

SIDDIQ AALAM

## The Thirst of the Pipe<sup>\*</sup>

THIS IS A SIX-FOOT-WIDE STREET, fully paved. On entering it you bump into a tube-well, which is out of order these days. The street itself is an impregnable stronghold of the red flag. During elections, or on the Party's anniversary, or for the visit of some great leader, the red flag is raised. Perhaps due to an inability to support the weight of its hammer and sickle, the flag hangs limply from its slender, bamboo pole much of the time.

One day I decided to make the tube-well work, and since I decided to perform such a huge task, here are a few words about myself:

I live on this street. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the street lives within me. Outside the main door of our house, two cast-iron rings hang from the wall. From this it can be surmised that at sometime in the past horses must have been tethered there. This means that it's an ancient house, decrepit and run down. Pigeons have set up dovecotes in the cornices of its walls. Their cooing usually echoes in the morning. The rest of the time they just sit there hiding their beaks inside their wings, oblivious to the world and all that's in it. I don't like the pigeons. They go about messing up the whole street, especially in winter. Once I saw the carcass of a pigeon lying in the street being clawed at by a cat. I shooed the cat away but didn't know what to do with the lacerated body of the pigeon. In the evening when I returned from the office, it still lay there, in the same position, its feet pointing upwards; except now both of its eyes were covered by black ants. I stand in my doorway a long time, staring at it, until the man-sized window above the door opens, and I hear my wife Bandana cry out, "Why don't you come inside now? It's very damp outside."

I put my hand on my hair to check. It is indeed wet. This is the first I notice the cold and go inside the house. The entire lower floor of the house is used by the tenants as a bath, and it's always wet because they wash themselves and their clothes there. Bird feathers and droppings are always

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<sup>\*</sup>"Nal kī Pyās," from the author's collection *Lemp Jālānē Wālē* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2008), pp. 152–69.

floating in the cistern there. At times even a dead mouse can be found there and it gets picked up and tossed out. There is a permanent dampness on the walls. The people who live within these semi-dark rooms are themselves ancient like this house. Once I saw an old man coughing and staring at me.

“Dadu Moi, need anything?” I asked him.

“After Bhawani Shiv Shankar, no one has any kindness left in their heart.” He was talking about my grandfather. “And you were just a toddler roaming around naked when I arrived here. Those were some good days. But ah! how long did they last? The country became independent and the sparrow-hawks started gathering in the sky.” I nodded my head in agreement. There was no other effective way of avoiding an unnecessary discussion, but was it easy to get rid of Parimal Da?

“About six hundred sparrow-hawks.” He started counting them. “And the clawing buzzards, and kites, and crows and jackals. Afterwards, dogs and more dogs, all without tails and of uncertain pedigree.” Perhaps he wanted to say more, but who had the time for all that? Once, six years ago, we had consigned Parimal Da to the loony bin in Alipur. He hadn’t forgotten that and was still taking out his anger on us. Going up the stairs, I noticed that Parimal Da had become suddenly quiet and was staring at me from behind his thick eyeglasses.

Of the rooms upstairs, two are in our possession. Here, in one room, I sleep on a high bed with Bandana. In the other room, my two children are growing up. Despite the tall, barred, man-size windows, not much light enters these rooms because of the narrowness of the street. On top of all this, we also have a pet, a dog called Hiranman who sits with a philosopher’s expression on his face much of the time, either peering out at the balcony which opens onto the inner courtyard, and is also a passageway for people, or chasing the mice which appear from the cracks in the drainpipes but vanish as soon as they see even a human shadow.

If I’ve wandered far away from the tube-well, my intent is no more than to describe the world around it, so that I might tell its story completely. Otherwise, how could this lifeless contraption made of nuts, bolts and a piece of pipe have any story of its own? If you press it down, it groans; press it down hard and continuously, it spits out some water. But these days its faucet spits out nothing. It’s like an old man who just can’t get it up, or an old maid who’s repressed her sexuality long enough to let it dry up. This tube-well has become completely unserviceable inside. Or, perhaps the underground spring it emanated from changed its course or ran completely dry. The street folk wait at the corner for the huge municipal tanker, which never arrives on time. And when it does arrive, the one-

eyed driver gets off his seat and tries to ingratiate himself to the people as they stand in a queue with weary expressions on their faces holding plastic bottles or brass pots.

