course. Then an honest man like you will be fully rewarded.'

Supporting my views, Bikram said, 'Yes, you are right! Everything has its limit. When anything goes beyond its limit, no one can tolerate it. The situation corruption has created is such that it beggars description. If they expect something for their service, it is not unnatural. To put it in a metaphor, if they just take something of the fruit, it is natural. But here they are going to destroy the tree itself and swallow its roots and branches. Nobody fears anybody. Why should they? All are doing booming business and having their field days. Nobody is pure and holy!'

During his contractor's career, Bikram must have come across different types of people of different mentality. So he knows well what the present situation here is like. Because Bikram has to work among the officials and the workers twenty-four hours a day. And in contractor's business, one has to curry favour of the officials. Moreover, the root of corruption is this contractor's business. There is corruption of thousands in small contracts. There is corruption of millions in large ones. Bikram has a great deal of knowledge of the activities going on in this field.

'Bikram,' I said, 'which contract had been most profitable for you?'

I can't say actually,' he said, 'including all large and small ones, I have so far undertaken about twenty projects. Most of these projects have not been profitable, so to say. But on three or four projects I earned profit beyond my expectation. So I can say, I maintain my

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balance of loss and profit so far'. He further said, 'If you want to make more profit, you have got to shut your eyes to the questions of conscience and morality. Then there is profit only. Any profit is alright. During my contractor's career, I haven't found any honest engineer except Mr. Tirtha. He can be described as an exception among our engineers. Other engineers whom I had to work with were the worshipers of 'dollar almighty'. They only looked for, and ran after money'. He went on, 'They would give us a little, and squeeze more for themselves. So from the point of view of workload, it is difficult to say which projects are good and which are not. But from the point of view of cash, every project is good if you wanted to cash in.'

Tirtha said, 'Yes, everywhere there is project and everybody is busy cutting gold and silver. Whether it is the contractor, the engineer, an overseer, authorities connected with the project, or the accountant, all are busy looking for fortune. A project has its goal by itself. And the people who are responsible for the project have their own goal, the goal to fill their pockets. The result; the project falls flat'. He further said, 'I can say definitely that all the houses built during these past ten or fifteen years have no guarantee of safety and of quality construction. Any day they can crack. The walls can give way. Even the whole structure may cave in.'

Tirtha further said, 'You must have read in the newspaper or heard about it sometime ago that a building, housing a ministry was declared uninhabitable.

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So the ministry and the office functioning under it were shifted to another building hurriedly. Even in the new building cracks have been noticed and the building might collapse. Now say, is there anyone who takes responsibility for this work? No! Nobody cares for responsibility here.'

Bikrarn also had information about it. So agreeing with Tirtha, he said, 'Yes, I know about that building myself. It was built about ten years back at public expenses. The cost and the show of the building then impressed everyone into thinking that it would stand. For centuries. Now it is anybody's guess that not more than thirty percent of the money had gone into the building. They had only given a show to the facade. I have calculated with parts of the building they had canceled and filled their pockets.'

Nothing in this field is unknown to the contractor Bikram. Continuing with his honesty as a contractor, he could never make any progress. He would have often told me that he would like to give up this contractor's career and do something else. How long could he go on with this cheating business? Go to find the tender, you can't win unless your tender is at the lowest bid. When you are staying idle, you want to win the tender even under the lowest bid. And if you want to work according to the project estimate, you go into loss. Then what will you do? Though your conscience revolts, you have to cheat the country. He has said so many things to me. On one project as he failed to secure compliance of the

engineers, he had to incur a heavy loss. Bikrarn has much experience of this line. How much a concerned authority takes from one project, how much an accountant; how much a contractor and so on?

After a moment's pause. I asked Tirtha, 'Mr. Tirtha, I have come to know that you have worked in so many offices. Would you tell me which of the offices had been most suitable to you?'

He was in difficulty for a while. His head drooping he was lost into thinking. After awhile, he said, 'Yes, I would like to tell you that, in fact, I didn't find any office and project suitable to me. If I could do the unthinkable and the immoral, they make friends with me. Let me tell you frankly. In this country, I found no office suitable for me. And there is no one either. So I sometimes think of going abroad and work there.'

He continued, 'There is no country in this world where they do the kind of plundering as they do here in our country. It is free here.'

