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BHOMKYA

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“Bhomkya? You are Bhomkya? Right?”
“Oh God! Oh God! How can I know?”
“How many children do you have?”
“Two. Oh God! Oh God!”
“Where is your wife?”
“Oh God! Oh God! I do not know”
“When did you wed?”
“Oh God! Oh God! I don’t know.”

We were all prisoners, would crowd beside him to ask him questions. He would laughing cowardly while giving us answers. He too was the prisoner in Amravati jail. He was dark, dwarf and fat. He had a pair of short and lean legs and a pot belly. It was huge and round like a big drum. It was shaggy as like that of a frog. When he would rise on his feet he looked like a huge pumpkin installed on two thick sticks. To cover hair on his head he would wear a long and high cap. He had only one loin cloth. A thick, dark and black hair grew on his cheeks, jaws, jowls except sockets of his eyes.

His gait was peculiar. Whenever he walked his whole body would shiver. He would always wait for his plate. He looked nervous till he got it. He would shun talk with anybody. After finishing his dish he would start speaking with the others. It seemed his tongue was unloosed. He loved chatting. He would talk in a thunderous tone like a roar of intoxicated tiger.

We would become anxious to converse with him. He was reticent and reserved type of man. He talked with others jocularly. He was whimsical fellow. Sometimes he would start singing an Abhangs. Here is one example.

“Be silent and contemplate.
Loud sounds reverberate in Pandhari.
Nama says Tukaram. Tukaram.
Tuka says that skilled hands can do this work
The untrained, unskilled can’t.

We would hear and laugh whenever he sang his abhangas. We liked Bhomkya was very much. At the time parade we would stand in two rows. Mr. Ghotale, the officer would lead us to



the ground. We would inform him our troubles. That day we made the two rows. Bhomkya stood beside me. Mr. Ghotale was proudly casting his eyes here and there.

Bhomkya cleared his throat and said, "Saheb."

"What?" "What is your problem?" Said Mr. Ghotale.

How long shall I live here barely as like a pumpkin." Bhomkya said.

We laughed.

"What is your problem? Tell me clearly." Said the officer.

"Saheb, day by day I am becoming ripe as like a pumpkin. Yes. The pumpkin vine climbs on the roof of the house, and there grows a large yellow pumpkin." When I came here the colour of my skin was dark. Now it is yellowish." Bhomkya said.

We laughed. We tried to suppress it but we could not do so. Bhomkya stood there poker-faced. He looked like a stoic. Embarrassed, the officer pored at us. He looked like a frightened monkey. He was puzzled. The prisoners standing in the row put their hands on their knees and laughed to their fill. Now the officer flew into a rage.

"Keep silence." He said solemnly.

Like a strict disciplinarian he took two steps back but he slipped and collapsed on the ground. Bhomkya began laughing. As like a tomcat he opened his jaws widely and gestured as if he were laughing. We looked at him and laughed merrily. He was utterly confused.

"I say, don't make noise. Shh.....!" the officer said". We became quiet.

"Hey you..... Oh man..... what is your problem?" The officer said.

"I want one dress!"

"Did the officer seize your dress? Did he keep it in the stock room?"

"No. They seize my tarya (musical instrument) only. 'I have nothing except this loin-cloth. Will they snatch it off?' He pointed his finger at the loin cloth and said. "They didn't snatch off my loin-cloth."

"It's mine. Why will they take it off any way?"

All the prisoners laughed again. Mr. Ghotale went to his office angrily.

After a while the warden brought a trouser and vest and gave it to Bhomkya. He became happy. Never before he has seen such a crispy, brand new trousers and vest for the first time he was wearing a full dress.

"Oh, Good-heated man! Now I am throwing away this loin-cloth." He mumbled.

The clock on the tower struck six o'clock. We waited to get locked inside the barrack. We detested this very much but it was unavoidable. The officer pushed us inside the barrack. Tucking his new dress under one of his arms Bhomkya entered in to the room. He began wearing his dress hurriedly. We paid no heed to him. He said to me, "Patil, is it suitable for me?" We laughed again. He looked absurd so the prisoners laughed and some of them rolled on the ground. His vest was short. It gripped his chest tightly. He looked as like a grown up woman in a small girl's bodice. He was trapped inside his tight dress. He rose to his feet and raised his hand upward. He wore skin-tight dress. His trousers stuck to his loins tightly and made him unable to make any movement. Like a hare he fall into the trap. He could not of breath properly. He moved round and round. We laughed heartily.

His condition was like the coveatous cat that pushes her head inside an earthen milk pot to find some milk there but it's the head get stuck inside it. Bhomkya was packed in his own dress. After some time he collapsed on the ground. He summoned all his power to take off his dress but in vain. Now he was gasping and groaning with pain.