“Just think, so much water passes through our stomachs and our urinary tracts, and we aren’t even aware of it.” This is his favorite topic of conversation, and he repeats it the same way each time, as if he’d heard those very words from someone and memorized them. “Because of us humans, the world is no longer fit to live in: you eat good things, but eject filth; drink nice liquids, but excrete dirty liquid; inhale fresh air, but exhale foul air. We’ve become machines that produce garbage.”

A philosopher, indeed!

But what’s odd is that it isn’t the same driver every time. Once we saw a driver who was suffering from an itch and his face looked pallid. So, while people were drawing water from the faucet of the tanker, he was rubbing his back against the wall, and his right hand was continuously scratching his balls. Finally, when the crowd of people had disappeared, he began, with a gesture of his hand, to address everyone present or absent from the street.

“Now look at this! At first people were clamoring so much for water, but now nobody is even showing up to take it. What do you want me to do with all the water that’s left? Even the dogs aren’t coming to have a roll in it.”

And it was true; by that time all the dogs gathered at the street corner had already had their dip in the water under the tanker and departed.

After the tanker left, a beggar, his face bristling with pimples and boils, appeared and installed himself on the wet pavement left behind by the tanker. He had a hangdog expression on his face. One of his eyes was closed and most of his remaining eye had been attacked by a cataract. Perhaps he had no money to get it treated, or perhaps he’d been assured that people would pity him more because of the impairment so he never got it treated.

While he was there, he would call out time and again: “What Lord Krishna wills, no one can prevent.”

The fact was that an Orissa Brahmin, Mahalat Goswami, the priest of the Diwargir temple<sup>1</sup> had discovered him somewhere and brought him to his temple to increase its income. Often, late at night, people in the

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<sup>1</sup>Divārgīr Mandir is a temple-like projection in a wall in any very old building with the image of one of the Hindu deities kept there for the passersby. Such constructions are often built illegally in order to collect money from pious people. The translator would like to thank the author for supplying this and the following notes.

neighborhood heard their bickering and arguing when, completely plastered, the two divided up the proceeds from begging, and often came to blows in the process.

Three hundred years ago, this city was part of Sunderban. Then one day it so happened that a man,<sup>2</sup> placing his foot on the head of a crocodile, stepped down from his sailing ship. His eyes were bloodshot. Besotted with opium, he was somewhat terrified of the greenery and the swampy terrain around him which he feared was chock-full of snakes and alligators. He looked around and concluded that everything there was utterly meaningless. Time passed. One day the British suddenly sounded their bugle, rolled up their Union Jack and marched out for Delhi, after which the people noticed that the situation had become even more meaningless than before. Or, perhaps, when all is said and done, the sensation of meaninglessness deepens somewhat. However, the water in the Hoogly River was not likely to stop flowing. It kept moving and becoming muddier by the day. The chimneys of the factories went on blackening the city sky, and the plaster from the walls of our houses kept peeling off. Some folks left their faces in the windows and forgot about them; some faceless others, after a protracted stay in this world, moved on towards the cremation grounds. And I, who had resolved to draw water from the tube-well, had to investigate the whole issue from scratch. After all, I too had to find out whether I was really cut out for the job.

Could I really do it? I asked myself for the first and last time. While tying my shoelaces, I shook my head and, in a way, put an end to the question for all time. I told my older son to give more attention to his studies because a really difficult time was upon us; even doctors and engineers were traipsing around idly.

Although my point was not to dishearten my son, my wife did not take very kindly to my comments. “Why do only black clouds hover over your sky?” she asked me. “Such words have a bad effect on children. You should always talk to them nicely. They’re like flowers. They wilt if they don’t get enough sun and die if they get too much.”

“Bandana! My! You’re really a poet!” I smiled and looked at her. “Why don’t you write poetry? I’ve known a clerk in the town hall for quite a while; why, you can easily take on the role of a poet in their events. They’re always looking for females to enhance the beauty and loveliness

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<sup>2</sup>The reference here is to Job-Charnok, founder of Calcutta, who is said to have come there when it was a marshy land infested with snakes and alligators.

of their literary gatherings. And I also promise to find you a publisher, one who'll go bankrupt after publishing your poems. College Street is full of such crazies."