Consoling him, I said: 'This situation has reached its climax. It has now been intolerable to all. This corrupt situation must be done away with. It must be put to an end. Like you, everybody is dissatisfied with the situation. It can continue no longer.'

Reacting to my statement, Bikrarn said, 'But what you say is not possible in this country. Look at the people here; look at the mentality of the elite as well as at the mentality of the responsible authorities here. There

seems to be no possibility that this situation will ever come to an end.

Moreover, there is competition in making of the society? How are you going to watch any aspect of their activities? It is impossible. And more. Have you ever thought of the inner motives of the educated people here? I tell you,' he continued, 'their motives is that their son should become a doctor or an engineer. If he could not go into the technical line, he should become an administrator and work in an office where he can make fortune. And those who are following this line, they have become well to do people. And they will make their children follow the same line; and this may go on as a family tradition in their professional life. In our society those who have fortune, they have position and status. This is the materialistic age. If you have wealth, you can make the powerful people bow down to you. I don't believe in your statements.'

What I could understand with my simple observation is that I do not say that I do not agree with Bikram. But I give full credit to my analysis, too. Today whatever information I have got from Mr. Tirtha about our social situation is intolerable. The present situation is indeed condemnable. The whole society finds it hard to tolerate it. They find it hard to put up with their pent-up feeling.

Tirtha said, expressing his views further, 'I, however, don't think this situation would continue for long. It is just like the flash

flood. It would continue until the rainy season. When the rainy season is over, the elements will

be clear and fine.'

You are right! Mr. Tirtha,' supporting his views, I said, 'When there will be clarnouring for clean water everywhere; when the dirty rivers and streams go dry, only then clean water will be available.'

Meanwhile, tea for Tirtha and Bikram arrived. Sipping tea, Tirtha was puffing his cigarette. For a while, the drawing room was silent. One could only hear the sound of sipping of tea. Tirtha was still thinking when he was sipping tea. By his appearance, I could guess he was eager to pour out his feelings.

Placing his tea-cup on the table, Bikram said, 'I would like to tell you an interesting episode in this context which shows how things are manipulated in this field here.'

'It happened some four years back. A suspense bridge was to be installed in one of the remote areas in western Nepal. A contract was signed in Kathmandu to that effect. One of my friends had undertaken the contract at rupees one million. An overseer was commissioned to that project. As it was in remote part of the country, the contractor was given an advance also. Rest of the money was handed over to the overseer and the two people's representatives by the department, and the project was launched. The contractor did not have to go out of Kathmandu. The overseer left for home on three month's leave. The people's representatives did

some shuttling by plane to and for between the district and Kathmandu. There was news that the bridge had been completed and was ready for use by the people. And Radio Nepal broadcast the news under its district news programme. Afterwards, the newspapers of Kathmandu published a news item on the said bridge that the bridge was swept away by the swollen river. Including the contractor, four persons divided the loot. Nobody could prove that the bridge was not built. From the day of agreement on the contract for building the bridge to the sweeping away of the bridge by the river, all legal documents had been made ready to be examined by anyone concerned. So nobody could do anything legally. If anyone performed act with such projects, how could it be taken as corruption ?'

Bikrarn's story made Tirtha laugh painfully. Tirtha wanted more information from Bikrarn on it. So he said, 'Oh! You said, the contractor and the overseer filled their pockets with the loot even without visiting the project site?'

'Why should they visit, if they could prove everything from home? The people's representatives would and threw away the wooden bridge in the river and prepare a legal document of the same as on-the-spot witnesses. It

was not a fiction but a fact. Because a wooden bridge is also a bridge, an iron bridge is also a bridge. And a bridge was also swept away by river.

Expressing my curiosity, I said, 'So, the news broadcast by the Radio Nepal and published by the newspaper was just fake?'

'Yes, it was.'

'How did they do so?'

'As usual.'

Believing the episode ' to be true, Tirtha said, 'such stories are natural here. Let me tell you one such interesting story. A department signed an agreement with some contractor on some project. Work started. The contractor was a foreigner. He must have thought that he should take advantage of the situation. The people here have money but they don't have intelligence. He contrived a design, got into contact with the secretary of the concerned Ministry and filed an application. They did not have to give him from their pocket. They obtained a loan assistance of rupees ten million from a foreign agency and purchased equipment for the project. According to the stipulation, the contractor had to pay rent on the machinery and equipment. The contractor used the new machinery and equipments and completed the project. But the contractor took to his heels without paying the rent leaving behind the worn out junk machinery and equipments.

