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Other Cures

WHILE BABUJI WAS CHECKING ON DOCTORS, *hakeems* (physicians who practiced a Greco-Persian form of medicine), and vairs, other members of the family were busy finding “better” cures.

My Bhua Parvati, Babuji’s younger sister, was a very religious woman. Everything in the world, according to her, happened according to the pre-written will of Rama or Krishna or Vishnu or Shiva—the four major Hindu gods. Her faith in her gods was inimitable and unshakable. Her life itself was inimitable and full of faith, despite all the personal catastrophes she suffered and prevailed through.

Bhua Parvati was nine years Babuji’s junior. Just like all the girls of her time, she did not receive any education—not even the three Rs. She could not read or sign her name, but she could count up to 1,000 and had a good concept of *lakh* (100,000) and *crore* (a billion).

She started to work in the kitchen before she started to crawl and did not stop until, close to age ninety, she was carried out for cremation. At the ripe old age of nine years, she was married to Bhagat Ram of Lohara village. Bhagat Ram was much older—twelve or thirteen. As was the custom at that time, the bride and groom never met each other during the four-day wedding ceremony. She did not know why she was dressed up in a red suit, wearing jewelry, with her hands and feet covered in red henna. Nor was she sure why she had to be veiled from all the people in Lohara, where she stayed for only one day. She was brought back to Gagret in a red cloth-covered palanquin carried on the shoulders of four young men. The very next day, she resumed her normal life—cooking, bringing water from the well, washing clothes, and cleaning the house. For her, the wedding ceremony was nothing more than a four-day vacation from work. Bhua Parvati was supposed to go to her husband’s home when she was thirteen or fourteen and start her married life, but Bhagat

Ram died of some illness before that. Thus, Bhua Parvati became a widow before she was a teenager and before her marriage was consummated.

Widows did not, and still do not in most cases today, marry a second time. A woman's marriage, according to Hindu scriptures, was like a glass; once broken, it could not be put together or fixed. So Bhua Parvati never married again. As was required of a widow, she wore simple, white clothes and no jewelry or makeup, had her head shaved, and ate very simple and Spartan meals.

She had a house in Lohara, where she spent a total of about one month in a year. During the rest of the year, her home was our home, and she was everyone's aunt. Babuji loved and cared for her. Bhabhi was not very fond of her, but appreciated her since Bhua Parvati worked all day long and took care of everything. However, her real full-time job was spoiling her nephews and nieces, including me.

Bhua Parvati strongly believed that my deafness was caused by my lack of respect for various gods. I had read Ramayana and Mahabharata epics when I was only ten years old and was convinced that neither Rama nor Krishna were bona fide gods. Bhua Parvati used to cover her ears when I would try to argue my theory about the gods.

"That is sinful, young boy," She would scold me. "Lord Rama will hear you. Do not talk like that or He might punish you." Her fear was genuine, and that only encouraged me to push my theory about the gods even more. My deafness, according to Bhua Parvati's unshakable belief, was the result of my mocking of the gods. She wanted to make sure that I made amends for my transgression so I would be forgiven. She was as sure as the sun rises that I would regain my hearing if I asked for forgiveness.

My already weak faith in the gods was further shaken by this "punishment" meted out to me for no reason. I refused to pray and ask for forgiveness for a sin or crime that I had not committed. Bhua Parvati was not one to give in easily. She made plans and got support from Babuji, who did not think that my deafness was the result of some celestial punishment, but who also thought that a little religion would not hurt me. Thus, I was taken to a number of *sadhus*—holy men, temple priests, and those who claimed to have a direct line to gods.

The first was the Gurkha sadhu who lived in a cave next to a very old temple about half a mile from our home. We all called him Gurkha

Baba because he was from Nepal. (Gurkha is a city-state in Nepal.) He was a well-built young man who dressed only in a *langoti*, which closely resembles thong bikini underwear. Gurkha Baba's langoti was a thong tied around his waist, which held a two-inch-wide strip of cloth that went from front to back between his legs. His whole body was covered with white ash, as was the practice of many holy men in India. Even in winter, when the temperature went down to forty degrees and all of us wore woolen sweaters, Gurkha Baba walked around only in his langoti. His immunity to cold won people's respect for him as a man of God. I, along with other kids in the village, used to make fun of Gurkha Baba. No wonder he did not like me. The fact that he had worked as a cook for us in Delhi a couple of years back did not help the situation either. It was a strange coincidence that he ended up in our village, 250 miles from Delhi, while he was wandering as a sadhu.

Bhua Parvati brought Gurkha Baba to our home. He sat there in front of my bed, erect on a chair with his left foot crossed over his right knee, holding the *trishul* (a three-pronged spear that many sadhus carried as a symbol of Shiva) in his right hand. His eyes were very serious, and he did look very graceful—almost holy. No wonder Bhua Parvati and Bhabhi sat there looking at him with their hands clasped in abeyance. I knew if we were both alone, I would have made some smart remarks and he would have threatened me. Here, we were acting very civilized to each other, and I did not want to exasperate Bhua Parvati and Bhabhi.