"Is it so easy to write poetry?" Bandana asked. "And do people today have time for it? I've been with you for the past fifteen years, but I have yet to see you read a book of poems. You're much crazier about football news than poetry. The Mohan Bagan Club seems to be the center of the universe for you."

"I know you studied at the Presidency College,<sup>3</sup> that's why I'm so scared of you," I said smiling. "And listen! Don't speak the language of the runaways from East Pakistan."

"When did you ever see me support the East Bengal Club?"<sup>4</sup>

"I understand everything. You were a member of the Student Federation of India. Just who are its influential members?"<sup>5</sup>

"Come on! You're so ... what should I say?" Bandana laughs and says. "It's not that I don't like football. I don't like this kind of talk about the local Bengalis and the foreign ones, nor do I care for the distinction between Indians and Pakistanis in cricket. People here disguise their hatred as patriotism and strut about with their chests puffed up. Meanwhile the players become even richer."

"It's actually our hatred that makes us so active. Why, the whole world now knows how wonderfully hatred sells everywhere. You can't diminish its significance by putting on a liberal mask," I say to her. "And then each one of these hatreds has its own distinct flavor. This you can't understand because you perceive no difference anywhere in the world—even though mountain inhabitants are short and eat snakes while those on the plains

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<sup>3</sup>A Government College at Calcutta, famous for being the hotbed of leftist politics spearheaded by migrant East Pakistani (now Bangladeshi) Bengalis.

<sup>4</sup>In India, there are three famous football clubs which win most of the trophies and shields in the country: i) East Bengal Club, ii) Mohan Bagan Club and iii) Mohammedan Sporting Club. All three are located in Calcutta. The East Bengal Club belongs to and is largely supported by East Bengali refugees (erstwhile East Pakistan) who migrated to India and settled there. The Mohan Bagan Club belongs largely to the original Bengali inhabitants of West Bengal and the Mohammedan Sporting Club is supported mostly by Muslims. Individuals play for all three clubs irrespective of their religious or regional affiliations. When Bandana's husband, who is an original inhabitant of West Bengal and a member of the Mohan Bagan Club, taunts her for being a student of Presidency College where refugees are dominant, she protests that she never supported the East Bengal Club that is controlled by the refugees.

<sup>5</sup>The Student Federation of India is a student wing of leftist politics and parties.

are cleverer, victims of many more ailments and addicted to reading newspapers.”

Whenever Bandana is about to lose an argument she clings to my chest, rubs her hand on my rough beard, and says: “I know you always won in college debates, but let me at least win sometimes at home.”

“That’s it,” I respond, fondling her beautiful tresses—love for these tresses caused me to go through the seven circumambulations without realizing that they are exquisite chains made just to put men under a life sentence. “We, the lovers of football, do not allow this. We do not have the word defeat in our dictionaries. Call it our weakness or strength, but there is indeed an urge within us to go on living. The day we admit defeat, we’ll cease to be humans; we will indeed become deflated balloons.”

Oh, yes, the tube-well! Forgive me, I wandered off. Getting back to that, allow me to repeat: The tube-well is really old. Now, those who come into the street or go out have become accustomed to regarding it as useless.

“Did you know,” I heard one resident of the street telling his companion who was an outsider, “there are a lot of rumors about this tube-well?”

“Really? And I thought it was just an ordinary hand pump that has seen its day, like many others in many other places,” the outsider remarked. “Whenever I come to visit you, I bump into it. I don’t know how you stand it. By the way, what are the rumors? They must be really very strong, because the pump stands its ground firmly in the middle of the street.”

“According to one rumor the tube-well never produced any water.”

“What’s new about that?” he replied. “How can this possibly make it more significant? There are hundreds of things in this country that stopped working from day one. There’s got to be another reason—perhaps you don’t know.”

“How could I not know it? I’ve been living here for over twenty years.”