We sensed that his condition was worst. To give him help the two Pathans came forward. A butcher easily removes skin from the body of a dead he-goat. They applied the same skill and took off his tight vest and trousers. The first one removed his vest and the other one removed his trousers. Now he was freed and so he breathed easily. He heaved a sigh of relief and lay on the floor of the room silently. His gigantic belly rose up and down. It looked like a bellow. Sadness dripped in his eyes. We became anxious about his health. Like an etherized patient lying on the bed, Bhomkya, the proud successor of great Indian culture fall on the floor. It was the room where our former Governor C. Rajgopalachari lived and passed his time quietly reading books on India's progress and culture. Bhomkya learned a big lesson today.

Outside the building the darkness was dancing randomly. Big walls of desolate prison building were keeping a watch over us. Silence pervaded in every nook and corner. Everything looked still and inert. No movement. No sound. The heavy silence fell everywhere. Nobody spoke. Nobody took a single step. Nobody crooned. Fully opened eyes could not perceive anything. The living creatures were in suspended state. Cold, terror, fear, barbarity and cruelty were ruling ruthlessly. Inside the four dull prison walls thousands of prisoners slept. Nobody heard the sound of ululating baby, a sweet talking woman, chirping of birds and a crowing of a cock? The tower clock struck regularly at every hour and sentries shouted slogans. 'Sixty prisoners in all total.' 'All is well'. The bell rang loudly. A man standing far away from the prison could hear it. The guards stamped their feet in the verandah. Prisoners were asleep and some of them were snoring too.

Bhomkya yawned loudly like a giant and said to me, "Patil, why are you not sleeping?"

"Oh I am pondering over something."

"Yes. I am also unable to sleep now." He complained.

I said to him, "Why are you taken here in this jail?"

He drew a deep breath and then exhaled relaxedly. Instead of giving me a reply he asked me the same question, "Well, Why are you taken here?"

"The police brought me here". I said promptly.

"Yes, They brought me too." He rejoined. Then he told me his tragic story thoroughly. I wondered he told me everything except his caste, birth place, and father's name.

Indeed he was a human being. His ungainly physique is enough to tell us the true colour of the so called scoundrels in our society. We often take them to be respected men. He wanted to become a wager. In search of his work he visited many firms from Mumbai to Nagpur. He left no stone unturned to find him some work. But in vain. People rejected him because of his ugly look; his ungainly, abominable shape. They take him to be a freak so they avoided him like a plague. Finally he decided to become a beggar. He started begging people door to door. This was the only thing he could do to make ends meet. Sometimes he would beg for clothes. Many days elapsed. He faced a difficulty. He realized his mistake. He would put on his full dress and would visit houses to beg for food. Nobody showed sympathy to him and gave him food because he wore a full dress. When it was all tattered the people started giving him food again. They would pore at his new dress and would say, 'You are meaty, if we cut into two parts one will get two big lumps. Be off. Do some work.'

"Hey man, don't you have a pair of hands and feet? You put on expensive dress. And are you begging for alms! Get out". Another man would admonish him.

Nobody gave him the little food. He realized that one needs to live in wretchedness. Then he can be sustained. Or else he will have to meet his maker. He said to himself, "What is the use



of this dress? I can live without clothes but I cannot live without food. I have two options: bread and clothes. I must opt only one. I cannot have both because I am a beggar. The people do not think I am a man. So they do not employ me. I am not a man in the eyes of civilized and cultured men. So they do not trust me. The labour generates our bread. No work, no bread. Nobody give me work. So I have to resort to begging? Beggars do not require clothes. If they wander half-nakedly then someone will give them food.” Later he obtained one aluminum bowl; made a hole at its center; fixed a stick into it and tied a string to the stick. Thus he made Tarya, (the musical instrument). He was a whimsical man. He would start singing all of a sudden. There was no choice he would sing any song he remembered at that moment. There was no selection as such. He never bothered about its tune, tone and the quality of the voice of the original singer.

He would spend all day begging for alms and after the sunset he would return back to his lodge. That day he stayed at the place where wedding ceremony was held. There he was given a large quantity of food. He filled all of it in his satchel and brought it to the poor-asylum. The darkness fell. It filled all the nooks and corners of the building. It was the darkest night. Eyes cannot see anything although somebody thrust his fingers in into it. Bhomkya was fishing out food from his satchel. He was eating as like a glutton. Not a single lamp was burning outside. There was no water. Nobody was there outside. He smacked while chewing delicious food. All of a sudden he heard a voice.