'There is no end to such stories,' said Tirtha, 'You will find such stories galore. Let me cite you a case that took place when I was in the Water Supply. There was a pipelaying scheme. When I found they were lying in light pipes instead of heavy ones, I protested. Why were

they doing so? They tried to justify arguing that it did not matter whether the pipes were light or heavy as the pipes were to be laid underground. After a few years they would have to be replaced. So it did not really matter. When they argued this way, there was nothing I could do. So I concluded: everybody is corrupt here. This is a place only for the thugs and swindlers. I should rather go abroad leaving this country though it is my motherland.'

Bikram cut in and said, 'Mr. Tirtha always talks like this. Wherever you go, you have to work. Engineers like you are very few in this country. The respect you enjoy here will be unthinkable elsewhere. You are not so far acclimatized to the climate here. Once you did so, you would never think of leaving this country.'

'Look, Mr. Bikram! If I had thought of selling my principles, I would have done so long ago. So far I have guarded my principles. When I find myself alone talking principles and character, I get frustrated and feel like leaving this country. When you are away and you don't get to see and hear, you have peace of mind.'

Cousoling Tirtha, I said, 'What you are thinking is your weakness. You should stay put in this country. That will be your victory! Have patience. Wait for opportunity Opportunity will come!'

'You are right! He said quietly, but. I have been foundering! I have been swept off -by the winds of the corrupt environment like a kite without a string to hold.'

Meanwhile Bikram stood up looked at his watch and said hurriedly, 'Oh! I have to manage cement and rods today for my project.'

I said, 'I thought you were free for the whole day. It is eleven now. Why are you in a hurry?'

'I had thought, it would take one hour here. But it took three hours. I have not paid for the cement. Other engineers would finish with three hundred bags of cement. But our engineer Mr. Tirtha is of different type. And I myself don't like such cheating business.'

Emphasizing on the project, I said: 'yes, you should be careful! If you put less cement than required in the mortar, when you take out the plank form, the whole floorcasting may collapse. It is dangerous.'

'Oh! That will never happen. He said laughing. If you use only twenty-five percent of cement, even then the casting will stay put, but it can't be as durable as it could be. Let me give you some examples. If you plaster rooms of your house, you have to put one fourth in the mortar. Here you can even do with one-eighth part of the cement. It can't make much difference. In this way you can save fifty percent in cement. Well! This is the way of the contractors. You should not do so in your house.'

Bikram seemed to be in a hurry. But I wanted to talk to Tirtha and he was also taking interest in my talk. With the purpose of holding Bikram for some more time, I proposed to have one more cup of tea.

'It's alright,' Bikram said. 'But the quicker, the better. I suppose, your discussion willn't come to conclusion

today. If you want to have more discussion, we can meet again sometime later. We will arrange it.'

'Fine!' I said, and addressing Tirtha, added, 'Just one more question. Could you tell me, which office has the largest budget?'

'Well! I think, the Roads Department has the largest budget. Only this year, the budget allotment was about one thousand million rupees.'

'How is the progress?'

'Progress? Cheats are the progress!'

'I didn't follow.'

'Well! It is as straight as anything could be. There is no solid work. Even fifty percent of the budget of the project does not go into the project. Then how do you evaluate it?' He further said, 'Let me cite another case of project manipulation in this very department. To extend and blacktop a section of the Mahendra Highway along Nepal India boarder, the department signed a contract with a foreign company. The contract was of the value of rupees ninety million. As soon as the contractor left, following the completion of the project, the road began to crack and break up. See! This is the situation. I can cite hundreds of such cases. If you go on remembering and thinking over such cases you will feel you are burning inside, in your heart and mind. If you speak against all this you are taken to be enemy. That's why I say I want to leave this country.'

Tirtha heaved a sigh, took out a cigarette and lighted His eyes were playing with the smoke in the vacuum!

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Tea arrived. Bikram and myself took our cups ~i tea. Tirtha was lost in thoughts, a cigarette stump smoldering between his fingers. Awakening him from his reverie, I said, 'Mr. Tirtha, please tea! Help yourself. Today Bikram seemed to be in a hurry. We will meet again after some days. We will sit for longer hours then and have discussion. Allright! We will surely meet again. Thank you for coming!'