But the outsider was right in saying what he did. Fifteen years ago, at the demand of the residents, this tube-well was installed immediately before the call for elections. However, when, after a lengthy speech, the Minister proceeded to start the pump, it didn’t emit even one drop of water, although during the earlier tests it had been spilling out water copiously. The Minister immediately declared it “sabotage” and attributed it to the opposition. The next day a dog was found lying dead in front of the well. Because the whole thing was politicized, no one bothered to remove the dog. It lay there for days, reeking. The leader won the Assembly elections, as he was expected to, but the tube-well stayed on as a

memento of those days. From this we learned that our leaders at least try to do things for us; it's a different matter, though, that in the end, the tube-well still remains thirsty.

The councilor for our local area, the lanky Kinamoy Gangaram, always comes to our house because, during every election campaign, Bandana puts vermilion in the part in her hair and places a stole or shawl over her shoulders to go out canvassing for the Party.

"We should make this tube-well work," I told him one day.

"What's the use?" he said. "It would only create a nuisance for people who come into the street. There's no chance of introducing any new drainage system here now, so the street will just look messy. And, in any case, who's going to need water now? Most of the houses have already been equipped with hand pumps. On top of that, in summer, the corporation tanker brings water every day."

"In that case, remove it."

"How could that be? Shankhu Da himself had it installed."—He means the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) who is a Minister in the Government nowadays. "Laghu Da, now you've started talking like the Congress-wallahs. Bandana, why don't you put some sense into Laghu Da's head?"

"I don't have the brains for that," Bandana answers. "Every day he comes up with some new scheme."

"No matter what you say, I won't stop until I get some water out of it." I issue the ultimatum. "And Ganga Ram, you guys please stop trying to turn this into a political issue, all right?"

"Of course, Laghu Da. How can you be talking like that? Don't we know your views? There is hardly anyone here who does not have respect for you." I know he's lying. Lord knows how many tongues these wretched politicians speak with?

That day I strolled up and down the street a long time. The lights were already glowing on the slender lampposts. The shadow of the tube-well, like an archer's, had shrunk from its outer corner and retreated inward. I'd grown up playing along this street; someday my bier will be carried out down this same street. People will load my body into a truck, throw *morhi* (parched rice) over me and take the road to Neem Talla. Will I die without achieving anything? What would be so wrong with doing something useful before dying so the people living along the street consider me their benefactor, even if it's for a short while and for no reason at all?

There's a site engineer in the architectural firm where I work. I phoned him: "Well, if it turns out that the inner pipes have gone bad, that would mean the cost of new ones, plus the expense of digging."

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll take care of it,” I said. “It’s no longer a political matter so a number of people living along the street will help me.”

“So, what do you want us to do with it?”

“Either make it work properly, or remove it.”

“You think it’s that easy?”

“It seems you don’t want to do the job. I’ll have to look for somebody else.”

“No, no. You get riled up for no reason.” The site engineer’s speech softened. “Don’t I know what kind of individual you are? People in our firm have nothing but respect for you.”

“Skip this wheedling and cajoling. I want a frank estimate of what exactly I’d need to do. How much money would I need? Why, what else is the Consumer Court for?”

“The total cost will only be known after my man looks at it. If the pipe inside the ground is intact, the expense would be nominal.”

“Hope it’s that,” I said and hung up.

The drafting table before which I stand to draw maps has a huge, man-sized window in front with panels that open to the outside. Behind it the decrepit old buildings of Calcutta appear like a faded painting. In this assemblage of ancient buildings, I notice two mosque domes of equal size upon which the pigeons have pitched their camp. During the winter, I’ve always witnessed the blazing disc of the sun melt between these two domes. I know, and I keep reminding myself of it, that this world is not an easy place to inhabit, but this is not a world I made. And besides, we have to make an effort to show we can at least do something to make our presence felt on this planet.

Nimai Ghoshal is a man without a neck. Placing tea in front of him on a teapoy, my wife looks at him disapprovingly, but he’s my favorite person on the whole street. He’s the one who planted the idea of the Consumer Court in my mind. I’ve played football with Nimai Ghoshal in the Mohan Bagan Stadium all my life. When he was obliged to manage his father’s laundry business, he bankrupted it within four years and was done with it.

“I don’t like this whole mess,” he declared in front of me. “Is a man born just so he can spend his whole life washing other people’s filth?”

“We toil so we can earn our bread,” I protested weakly as it seemed necessary at the time, but I knew Ghoshal was going to wash it away in a flood of logic.