Bhua motioned for me to touch his feet, which I did with an exaggerated motion. He blessed me, matching my exaggeration. While I lay there, Bhua and Bhabhi took turns explaining something to him while pointing toward me. Gurkha Baba listened with great earnestness and then closed his eyes and began to mumble something. Bhabhi and Bhua also closed their eyes in respect to the great saint's efforts to bless me. I tried my best to hide a smile, as I believed Gurkha Baba, behind his facade of prayers, must have been thinking, "serves the little brat right."

With the prayer over, Gurkha Baba dug his hand into the small cloth bag that hung from his shoulder. He produced a small packet made of old newspaper, unwrapped it, and took out some white ash between his thumb and index finger. Bhua Parvati stood up and hurriedly made me get both my palms open so I could receive the holy ash. He put a pinch of ash in my palm and applied some of it with his thumb to my forehead.

I did not want Bhua Parvati to give me further directions, so, knowing what was expected of me, I licked the ash from my palm and moved it around my tongue and swallowed it. Gurkha Baba gave the ash to both ladies and applied it to their foreheads. They both touched his feet with great respect and prayed with their eyes closed.

After he left, I got mad at Bhua Parvati and told her that Gurkha Baba was nothing but a thug, who was too lazy to work and was leading a nice life by fooling people. Both Bhabhi and Bhua Parvati were upset and asked me not to be sacrilegious. They pointed to my ears and toward Heaven, explaining that God will cure me.

“God does not need a Gurkha as a middle man to help me,” I declared. “If God wants to make me hearing, he would do it without that faker.” They got exasperated and I went to sleep.

Needless to say, I received some admonition from Babuji that night for being disrespectful to a holy man. I quietly read as he traced words on his palm and said, “OK!”

In Gagret, a son never disagrees with his father; he just obeys. I did.



The second sadhu I encountered was the Mahatma, or “great soul,” of Andora, a small village, two miles from Gagret, across the Swan river. The Andora Temple was on a cliff right on the Swan’s bank. The main temple was high with a white steeple topped by a red flag. The Mahatma of Andora was well known throughout the district. People from miles away came to worship there. They brought offerings—food grains, dals, fruit, milk, butter, and, of course, cash. Every time I visited there, I tried to figure out how much the temple earned in cash and the other items. My guess was it was hundreds of times more than a laborer would make and even more than what Dr. Tulsi Das made by writing prescriptions full-time. Each year, the Mahatma would go on two- or three-month-long pilgrimages. It was known that he had many disciples who invited him to bless their homes in faraway cities. I had a different theory: I believed he just went out to spend the money. Maybe he saw a lot of movies in cities where no one knew him. Maybe he had a lot of fun spending the money and came back to his ascetic life after having a ball. Not many people agreed with me.

The Mahatma of Andora, being a holy man of higher stature, did not make house calls. So, there was no alternative but for us to visit him. Since there was no bus service to Andora, the trip had to wait until I was strong enough to walk two miles each way. Bhua Parvati, of course, had to go. Sham, Ramesh, and a few other kids made up the entourage. I walked slowly and kept chattering and making snide remarks about the Mahatma. But soon I had to stop since no one seemed to share my view. Sham was religious and strongly believed in holy men. Ramesh and the others believed at various levels and did not want to speak out.

The Mahatma himself greeted us very warmly at the temple. He knew Bhua Parvati as a generous donor, therefore, he gave her the red-carpet treatment. After we had touched his feet and received his blessings, we sat down on the cold marble floor of the temple. Bhua Parvati talked to the Mahatma while Sham and the other kids sat very solemnly listening to her. I looked at the various statues of gods dressed in clothes. Their eyes were lifelike. I looked into their eyes and tried to communicate with them.

The Mahatma applied sandalwood paste to our foreheads—a fancier stuff than the Gurkha Baba's ash. He also gave us fruit and sweetmeats. The Mahatma ran an upscale establishment. We ate lunch at the *langar* (open kitchen), which the temple provided daily, and headed back home. Sham, at the bidding of Bhua Parvati, told me that the Mahatma had blessed me so I would be able to hear soon.

"When?" I asked.

"Soon." Sham interpreted Bhua Parvati's speech into tracings on his palms. "As soon as God wants you to hear."

So that is what the smart mahatma had told her. It was an open-ended and broad answer—anytime between now and whenever. I wanted to comment on this totally ambiguous and nebulous prophecy, but kept quiet. I knew my opinion in that group would not be valued and that Bhua Parvati's firm belief that my deafness was caused by my mocking everything religious would only be strengthened. I had no intention of increasing her conviction.