“Would you give me some food?” said the voice. He identified that a woman was speaking to him. He pored at her in the darkness but darkness engulfed her. He said,

“Hey..... who are you?”

“I am a beggar.”

“Yes I know it. Who are you?”

“I mean tell me whether you are a man or a woman?” Bhomkya stopped eating and said. He waited for a moment to hear her reply.

“A woman”, the voice said.

He himself uttered her words. He kept a mum. He could not order her to vacate the place, not to beg and do some work. He took out a handful of rice from the satchel held it before her and said,

“Hey... you Woman! Where are you?”

“I am here this side. Thank you”

They ate their dinner together.

“What is your name?” Bhomkya said.

“Sundri”

“Didn't you get some food today?”

“No” she said.

“From tomorrow, we will beg together.”

“Will you come with me?”

“Yes.” “Yes”. “Your name?”

“Bhomkya.” “Now go and sleep there.”

From the next day they began begging for alms together. One day he left Sundri and children at the lodge and himself set out to go for begging. He took his tarya with him and started his work in the chilly morning. It was very cold but he could not stop at one place. He started singing abhangs loudly. He was muttering names of gods. He came at the big entrance of the spacious house. The owner of the house was a rich man. He came to the door, lanced at Bhomkya,

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a despicable, ungainly, poor and ugly figure. He took out two coins wrapped in his dhoti fold and gave it to him. Bhomkya became very happy. He thanked the generous man and left the house.

Since then Bhomkya would start his morning round from this place. This lasted for three days only. On the fourth day, as usual he stood before the door of that house. The owner glared at him. He admonished him. He told him not to appear there again. Else he would drive him out. He said,

“Beware. Be off. Don’t come here again. Or I will kill you.”

Bhomkya trembled with fear. How can anybody become so callous? He decided not to go there again.

On the next day Bhomkya faced a terrible experience. He just finished his daily round and went back to the poor asylum. Sundri and children sat close to him. They anticipated that he might have collected delectable food from various houses. All of them were happy. They began eating delicious food. They smacked while eating it. Darkness was engulfing every visible object and was sending it to his stomach. The darkness filled in their eyes and heads. The whole world sank in to the void of the darkness. The cold herself shivered and tattered her teeth sadly. Suddenly bright focus of torch penetrated in to the building. People became panic. The bright circles penetrated the thick layer of darkness. They heard whistles and trampling of feet. They were trembled. The children fainted with the unexpected infiltration, light, whistling, etc. They hid behind pallav of their mother’s saree. They were under grip of fear.

One of the police pointed finger of his hand at Bhomkya said, “Look, There is he!”

The circle of light fell on his face. He rose to his feet. Tarya was still hanging on one of his shoulders. Ten to twelve stout men ran towards him and grabbed him quickly. They caught hold of his hands and started dragging him out of the building. All those who lived there were stunned. Heavy silence pervaded everywhere. Those hardy men were dragging him as if he were a dead dog. He muffled something but nobody heard it. Sundari and children began crying loudly. They took their seats. They spoke with one another. An electric lamp was burning outside the building. The police accomplished their mission. The suspect was caught and cuffed. The kind man, the Mahatma, sat on the chair outside. Bhomkya looked at him sadly. He said to himself, “Alas..... This is the kind man who gave me two paisa every day. I went to his house for two days. On the third day he threatened me not to visit his house again. Since then I did not go there. What does he want now? He was confused.” The rich and kind man said loudly, “Circle sahib. I doubt this man. He is the thief. He came to my house in the morning and in the night it was burgled. Catch him.”

The circle sahib said, “You are right. He is burglar in f a beggar’s skin Thus he was arrested and prosecuted. He was a warded life imprisonment. And now he was lying in this room. While telling his story to me he went asleep. I was stunned. I do not trust this capitalistic world because I am sure it will not give justice to the depressed and the deprived. This cruel world implicated me too. I thought about his name. Bhomkya? a strange name? A queer fish. But he is a human being indeed. What is his place in this capitalistic world? What is his status? What could be the meaning of the word Bhomkya? In which dictionary can I find its meaning. Will anybody tell me etymology? I was confused. I heard ringing of the bell. The guard shrieked. ‘All is well!’ We hear him saying this at every hour. His words constantly reminded us that we were prisoners. Terror gripped us. I could not sleep a wink. I was nervous and was trying to recall the meaning. I have read many Marathi books and dictionaries. But I never have read it anywhere. Let’s decide the meaning together. Shall we say this is a big stone we used to him heads of men who vainly exhibit greatness of Indian culture? Or shall we call it a stone pelted at us by slavery and poverty. I

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pronounced these words angrily, pushed my head inside the coarse blanket and sank into a dead sleep.



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