“We say such things just to convince ourselves,” Ghoshal replied. “But the truth is we’re all pack animals. The heavier the load we carry on our



backs, the luckier we consider ourselves.”

After the closure of the laundry, Nimai tried to bring out a newspaper for a while. He'd walk around with a satchel hanging from his shoulder, and to complete his image as a journalist he'd grown a really haughty-looking beard on his chin. That paper didn't take off, but of course Nimai did become well known and his contacts in business and politics were spread far and wide.

“This Kinamoy Ganga Ram is an ass of the first order,” he said. He picked up a biscuit and pulverized it between his pointed teeth, just as he did with his pen. “First, I'll have a talk with Shankhu Da. Then we'll move forward. Every matter has to have a proper beginning, a proper manner for handling it. We should have thought about this issue a long time ago. That's why we Bengalis are such losers. There was a time when Bengal thought of things first and the whole of Bharat followed her. Nowadays, what Bharat thinks of today, we get into our heads three years later.”

“Everybody tells me it's not as easy as it seems. An old pipe is like an old tenant, not easy to get rid of, and even harder to make right. A lot of other issues we know nothing about are involved and they'll only come to light gradually.”

“Well, I hope they do come to light,” Ghoshal said as he moved his neckless head clockwise and then, like a dove, in the opposite direction. “But, at least you tried to think about this issue, otherwise, who has time for such matters these days? If the truth be told, we've all become machines, machines being run by others.”

After he left, my wife said, “This Nimai Da can't even do much for himself. What do you expect him to do for you?”

“Wait a while, Bandana,” I said, picking up the biscuit Nimai Ghoshal left behind on the saucer. “And please make me a hot cup of tea. I'm going up to sit on the roof in the sun. This matter is serious, I may need your help.”

“What sort of help?” my wife asked, becoming alarmed. “Don't embroil me in your problems. I know you, don't I? Keep all this madness to yourself.”

“Perhaps the world just needs madmen these days,” I say smiling.

Two weeks have gone by. The truth is that I have, in a way, gotten a bit tired of this issue. Whatever the reason, I know my own daily activities have little to do with it since they've remained more or less the same all along. They haven't increased or decreased. As on other days, standing in front of my table, I've gotten tired of drawing lines on paper and started

looking out the window where, amid the jumble of buildings, the pigeons flutter above the domes of the mosque. The time for the sun's rays to soften hasn't arrived yet. The window on our side is still in the shadow of the building. Down below on the street, the horns of the passing cars are constantly blaring. I'm enjoying the symphony of the city when Karim walks in with a cup of tea. Holding the cup in my hands, I sink down onto my cushioned chair and, spreading both of my legs across the table, shout: "Karim!"

"Yes, *Huzoor*." Karim was the lift operator in the building, but since the lift is permanently disabled he started working in our office. His ear hairs are white and bright like pigeon feathers. He sleeps in our office, also says his prayers here, and looks like he's part of the oily, old, blackened furniture that hasn't been used for years.

"Karim, where do you hope to be buried?"

"Wherever the *bhai log* choose to take me, *Huzoor*—Gobra, Baghmari or the Sola Ana Qabristan. Where else would the bastards take me?"

"Don't you have any close relatives?"

"You guys are now everything to me, *Huzoor*."

"Why don't you return to your village? Its soil, its air, its people—don't you ever remember them?"

"Who would even recognize me there after fifty years, *Huzoor*?" Karim said as he sat down on the bench. "And the village itself is hardly a village anymore. The villagers have become shrewder than the city-dwellers. Now the bad ones there do more killing and maiming for a bit of land and property. A person needs to count his fingers after shaking hands with them."

The villagers have become cleverer?; the villages themselves have turned into cities, the cities into mega-cities, the metropolises into cosmopolises. Now our mega-cities are whole countries; everybody seems to be living in a country within a country, each has its own invisible borders, its own barbed-wire fences, its own "no man's lands" controlled politically by particular parties, with special arrangement for terrorist attacks by the hoodlums. What more does a country require?