Tirtha Ratna who has been a misfit in this society is thinking of migrating abroad. Every word of his is full of frustration and hopelessness. This country has failed to understand an honest man like Tirtha Ratna. It has failed to realize his importance in this country.

I said, 'Mr. Tirtha, please come again before. Long. Thank you for coming, once again!'

Both of them, Tirtha Ratna and Bikram took leave of me saying 'namaste'. I felt lost myself for a while in the smoke puffed off by Tirtha Ratna in the drawing room!

Saturday

I was getting ready to go to the Pashupati Nath, temple early morning. It was now months that I had gone to the Pashupati. Two years before, I would go to the temple at least once a week. It had been my routine for a decade. if I did not go to the temple, I felt unhappy the whole day and when I would go to the temple, I would spend one or two hours lingering around the

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temple. But for the last two years, I had seldom visited the temple, five or six times. Nowadays, I don't know, why I don't feel interested in going to the temple? And moreover, I don't have time too. Actually speaking, it seemed as if I had forgotten Pashupati Nath.

After my morning routine, I prepared myself to go to the Pashupati Nath temple. It had been my routine that when I go out, my wife would give me a bag and a shopping list. When I was waiting for my wife at the door, she came up and said, 'You meet mother before you leave.' I was glad that my wife did not have a bag and a shopping list in her hands.

Without saying a word to my wife, I went straight into mother's room. When she saw me, she said admonishingly, 'Why don't you do anything when others are forcibly occupying your forefathers property? Can't you spare a few minutes, too? I have heard that one of your friends is a renowned lawyer. Why don't you go to him and take counsel? How are you going to manage yours in such a way?'

My mother had told me about it several times. As I did not have time, I could not do what she had said. It was not that I did not have any feeling for the patrimony. The plot which was in the city area might cost thousands of rupees. Moreover, it was not only a matter of money, but a matter of patrimonial property. If I failed to protect it, what could my children do to it later? However, I knew everything about that plot, yet I had failed to take any step towards protecting that inheritance.

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Ratna Kumar had trespassed on the plot claiming it belonged to him. He had also obtained legal certificate for building a new house on that plot. One day I visited the site and stopped the construction work at least. I do not have any legal documents concerning the plot. But Ratna Kumar had the legal proof.

Consoling my mother, I said: 'the other day, I went to the site and stopped the construction work. Now I will go to the lawyer and take necessary counsel from him to reclaim my soil. And I am sure I would reclaim it. Don't worry, mother!'

'You say, 'Don't worry!' How can I bear it all when somebody else is robbing us of our forefather's property under our eyes!'

I understood what my mother was saying. She wanted me to pay attention and take action as soon as possible on the matter. I assured her that I would go to the lawyer and take counsel.

It was early morning. There were a few pedestrians along the road. I was going to the temple after so long. I have great faith in and veneration for Lord Pashupati Nath. I am one of his greatest devotees. Recently however, I had failed to make much service to the god. Though I have veneration in my heart, I have lost my enthusiasm. Because one day a priest of the temple had treated me impolitely. Since that day, the relation between the god and me had gone sour. Today I felt rejuvenated. After months, I felt a keen desire to worship the deity.

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I could see the end-point of the road. On one side of the road, I could see a line of trees, on the other, only a line of stumps. I remembered, about thirteen years before trees were planted on both sides of the road. If the trees were grown on both sides of the road, it would have been a beautiful boulevard today. Later I observed that they had cut down the trees because the tree-line was just below the power-line. I wondered why they did not see it before?

Suddenly a bicycle stopped in front of me and the rider greeted me with 'namaste!' I recognized him. He is Mr. Som Nath, an assistant of my lawyer friend. When I saw him I remembered what my mother had told me. 'Mr. Som Nath, I said may I meet Mr. Bishnu Kant at about nine in the morning at his T

'Yes, he will be at his firm's office at that time,' he said.

'I must see him today. Will you please tell him that I would be coming to see him around nine this morning?'

'Alright! Where are you heading for?'

'Just up to Pashupati Nath temple.'

Parting, I moved towards my destination.

Bishnu Kant is one of the renowned lawyers of Nepal. Within fifteen years of his career, he made a name for himself. He doesn't take all and sundry cases. Whatever cases he undertakes, he succeeds in them. So he is taken to be one of the best lawyers in the capital.

