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Page 104-113

The Cosmic Joke – A Fable?

Jayanti Datta

The shivering midnight sky was pierced by millions of shafts of rain that arrived suddenly unasked like dhoomketu. The next day was shining so bright that it erased the very memory of rain.

The ball of orange welcomed the auspicious day that would see the inauguration of a temple which would bring the nation worldwide fame. For months past the media had been agog with the news like over eager hounds tracking down a prey.

The temple would return to the Hindu civilization its past glory.

Birju the beggar or Birju Bhikari was not ashamed of his title. In fact, he had returned to this profession willingly. He was crippled and had to hobble around on crutches. His bronze coloured hair was pushed back from his forehead, and his eyes were clear and penetrating. Birju had been reading about the temple for many months, and as the moment of its inauguration drew near, confused emotions pulled him into a nightmarish vortex for which there was no logical explanation. He was not a devoted worshipper, but some uncertain sense of suppressed defeat drew him to the temple city. Was it some sort of transanction or bargain that he wanted to strike with God?

This is an impossible proposition, his friend told him. Do you have even the remotest idea of the scale of the ceremonies? The Prime Minister himself, foreign dignitaries, and the wealthiest men of our country will be arriving in planes and private helicopters. It will be a sea of saffron, sadhus and sants will be converging here from all four directions. Even within the film industry, there have been discriminations and nitpicking. Only a few favored stars will be allowed to shine. The entire area has been cordoned off. Thousands of security guards will put up a barricade. Don't you realise, you fool, and evictions have been going on for months. All hovels and ugly establishments near the site have been razed to the ground. Why do you think this superhuman work is being accomplished? So that Birju the beggar can get an entry into the temple?

On the train journey towards the city, as he watched the dry and arid countryside glide past him through the dirty iron bars of his third-class compartment, scenes from his earlier life flitted along with the moving land. Whenever he had a moment to himself, or whenever he was asleep, these scenes surfaced involuntarily from the depths. He would feel again

the blunt, dull, faceless, hellish pain of his legs being deformed. He was branded for life as a beggar. He could no longer be a child. That path of childhood was closed to him forever. Much later, many years later in fact, he had managed to escape from the clutches of the gang and return to his native land. He never blamed God for his misfortune. His fortune had been crafted by man. He cleaned himself of all the dirt in the way a doughty crow cleans its ugly feathers of a heap of garbage dropped on it. The crow looks at the world with its beady eyes and says, I dare you to knock me down!

Far away in the capital city, a wealthy childless couple is preparing to attend the ceremonies to which they have been personally and officially invited. They have tried every trick in the book. They have visited the best gynecologists all over the world, and have gone through numerous fertility rites, both technological and metaphysical! Surrogacy will be a last option for them. The gorgeous lady has a yearning to conceive naturally, to feel the little forming baby kick and heave against the walls of her uterus. The visit to the temple may still allow that yearning to be gratified.

So, the night before was ominous. It shed millions of water droplets that looked like tears. Red lines of lightning zigzagged across the sky, splitting it up into many compartments. There was a low wailing sound that accompanied each lightning strike, and half realised puckered faces seemed to appear in illusory veils. But there was not even a vestige left of this the next morning. The next morning was so dazzling that it had wiped the slate clean.

The air is resounding with chants. Everyone is waiting for the helicopter that will bring the elaborate idol to its home. The press has been magnificently expansive in its coverage. All other news items, including potentially disruptive ones, have been carefully shepherded into tiny columns on the fourth, fifth or sixth pages of newspapers. Anchors on popular TV channels are displaying whatever histrionic talents they are

capable of. WhatsApp messages are flooded with blessings and greetings. Twitter is perky and alert. Facebook is full of saintly, beatific visages. One mega star looks distinctly uncomfortable in the front row, but there is no way he could have avoided the invitation. Recently married ‘non- political’ star couples bedecked in festive yellow are smilingly aware of the cameras focused on them. And one stridently ‘political’ star is screaming so loudly that dogs and cats are startled out of their wits. The idol has arrived! Our darling precious lord has arrived after centuries of waiting! A collective yell of bliss bounds across the courtyard. Some are openly weeping and heaving with emotion. Our infertile couple is in the first row, seated quietly and solemnly with folded hands and bowed heads.

Meanwhile Birju has not been allowed anywhere near the hullabaloo. He has tried to befriend various guards, cooks, messengers. He has tried to ferret out secret information. He has looked for chinks in the barricade through which he might slip in. He has hired smart clothes, and produced a fake identity. Some of the guards are covertly sympathetic towards him, but even they consider him to be insane.