While crossing the street, I stop at the tram-tracks under my building. Smoke is spreading down the street. The Bihari cart-pushers are passing by with their loaded carts. The Bengali clerks are nodding off at their typewriters. They've been sitting there doing the same thing since the time of the British, a consequence of eating too much boiled rice. The lawyers and couriers of the High Court, each one in his uniform, are milling about. A dog, one of its hind legs in the air, is pissing on a fire hydrant. The color of its urine is a bit like the muddy water of the Hoogly that flows out of

this hydrant. But no one pays attention to the dog. Everyone's in a hurry. So am I. A rather colorful, state-of-the-art tram, ringing its bell, is turning around, crescent-like, from the edge of the Lal Deghi, its wheels rattling devilishly as it changes tracks. The heads of the passengers inside bob.

At my house, Nimai Da is waiting for me.

"I've spoken to Shankhu Da. He wants to see you."

"I don't have time, and, in any case, this issue doesn't concern me alone."

"You're bowing out now, aren't you? Lost your enthusiasm, eh? You weren't like that before."

"And not even now," I say to him. "But why should I go to Shankhu Da? In any case, I'm just not very fond of these political types."

"You're impossible," Nimai Ghoshal is smiling. "Well, you'll have to see Shankhu Da anyway. Don't worry, he isn't all that bad. He's a Minister, but still lives an ordinary life in his old house."

"We're all living ordinary lives, and that's why we don't accomplish anything memorable."

After Nimai's departure, Bandana gives me a piece of her mind. "You have a strange way with people. He's doing so much for you and you don't even ... Will you ever change?"

"What change do you expect at my age? Don't wait for any new tricks from an old dog," I say as I climb up to the bed in my room, under which a lot of household junk lies stored. Even if our belongings are of no use to us at all, we lower-middle-class people don't believe in discarding them. "And about Nimai Ghoshal, don't be too concerned. We know each other quite well. We've been friends since we used to roam around naked. You actually came along much later."

Even though Bandana feels hurt by what I've said, I don't take notice of it. That night it takes me much longer to get to sleep. In my dream I see the state-of-the-art tram cross my tracks again and again. And each time, I see Karim sitting in it beckoning me to come inside. Finally, I manage to hang on to its footboard, but the conductor keeps telling me to get off. He'd been watching my moves for quite some time.

"You should know the tram is going back to the depot."

When I wake up in the morning, my head leaning against the pillow, I'm still thinking about that dream. The city is gradually emerging from a sheet of smoke and mist. A strange stale odor clings to the doors and walls of the city. Has my nose become more sensitive? After washing my hands and face, I go sit in front of the window in the cane chair loaded with undergarments and watch the rays of the sun pierce the empty spaces between the buildings like lances. The traffic of the people has begun in the

street below. Our dog Hiraman has woken up and is emitting strange, muffled sounds as if trying to make us aware of his presence. The newspaper boy has already tossed our paper in and disappeared. The milkman, rattling his tin can, is leaving on his bicycle. The sweeper is cleaning the street. The missionary school kids are getting ready to depart. Looks as though it's the same movie I'm obliged to watch every day. Bandana appears and hands me a cup of hot tea with the newspaper.

"Good morning," she says to me. That is the moment when I seem to fancy her as the most beautiful woman in the world, and I keep wondering what would have happened if she hadn't come into my life. I would, perhaps, have been like a stone stuck to a wall. But she's smiling a little more than usual today. Perhaps this smile is for no special reason. Not all of our quirks have explanations.

That day I leave my office a little early. My plan is to meet Shankhu Da with Nimai Ghoshal. Turning into the street, as always, I try to force myself towards the edge so as not to bump into the tube-well, but I barely escape falling down. The tube-well isn't there anymore.

Have I walked into some other street? No, the street is ours, but the tube-well is missing. This makes the street seem somewhat alien and much too wide. I stand where the tube-well used to be; there's an oval-shaped hole in the ground filled to the top with soil.

I stand there for a long time until I see Mahalat Goswami, the priest of the wall temple, coming along.

"Where has the tube-well gone?" I ask him as if he's answerable for it.

"Three mechanics were here today. They worked the whole day. They removed everything, even the rusted pipes inside, and took them away. So, did you finally get it done, Laghu Da?"

"What did I do? Don't drag me into this," I say peevishly and move towards my house. I notice that today doors and windows are opening every step of my way. People have smiling faces: they're looking at me as if I was a close relative. I notice a hand-rickshaw leaning against the wall of a house. The driver is sitting comfortably on the footboard smoking a biri. Until yesterday no rickshaw could have come in, but now the street has become such that, if the driver was willing, even a taxi might venture in.