I arrived at Bishnu Kant's before the appointed time. I got into the office and took my seat near a table. No

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sooner had I taken my seat then he said, 'I will knock out all his teeth! What the hell can he do!' the lawyer was suddenly pouring down his vitriol upon me.

He was staring at me with angry eyes. I didn't see any reason why he should get angry with me like that. I was puzzled. For the last fifteen years, we had been friends. I know he is witty and jolly. But I have never seen him getting angry like this.

Before I could utter a word, he said to his assistant, 'Mr. Som Nath, what the hell are you looking at? Get that pincer, I will pull out his teeth, all his teeth. He brags he has beautiful teeth like pomegranate seeds. I will show him whether they are pomegranate seeds or corn seeds!'

'My friend, what are you saying? I said politely. Whose teeth are you going to pull out?'

Turning towards me violently, he said, 'Your teeth! Yours! Understand?'

I felt provoked by his violent challenge. Reacting to that, I said, 'What are you talking? Are you crazy? Whose teeth are you talking about?'

'Yes, I am crazy! What else you want to call me? Turning to his assistant, he said, 'What are you looking at? Get the pincer, I say. Are you deaf?'

Following the order of the lawyer, his assistant brought a pincer and put it on the table. The lawyer took the pincer in his right hand and said, 'I will pull out four of your front teeth, counting one, two, three and four and

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put them on the table one by one. What the hell can you do?'

Are you now without work? Without clients? So you are talking such nonsense?'

'Yes, I go a-begging. No clients. That's why I want to pull out your teeth,' he said, gripping my left jaw. '

Provoked I sprang out of my seat to challenge him. 'What the hell you want!'

Cooling down a bit, he said, 'No. I don't want to fight. I just want to pull out your teeth. I will have to pull out your teeth by force if I need. I will pay the fine decreed by the law. I have kept two hundred and forty rupees ready here.'

I saw two hundred and forty rupees and a pincer together on the table. He was ready to pull out four of my front teeth which are the beauty of my life for which he has put a price of two hundred and forty rupees.

I was finding it difficult to understand whether it was a drama or a reality. I was angry with the lawyer. I said, 'You keep two hundred and forty rupees with you. I don't have to lose the beauty of my life.'

When the lawyer saw me in temper, he started cooling down. I could not control my temper, 'I will pull out your teeth and pay ten times more than you I retorted. Why only sixty rupees per tooth. I will pay six hundred per tooth. Without realizing what important business I have with you, and how important and responsible a person you are, you are talking all this nonsense for nothing. Like an idiot!'

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He turned calm and serious and started looking into a file. After a while, he said laughing, 'This is the file concerning your case. My assistant informed me of your coming here. I was just enacting a drama in the hope I might get some clues from you. So don't mind! I was just joking.'

When he was still explaining away the drama, a middle-aged lady hurriedly entered the room, 'I am finished! Sir, I am finished!' she said and took her seat by me. We started looking at her.

Wearing a grim impression on her tired face, she said, 'I have lost the case again, sir! What am I to do now! Now I have no way but to go and jump into the river! I have been in the litigation for the past eighteen years. The hope that had kept me alive is now gone!'

'Which case did you lose and how?' Asked the lawyer, surprised at the lady's version.

The lady said slowly, 'They rejected our right, the right of my son and myself to share the property of my husband. The first court had given verdict in our favour. Now can there still be some way where you can help us?'

The lawyer said to the lady: 'It is not true that you have really lost the case because you have lost it in the district court. There are still two levels to go, if you like. But the law, as I have already told you, can't entertain your claims to your husband's movable property. This I had already told you before?'

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Interrupting the lawyer, I said, 'What did you say? Doesn't a wife have the right to share her husband's movable property?'

'No, such case is on record in which a wife's claim to her husbands movable property has ever been entertained.'

The lady said questioning: You then mean, the verdict that the supreme court had delivered, proving me as the wife of the man and compelling the man legally to baptize my son as his progeny has all been invalidated? All those thirteen years of my life that I had to spend to prove myself as the man's wife and my son as his progeny had been thrown into the waste basket?'

Gradually, I was gathering information on the case of the lady. The lady about forty years of age had spent almost half of her life in litigation. When her husband refused to accept her as his wife and drove her out of house, she went to the court to defend her right as well as to defend herself against the social stigma. When she found she had failed to defend her right even through the lengthy litigation of eighteen years, she was depressed to death. During the course of conversation, she said once, 'What am I to do now? Shall I kill myself?' Her questions will find no answer. They will ever remain a question all her life.