Bhua Parvati next took me to faith healers who professed to have connections with ghosts, goblins and lost souls. The sadhus and mahatmas I had visited previously at least practiced from temples and had some kind of legitimacy. These faith healers, however, used old tombs, broken-

down temples, or their own houses to run their trade. I visited several of these, but will describe only one experience to illustrate their *modus operandi*.

These faith healers usually got into this business of healing abruptly. A good and honest farmer, carpenter, or blacksmith would wake up one morning and go into a trance. Sitting on the floor with legs crossed and most of the weight on both palms, he would start moving his head in a jerky circular motion with his eyes closed and face in deep concentration. Then suddenly, strange people would start talking through him. He would make prophecies or curse people. Some of the prophecies would come true, and then word would spread from village to village through the very effective grapevine that so and so had become a *siddh*, an enlightened one.

I did go to some of these just so I could visit places. One of the trips still stands out in my memory.

I loved to watch movies, and the nearest cinema house was in Hoshiarpur. I could not, of course, just ask Babuji to go to Hoshiarpur for such an activity because watching movies was frowned upon. My cousin Ramesh and I hit upon a plan.

Two years after I became deaf, we learned that a *siddh* was plying his trade in Bheekuwal, a village not far from Hoshiarpur. Ramesh and I slowly and craftily began to sow the seeds for making the trip. I talked to Bhabhi about going to see this saint who had become famous for curing people. Ramesh casually mentioned it to Babuji one evening and volunteered his services to escort me there. A week later, I made the proposal to Babuji for taking a walking trip to Bheekuwal to see this *siddh*. Babuji was surprised and also pleased with my interest and increasing belief in *siddhs*. I suspected, however, that he saw through our conspiracy. He knew Ramesh well enough; he also knew that when we two got together, we could not be trusted. Still, he decided to approve our trip and made arrangements with someone to care for the cattle on the day we would be gone.

The next morning at 4 a.m., we woke, packed meals of chapatis and mango pickle in a piece of cloth, and set out for the long trip. We did not have a map and were not sure how far Bheekuwal was from Hoshiarpur. We walked, or rather ran, in the warm June morning fragrant from pine trees. We were very excited about the movie we were going

to see. We had no water and no change of clothes. All we had with us were the chapatis and clothes we wore. We carried our shoes in our hands; walking barefoot was easier and less tiring. Soon it became hot and we were thirsty. The sandy dust became hot under our feet. The temperatures in June in India go into three digits, and I began to wonder if I was being punished for lying to my father.

We managed to get drinks of lukewarm water in the villages we passed. People would pour water out of a jug, and we would take turns gulping it from our tightly cupped palms. Then we would ask for directions to Bheekuwal. Most of the people who gave us directions had never been there, but had heard the name of the village because of the siddh. We followed the general direction and felt fortunate we were not lost.

By noon, we knew that Bheekuwal was not next to Hoshiarpur; it was seven miles to the east. We kept walking as fast as we could and asked for directions whenever we passed anyone. We arrived in Bheekuwal in the afternoon after walking twenty-three miles.

It must have been over one hundred degrees at that time. We were hungry and tired and both had splitting headaches from hunger; we had been in too much of a hurry to stop and eat our chapatis. We came upon a huge crowd of people who had come for the blessing. It was apparent that this siddh did not provide individual service; he blessed people en masse. His disciple passed out ash that was supposedly blessed by him.

Ramesh asked me to sit on a rock in the hot shade of a mud house while he checked around. Since we had walked twenty-three miles in the hot sun for this, we needed to get some ash. He managed to get some and wrapped it in a piece of old newspaper.

We were crestfallen when we learned that Hoshiarpur was seven miles away. We had just enough money for the cinema and food for the evening. We decided that we would skimp on dinner and spend some money on a tonga since walking seven miles would require about two hours, and we didn't want to miss the movie. The seven-mile trip took a little over one hour by tonga pulled by a nag. We both dozed in the semi-shade of the tonga roof.

There were two cinema houses in Hoshiarpur. We saw movies at both cinemas. The fact that both cinema houses were hot, crowded, and smoke-filled did not bother us. Indian movies are full of songs and dances.

Ramesh, of course, sang along with the actors on the screen and was told repeatedly to shut up by other viewers. He would borrow my program to read the song lyrics and return it to me so I could follow the movie.

After seeing the movies, we bought some chapatis and dal from a roadside tandoor. Then we started walking toward Gagret. After walking for about five miles, we became too tired to travel any farther. We found a brick platform built around a *peepal* (fig leaf) tree and lay down in the dust. Before we knew it, we were asleep and did not wake up until next morning. Our bodies were sore as we arrived home around noon the next day. We gave ash to Bhua Parvati who touched it with her forehead and gave pinches of it to everyone in the family. She touched my head to show her affection and patted Ramesh on his back for taking me to the holy siddh.