

The White Lotus

It was Mahesh who first took me around Pahargunj. I had just come to Delhi, all the way from America, due to a sudden turn of events. It's really quite miraculous, how life remains as if the same for a very long time, and then changes as if nothing will ever be the same again, in just moments. At the very end of my dissertation writing, when all hope was lost, and it looked as if I would have to give up student life forever, a door opened. And so I was in Delhi to study media and caste issues, focussing on the Balmikis, generations of whom swept the streets of three empires: the Mughal empire, the British empire, and now, the endless empire of globalization that Delhi represents.

It was Mahesh who first spotted me, wandering around clueless in the MandirMargbasti. "Surveywaaliaagayi!" the kids would shout when I got in, and then disappear with a wild circular dance. Instead of disappearing, Mahesh sat down and talked to me. He was very familiar with my breed of researchers, the ones who descend from unspecified locations of privilege and then leave forever, with findings one would never know about. He made me promise that I would file a copy of my research with the small library near the Balmikimandir that he had started along with Vijay Prashad, my better known friend, who had preceded my own travels.

Mahesh was unlike other Balmiki youths in many ways. Around thirty, he remained unmarried. This was despite the fact that he could easily pass off as an upper caste male. Unusually fair and good looking, Mahesh had tomato cheeks and a Mammootty moustache. I was struck by his obvious visual discrepancy with his aged, wizened mother, Sarti Devi, who swigged local liquor, cursed with talent and swept the streets around Connaught place, the glittering centre of Delhi. Mahesh did not even smoke. He always dressed well, and in contrast to many others in the basti, looked extremely well-fed, even prosperous. He could have easily passed off for a Delhi bureaucrat, except for the crushed air he wore like an aura he could not discard. He spoke broken English, which helped my broken Hindi tremendously. He offered help, as a translator, and as someone who'd introduce me to families in the locality.

That's how we went to Pahargunj to have tea. Pahargunj was the closest shopping locality to the basti. Women sweepers went there every evening to buy vegetables and trinkets from the open markets, jostling with the occasional white tourists who bargained for fashionable cotton clothes and jackets that would cost them hundred times the amount in the West. We sat at one of those semi-open tea shops that dot the area. It was there that Mahesh told me about a recent incident that changed him.

One day Mahesh was travelling in a bus. Lurching forward on a sudden brake, Mahesh hit a policeman who was standing in front of him. He was hauled to the police station. A bunch of policemen looking for a human toy for their afternoon entertainment confronted him. Something happened to him there that he would not talk about, perhaps to me as a woman. It was something unbelievably humiliating, an event that would challenge one's worth and existence for a lifetime. He returned to the basti as a cripple; not a physical cripple, but with a mark on his manhood that could not be erased from memory. My superficial observation of him changed as he spoke. I began to notice the invisible sign of felt inferiority that no external appearance could change.

I was reminded of what happened to Gita, a woman from Nedumangad who had worked at our house in Thiruvananthapuram. Tall and sturdy, Gita had a powerful presence that seemed to fit

uneasily into domestic interiors. She even slightly intimidated my mother although all the power in Gita was harnessed for the infinite tasks that would be invented everyday. Despite her rebellious, dominating body, Gita carried out the daily work with a singularly obedient energy that made hard labour invisible. One day, she stopped coming to carry out the work that our house could design for her. We heard that Gita's son had been caught by the police for a robbery that he hadn't committed. Then came the unexpected news: Gita had committed suicide. I learnt that Gita went to the police station to plead for her son. No one knew what went on at the police station. But Gita came back after several hours, in the evening straight to the arrack shop. She ordered drinks and her favourite nettholi fry. The next morning, she was found dead in her hut. She had followed up the drinks with enough DDT to kill three people.