As I had appointment with the lawyer, he could not give, much time to the lady. So he said, addressing the lady, 'Madam, don't worry so much! What is fated cannot be blotted I have promised you, I will give you

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free legal service as long as the litigation continues. Don't worry! Let me think over it today. Please come tomorrow morning at this time. We will further discuss the matter.'

'Allright sir! You are my only support. Please help me' she said and saying good-bye to the lawyer, went out of the room.

The assistant said, handing over a file to the lawyer, 'This is a case we have to get registered tomorrow. We have to prepare a bill of indictment for the case.'

'Which case?'

'That broken-leg case.'

'Oh! Bring it.'

Turning towards me the lawyer said, 'What an assortment of cases! What an assortment of laws! I just find myself along with these cases and the laws. The person is in the hospital with his leg broken. The case must be submitted within the prescribed period. And moreover, there is nothing to gain at all at the end of the litigation. I don't like to take such cases at all. What's the use of pleading such a case?'

Drawing my attention, he said, 'Look, in case you are disfigured physically by some foolish person, you have no way but to remain a disabled person throughout your life.'

I didn't understand all the points of the law. I however, could not remain silent and listen to what the lawyer was saying. So I asked him, 'You mean, the law

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does not protect you if you are physically disfigured by someone?'

'Yes, it does. Why not? The law protects you for sure. But the only thing is there is no provision for the adequate compensation for the damage done.'

After hearing what the lawyer said, I began to feel insecure physically. I was feeling frightened in my heart, imagining - if somebody knocks off my teeth, or breaks my hands or legs! I do nothing. I am just helpless! I will be a disabled person throughout life...!

The lawyer explained to me the difference in the relation between the law and the practice of it. He put a lot of legal problems before me which he was facing 'at present. He opined that there should be harmony and coordination between the law and the practice of it. When he was putting problems upon problems before me, he compelled me to ask him, 'You have only problems or you have solutions, too?'

He said unhappily, 'You should know, the 'impure' can be sorted out only when you know the 'pure'. There is a solution to every problem. The only difficulty is how to find it out.'

I did not understand him clearly what he was saying. And I had no interest understand him either. I had come to just to take the legal counsel from him upon the trespassing by one of my neighbors over my landed property. I mentioned it to him twice or thrice. But he paid no attention to it.

Changing the topic of our conversation, I said, 'How often do you go to the court these days?'

'What's the use of going to the court? It takes months to plead a case. They never study the case on the same day on which the case is submitted. You bask in the sun on the court lawn the whole day and return home in the evening. Thus whether you go to the court or not, doesn't make much difference. Such is the situation'. He went on, 'I almost do not know a case which has not been reversed in the legal progress and given the opposite verdict.'

The lawyer continued, 'I have heard, during the Rana times, even if only five percent of the cases were reversed in the legal process, the legal authorities would have been sacked. However, it doesn't mean that the Rana government was a good government. But in some areas of the administration they were strict in their own way. Whatever the laws, in the legal process and execution they were strict. But today, this is not the case. Even hundred percent cases would get reversed in the legal process. It doesn't make any difference. To take ten or twelve years for getting a single case through has become a simple matter. What can you do? Whatever the situation you have to go to the court willy- nilly!' He further said, 'The profession you have already chosen, can't be given up easily, too. At the same time, you have to maintain the dignity of the law in the legal state. Whatever legal defects are there, you have to put up with

Meanwhile, the gentleman added, 'It is said, judiciary was far better in the times of the Rana than now. Whatever they had been like in other areas, in the matter of justice they were prompt. A case that has now been lingering over the period of twelve years would have been terminated in twelve minutes. So, they say: The Rana period was the golden period as for as legal system is concerned.

Refuting him, I said, 'In those days, there were few people. There were a few law suits filed in the court. And also that was the period of the Rana autocracy. And law was in their mouth. Now that sort of things cannot go and cannot be.'

. The gentleman argued, 'Why not? They would like to do so. If there are more people and more law suits are filed than there are more law courts, too. What is not right here is the way they perform their business.' He further said, 'You have heard, I have been in litigation the past twelve years. Can you imagine how much I had to spend over my rounds to the court paying fees to the lawyers and so on over this period of twelve years.'