After washing my hands and face, I emerge from the washroom and Bandana smiles as she hands me a towel. "The whole mohalla is pleased with you. Really, if this pipe hadn't been removed we would never have known how wide our street is."

"So, that ass of a Gangaram finally got it done," I say.

"Gangaram?" There was astonishment in Bandana's eyes. "But he him-

self showed up here to congratulate you.”

But why me? What did I do? I fell to thinking. If it wasn't Ganga Ram, then it had to be Nimai Ghoshal's doing. But soon it became evident to me that it was neither Nimai Ghoshal's job, nor the site engineer Bippa Roy's to whom I had spoken earlier. I haven't been able to solve this puzzle, and even though since that day I've been honestly denying having anything to do with it, my neighbors, precisely because of my denials, have begun to believe more firmly that I had a part in it. Not only have people begun looking at me with respect and admiration, even the cynical Parimal Da has been tempted to pat my back: "I'm seeing so many of Bhowani Shiv Shankar's qualities in you."

Perhaps, then, the tube-well really had bothered the people a lot.

Two weeks have passed. I've stopped protesting. In fact, passing by the place, I've begun to believe it is indeed my own achievement.

"It must be the doing of the PWD<sup>6</sup> guys. What's so surprising about that?" the site engineer had said. "It's a coincidence that you thought of it and they thought of it at the same time. And, then again, who knows, some scrap metal collector may have taken advantage of the opportunity and walked away with everything. In an old city like Calcutta this is almost a daily occurrence. What's there to be embarrassed about? It's good, isn't it, that you lost your headache without losing your head."

This was the engineer Bippa Roy's uncouth way of cracking a joke. I don't like this man. Nowadays I've come to know him much better than I did earlier. He's only good at delaying assignments. If he had dealt with me honestly, I wouldn't have been in this state today. In life, we like many people simply because we've never had to put them to the test. All it takes is a little bit of acid before the exterior metal begins to vanish and—*voilà!*—the devil begins to show!

It's been six months since all this happened. The work at my office has increased a bit. Huge residential areas are beginning to go up in the suburbs. A sudden craze to build houses has taken over this mega-city. Drawing lines on paper with a pencil, I often don't find the time to observe the pigeons fluttering over the domes of the mosque. There are times when the disk of the sun between them has already dissolved and I don't even know about it. Then one day, when there isn't much work to do in the office, sipping tea, my legs on the desk, I call out: "Karim!"

"Yes, *Huzoor*," the silhouette of Karim's emaciated body emerges from

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<sup>6</sup>Public Works Department.

the fog of old furniture.

“Karim, you used to work as a lift-man in this building, did you not?”

“Yes, *Huzoor*.”

“Then you should have been drawing a salary for the work.”

“What salary, *Huzoor*? The lift doesn’t work anymore.”

“It doesn’t work, you say? But that’s not your fault, is it? They should get it fixed.”

“The lift dates from the time of the British. The necessary nuts and bolts are no longer available. What can they do, those poor fellows?”

“Everything is available; you don’t know those fellows. We Indians are a cunning lot. I’ve seen even older lifts work in Calcutta buildings. You meet me tomorrow at 10:00; we’ll go to see the Secretary of the Trust. If he doesn’t do anything, I have a friend by the name of Nimai Ghoshal. He knows everything about the Consumer Court. There are other reasons too why we can’t just ignore this issue. It’s not just a matter of your salary, it’s a matter of our hearts as well. This is an ancient building with tall flights of stairs, and we have to climb so many of them every day. What if some day there’s an accident? Don’t the people pay rent?” (Even though I knew the rent wasn’t even enough to pay the municipal tax for the building.)

“*Huzoor*, does it look to you as if the lift will begin working again?” There’s a glow in Karim’s eyes. He seems to be a new man, as if he has found a purpose in life.

“Why not?” I smile at him as I say that. “There’s hardly anything that can’t be done in this country. All we need is a little resolve. Let me tell you the story of the tube-well that used to block people’s path for no reason.” □

—Translated by Faruq Hassan