"Things like this always happen to poor people like us," said Janaki, who told me about Gita. In Mahesh's life too, one tragedy followed another. At the time when Mahesh was dragged to the police station, he was also in love with an upper caste girl, Mayuri. Somehow the girl's parents got to know that he was a Balmiki, living in the basti. After the outcry at home, Mayuri became aloof. She stopped meeting him alone. Then all of a sudden, one day, she would no longer talk to him. Finally, she would not even glance at him after he spent hours waiting at their favourite bus stop. He only wanted to know from her why. And there was no reason at all, only a blindness, a silence, and a deafness. He waited for a year. He waited for a year, not troubling her, just hanging around at the right spots. Then Mayuri even stopped taking the bus or walking the same route. So Mahesh became alone, more alone than anyone in the basti, because for a while, he seemed to be on the threshold of different worlds, and the world that gave him life all of a sudden ceased to exist. That's why, despite his fair and prosperous appearance he seemed as if he had nothing.

Still, yesterday something happened at Pahargunj which occupied me after the news of the explosions in Delhi. It seemed as if in our time, spaces were being turned into war zones without announcements. Tired and listless at the end of the working day, I had to run yet another errand: make a color copy of my passport. So there I was in brightly lit Northampton, a little town just six miles away from the place where I live. Northampton is the home of Smith college, where the most privileged girls in Massachusetts come to study. There is something special about the bodies of the white people in Northampton, something very pure and clean, as if they have transmigrated on to a different realm of existence altogether. Perhaps it is the expensive organic foods – people would drink only organic coffee, organic fruit juice, shop for organic vegetables and eat soy substitutes for meat. Northampton abhorred America's mall culture, the big vulgar shiny shopping areas that criss cross middle America. Instead there are little shops with dim lights, unusual names, and exquisite objects that no one could possibly need. Like Faces, for instance, an accessories shop where you could buy colored glass beads that could be hung on your window to color the sunlight. Or like Lhasa, the Tibetan restaurant where customers paid hefty bills to nibble at half cooked vegetables served by someone, whom I imagined would be dressed up like a monk.

So here I was at Paradise copies, Northampton and waiting for the polite white kid, who knew enough to be nice to brown people, to copy my passport. As if by magic, the door opened and I turned to see an old African American man stand next to me. It was a rare sight in the world of pure white bodies. I had almost never seen poor black people in the town. After all the first duty of the first world police is to eliminate the visual presence of poor people. The old man showed the kid a sketch of someone with a huge moustache. He wanted it enlarged. It would cost three dollars, said

the kid. I took a second look at the very old man. He appeared strangely refined: his features had been fine tuned to a point where physical suffering had actually translated to a nobility that defied all material ancestry. Although his tattered long black coat suggested his utter poverty, he seemed unusually dignified. As an American who participates in the making of America, I came up with the only idea that surfaced – perhaps I could pay for the photocopy?

Yet things happened too soon as I was gazing at the sketch and thinking of Dostoyevsky. The blurred features now fell into focus: the sketch was of Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher of Anarchism, I noticed that the tattered book that the man held on to, as if it was the only precious thing in life. I could not read the title. The giant photocopier now threw out the image of Nietzsche. With trembling hands, the man produced a wallet from which he took out the only dollar that it clearly contained. I was still searching for the right words. In America you don't normally help people unless they ask because the gesture could be read as an insult. There was a common whiteness that shrouded us so that we had to be strangers. "Don't worry about the oney", the kid said. The old man took the enlarged sketch of Nietzsche who now loomed large over us all and left as silently as he had arrived.

Night had fallen early this winter yet I drove around looking for him in the small town streets and the dark park benches. I could not find him. He was lost forever, with long black coat, his tattered book and the enlarged image of the philosopher who had thought outside the boundaries of his time. I imagined he had left for a place that is outside everything that could crush life. In other words: "The form of that being is as follows: Like a cloth dyed with turmeric, like the grey sheep's wool, like the scarlet insect Indragopa, like a tongue of fire or like a white lotus. Those who know it as such attain splendour like a flash of lightning. Therefore the description: not this, not this."*

But then the Buddhists can justly ask: after all this debate, is it fair to describe Brahman this way?

*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, 3.6 with Shankaracharya's commentary.