Birju sits disconsolately on open ground near the banks of the river. Near him a group of birds are pecking at a heap of grains thrown on the steps by some passerby. The birds look humble, domesticated. Their eyes are invisible, only the backs of their scruffy necks can be seen, and their bedraggled tails. As he gazes at them intensely, Birju feels a wave of disgust sweep over him. He does not even understand himself. Why has he made this long journey? He has saved, or rather is scraping up enough money to open a small sweet shop in the distant future. He is ready for the long haul. He lives for the moment.

Each moment was always hard for him, and crystal clear, and concentrated like the stare of the crow. The crows were no longer scared of the superior humans. They would not be shooed away. They would peck at the ground viciously. They

would hold their necks stiffly to one side in defiance. If the humans pushed them two steps backwards, they would move three steps forwards threateningly. If a stone was thrown at them, they would fly off and then return again and again. They could not soar in disdain like the eagle. But they survived in ugly dignity. Birju sat by the river, watching its grey waters flow by silently. He had defiled himself, perhaps, by coming here. He had shown weakness. He had not even been aware of his own desperation to succeed. Of his own capacity for servitude. His beggary, which he had thought was an external mask, had become a part of his being. He had been beaten down perhaps.

The ceremonies are nearly over. The wealthy lady suddenly sits ramrod straight in her seat, and seems to tremble slightly. Her husband looks at her anxiously. Are you alright? Is anything wrong? She whispers into her husband's ear; it seems I have experienced an epiphany. An epiphany! Of what kind? It seems to me as though the idol looked at me with compassionate eyes and told me to be charitable towards the first beggar I saw. But that is a clear message, the husband almost cried out aloud in jubilation. God had spoken personally and intimately to his wife.

The ceremonies are now over. TV reporters are rabidly watching the scene, waiting voraciously to pounce upon sound bites. Various politicians and celebrities are being accosted for short interviews. So, how does it feel to be here this morning? Oh! Nothing short of rapturous.

The lady is looking in vain for a beggar. How can a beggar conveniently appear when the roads have been scrupulously cleared of any signs of ugliness? The lady is despondent. She feels momentarily strangulated, a most uncanny and rare sensation. She says unsteadily, can we walk a little towards the river? Her husband is flabbergasted. Walk? We can ask our chauffeur to drive us to the river. The banks are quite dirty and unhygienic. No! Let us walk! Can't we walk for once? She

is almost on the verge of hysteria. What do you mean? The husband returns coldly. We often walk, but not in places such as these.

However, he is ultimately forced to humor his wife. She has been extremely delicate of late. The couple starts to walk away from the glamorous crowds towards the river, and the further they walk, the more uncomfortable they begin to feel. The path is pebbly and coarse. Someone has thrown a used sanitary pad by the side of the road. A vague, nauseating smell emanates from it. They pass by quickly and turn their faces away from the curious glances of neighbourhood goons. The woman nearly slips and falls.

The serendipitous sight of the river ahead of them comes as a relief. It is the height of afternoon. Very few people have ventured out to the banks in the blazing heat. The sun is a ball of fury hanging in the middle of the sky. Sitting on a step almost opposite the sun, cross legged in a position of meditation, Birju catches the lady's eye. She notices his spindly thin deformed legs, his faded clothes, and the beggar's bowl by his side.

The woman stands staring at the beggar. She has never observed such a man from such close quarters. When she passes by slums in her car, she normally takes in the entire scene, the hovels, the discoloured washing strung out to dry, toddlers running out into the streets dangerously, uncared for. But she overlooks the details. The particular face of the particular man goes unnoticed. The particular cracked utensil, the particular accumulation of grime. She is kinder than many others. She feels a distant pity. Sometimes, she feels numb. She is kinder than most.

Now, as she looks at Birju, she feels an uncomfortable sensation. As though the door of a cage has opened temporarily. She feels the burning heat on her skin. Her skin is singed by it. In his present mood, Birju is full of resentment

against the rich. Yet he is curious about this wealthy woman who is looking at him as though he belongs to her status. Then it strikes him that she is wanting something from him.

The woman suddenly sat down on the step next to him to the husband's and her own utter astonishment. She said, the idol spoke to me today. You understand? If I can gift you all the jewellery I wear today, perhaps I will receive the gift of a child! Will you accept it?