Our lawyer Mr. Bishnu Kant says, 'I will have to carry on my litigation for another twelve years. What a ridiculous situation is this in which one has to be in litigation for ages!'

I did not so far have the chance to talk to my lawyer friend about the matter that had brought me to him. I glanced at my watch, hours have rolled away since my arrival at my lawyer friend's law firm. Drawing attention

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of the lawyer, I said, 'Look here, my friend! I have come to you for some legal counsel.'

'Why didn't you say so long before? Go ahead said.

'How could I tell as you started your drama as soon as I arrived?'

'Forget it. I knew, you were here to talk. Now tell me. What's the problem? And what sort of legal advice do you want?'

'I have about two thousand square feet of plot in the city area. In the old times, my forefathers had a house there. One can still see some remains of the house there. In the city area, there had been no revenue system in the old times. As there had been no revenue system, so there could not be any documentary proof about it, too. During the latest land survey, they recorded it just as a-house-plot. In that survey, they have no concern with people as owners. they did what they liked. You know it very well yourself. They did not record anybody's name as the owner of the plot. Now someone in the neighborhood claims it as his residential-plot and had it registered in his name and has obtained legal sanction to construct a new house on that plot. Some neighbors informed me about it. The plot is, de facto, my ancestral property. Somebody else has it. Is there anyway to reclaim it?'

Listening to me attentively, my lawyer friend pouted his lips and said, 'Then there is no proof that the plot belongs to you. You can't win a case just by word of mouth. Equally true is that the man who claimed your

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plot, as his own also doesn't have. Any valid proof though he has legal sanction to build a house on the plot. Because the plot, de facto, belongs to you, you can file a case, and the case is indictable, too. But to reclaim your property it will take ten to fifteen years. It does not matter if it involves only time, but it involves money, too. In my opinion, better leave it.'

'What do you say? I should leave it! I should let someone else build a house on my forefather's property? What are you saying?'

'Let him build. You will have to spend thousands of rupees for just two thousand square feet of land. Even after spending thousands of rupees, there is no guarantee that you will win the case. You yourself, say you don't have any proof. Then?'

'You have not followed me. In the city areas of the Kathmandu Valley there was no revenue system in the old times. Then how could there be any proof? My proof is my neighbors. They will stand witness to my claim.'

'No matter how much witness they will give to your claim, there cannot be any guarantee for ultimate validity. How many levels are there of the court, you know yourself well. It is easier to file a case under temper and emotion, but it is difficult to bear the result. I advise you as a friend to leave it!'

I had come to my lawyer friend with a very high hope. I was proud that I had a renowned lawyer as my friend. All' this now seemed frozen. It was totally

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pointless to argue against his advice. I only said, 'Should I leave it then T

He said, 'It is better to forget. You should know. Might is Right.'

I glanced at my watch. It was about noon. I told" my lawyer friend that I would come back some day before long, and took leave of him.

Noon, I was striding towards my home. I was feeling lonely along the deserted road and more so than ever. In my mental vision everything from the drama that my lawyer friend had staged to the legal advice were passing one after another. When I remembered those scenes and conversations, I felt frightened! I felt insecure in every area of my life and I had a feeling - I was being surrounded by dark shadows on all directions! And my story woven out of the present unbearable situations prevailing here appears to be never - ending like the timeless horizon!

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Yuyutsu is very promising poet with a fine sense of place and gift for vivid imagery.

Indian Literature

Blackout

Tara Nath Sharma

Blackout is a tale of two demented, bloodthirsty souls. Sanga Sherpa of Lamakhu speaks of the frightening bloodbath that the Lamakhu boys cause at Iyamke hilltop. Parallel to his primordial lust for violence runs another tale of Talak Bahadur in which to award justice he pulls out the eyes of his atrocious uncle, Jhamak Bahadur.

While weaving his structure for these thundering tales, the novelist Grapples with the factors that make

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these characters participate in the Grue some drama of bloodshed. In his process, argues Yuyutsu R.D

Gr. novelist brings to light the secret of Sharma in his Foreword, the turbulence that causes all commotion in the Napa esc hills. A memorable piece of Nepalese fiction.

Noted Napalese critic, **Krishna Chandra Singh Pradhan** in *Nepalese Novel and Novelists*

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