The woman suddenly sitting down, without warning, without preparation, had an almost physical impact upon Birju! He flinched and remained silent for a while. When he turned his head to look at her, the dazzle of her gold darkened his vision. He was crouching internally like an animal about to be attacked, suspicious, wary of traps, unbelieving. How was this possible? Was he some kind of a lamb being led to the sacrifice? But then when he had calmed himself down and brought his palpitating heart under control, he saw in her face neither appeal nor desperation nor condescension nor shrewdness. He saw it open and tender, as though she were no longer rich.

Birju has tied up all the ornaments in a ragged shawl tightly. Her heavy gold bangles, the necklace almost reaching down to her waist, and her danglers. He keeps touching them from time to time. It is as though he is unable to move. It is as though the shawl is on fire. He cannot understand its meaning. Why should God bless him with this treasure while his friends would continue to rot in their destiny? Is it because he has been more resourceful than the others? Or has he been greedier? What has he particularly done to deserve this more than the others? He keeps sitting on the banks of the river, until the sun loses its glare, and begins its slow descent. The sky is smeared with merging colours, and a line of pure crimson is distinctly visible. The dilapidated lamp posts standing nearby look like ghostly figures.

Birju is on his way to an inn. He keeps the shawl carefully bundled underneath his arm. Four goons emerge from the lengthening shadows and surround him. What's in that bey! We saw that bitch fawning over you in the afternoon. Where have you come from hey? You plan to lick all the cream yourself?

Birju puts up all the fight he is capable of. He hops around frantically on his crutches. He uses his crutches as weapons, and even injures the eyes of one of his assailants leaving them bleeding. But he does not stand a chance in a million. Enraged by his attack, they not only rob him of the jewellery but almost beat him to pulp, leaving him lying on the cold ground moaning in pain, while a lame dog tries to comfort him by sniffing around him with its tail and ears down. The torn shawl with its threads hanging loose is spread out, empty of all content. The tea stall owners who keep their shops open nearly the whole night through take him to the hospital, but they are full of contempt. The bastard thought he had got lucky.

Nine months later, the gorgeous lady is cradling a cherubic baby in her arms. All her friends and relatives are heaping her with praise, her spirituality, her capacity for charity. She is now the mother of a son after passing through deserts of despair. The inauguration of the temple was international in scale and universal in profundity, but for her, it has manifested itself as personally significant.

Her husband threw an extravagant party for his business colleagues, and distributed laddoos among his workers. That morning a labourer from the unorganized sector had slipped and fallen while working on his construction site. An entirely unnecessary nuisance. An unskilled man posing as skilled. He had broken his bones badly. But he was not a permanent employee of the company. Why would he be expected to foot the bills for the man's prolonged hospitalization? A lumpsome of money was enough. The union leaders would haggle with

him. Once the festivities were over, he would show them the claws behind his velvet gloves.

In a faraway small town in Northern India, Birju is celebrating his wedding. It is a small affair, all that he can afford. He has put on a gilded pagdi for the occasion, and his friends are cutting ribald verses on the dholak. His wounds are now nearly healed, and only faint scars are visible on his face.

At night, he lies on his rickety bed in his hovel. The bed is decorated with a few straggling flowers. His bride, a fellow beggar, caresses him on the cheek. He says, I don't want this scar to ever fade completely. Whenever I look at myself in the mirror, I want it to remind me that I have failed. I want it to remind me that God played a joke on me. When I was in hospital, at some points, I could hear everyone around me talking, but I could neither move, nor speak, and your voices were dim and low, everywhere there was only murky fog. Who am I to God? Am I an overreacher? Am I an imposter? A coward? A fool? Or just a selfish bastard?

Don't bother your head about all this Birju. At least, not tonight! Whatever happened, it is not for us to find our way through this maze. Perhaps God was playing games with us! Perhaps it was a gigantic cosmic joke.

Outside their window, a lonely crow is sitting in the stark moonlight. Its cold, beady eyes are surveying the landscape. A joke has been played by God it seems certain. But God perhaps plays his jokes in accordance with and appropriate to the laws of destiny crafted by man in a man made universe. This state of stagnant affairs may continue for centuries, with the same outcome played out over endless situations. But the crow is not ready to give up. The universe may shift in its course if the crow continues its battle. And the cosmic joke may then be turned on its head.

Jayanti Datta

Jayanti is Associate Professor of English Literature at Sivanath Sastri College, Kolkata. Her novel “Yearning” was published by Writers Workshop and was nominated by the publishers for the Commonwealth Prize for first time authors. Her translation of Bani Basu’s Bengali novel, “The Enemy Within” was published by Orient Longman. She has a published collection of short stories (Leadstart), and her latest novel “Until the Rains Come” (Avenel Press), has been recommended by Sanjukta Dasgupta and Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay (Sahitya Academy).

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