

SHORT STORY

Sun, Sparrows and God

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MY grandfather woke up very early, just around the time when the first morning ray blends in with the darkness of the dawn. Be it winter or summer, he would take his bath with cold water three times a day: in the early hours of the morning, before the mid-day meal, and then in the evening, before leaving for the *gurudwara*. The baths made him happy. He would always be humming a hymn from the *gurubani*.

After his morning bath, he would go directly to the room with *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Holy Book. He would burn incense and light flame in the round brass dish. Sitting in front of the book, reciting its lines, his eyes would be shut, and a gentle smile would blossom on his lips. His arms would go up and down like the hands of a dancer gesticulating mysterious movements, which only he understood. Eyes closed, a smile on his lips, dancing hands, in front of the opened pages of the Holy Book — this was one of the most wonderful sights from my childhood, which I did not ever witness again.

Even today, when I think of it, I am astounded at the enchanted world in which my grandfather, whom we all called “Bhai Jee”, lived. This was the world he had created, his very own world, of which he was both the king and its subject. It seemed that everyday, from morning till dusk, he would be surveying his kingdom from one end to the other. Finding that everything was in order, he would smile to himself, contented. A strange magical world.

Sometimes while reading the *Guru Granth Sahib*, he would lift his head for a moment to look at the sun. As the sun arose it spread its light right across the shrine room, and was reflected like a bright island amidst the floating ghee in the brass altar

plate. Bhai Jee would look at the sun and break into his usual gentle laughter. Then he would start talking to the sun. Softly, in whispers, just like one talks to one’s lover. Even with God, he would talk the same way, very softly, in short sentences, interspersed with gentle chuckles, as if it were a conversation between two very close friends. To see a man talking to

himself, grinning, sitting alone for hours in a room, was a strange experience — realisation of a universe which I did not know much about then.

In fact, the older we get, the farther we seem to drift away from the recognition of that secret universe. I had only an intuitive childlike feeling about the existence of such a world,



yet one does understand some parts. It may be difficult to translate all that into words, but then that is the marvel of childhood.

Bhai Jee was a simple, yet very strange person. I was greatly impressed by him. Stealthily, I would watch him with awe all day long. No one else in the family was interested in him. Not even grandmother. My father had given both of them a portion of the house to live in. Up on the terrace, my father built a room for the *Guru Granth Sahib* because it was what my grandfather wanted. Bhai Jee already had one of his rooms upstairs on the roof, adjoining the *Granth Sahib* room. Although my grandparents had their quarters on the other side of the roof, my grandfather spent most of his time in the prayer room. He would usually be found in one of those two rooms upstairs, when and if he was at home.

As a dutiful son, my father had provided everything for his parents — at least that's what he thought — shelter, food, clothing, and even two rooms on the terrace for prayers — one to place the Holy Book at a shrine, and the other for rest and contemplation after prayers. On top of that, he provided them with some pocket money as an allowance. My father thought that by doing these things he had fulfilled all his filial obligations. He must have wondered, "What more could this elderly couple need?" My mother was the one who cooked and served the meals to my grandparents. The truth is that all the conversation with them was confined to the same stereotyped sentences: "Breakfast? Lunch? Dinner? More tea? Tailor for your clothes? I'm going out to market to buy vegetables." While my grandmother circumscribed herself by hiding in a cave of silence, my grandfather seemed to have struck

a deep friendship with God, the sun, and the sparrows on the terrace.

Many years ago, he used to live in Bhera, a small town in Sargodha district which is now in Pakistan. There he ran a small, yet well established, family business which was passed on to him through the generations. My great-grandfather had only one son. In each generation, fate had decided that only one male child was born in the family; and that too, was often an only child. The male progeny took over the rein of the family business, from father to son, requiring very little effort except conducting the day-to-day running of the shop. However, breaking the family tradition, two children were born in the house of my great-grandfather — my father and his younger brother. I don't know my uncle's name because nobody ever mentioned him by name. My father had decided to be a doctor; the family business was not for him. He left Bhera to come to Amritsar, and later his younger brother joined him. He told his brother, "You should also become a doctor. At least, it is challenging. You will get to use your head." Both brothers did their premed in Amritsar, and were then admitted to the medical college. It was while they were attending this college that my father's younger brother died.

When my father started his practice in Lahore, one day Bhai Jee unexpectedly arrived with my grandmother. My grandmother was carrying under her arms her little green trunk with colourful flowers painted on it. On seeing her son, she broke down, "Your father has destroyed everything. He sold the shop, locked the house, and said we will go to Lahore."

"Why? How?..." was all my father could say. He was shaken. Bhai Jee

laughed carelessly, "Why not? What do I need the shop for now?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Once I knew you were not returning, I said to myself, why carry this unnecessary burden? It is a headache for nothing!"

My grandparents were provided a large room in the house. But my grandmother always quarrelled with Bhai Jee. It was so difficult for her to forget Bhera. He was responsible for uprooting them, and bringing her to Lahore.

Soon my grandfather had his *charpoy* laid out upstairs in the room on the roof. Facing the room, there was a wide open terrace, and the sun rose every morning, right into the front of the room. Earlier, the prayers before the *Guru Granth Sahib* used to be conducted downstairs. But grandfather kept insisting it was important that an extra room be built upstairs to install the *Sahib*. He was thrilled with his new shrine room, "It is wonderful here — the open terrace, the fresh air, and the *Baba Sahib*, next to my room."

Whenever grandma would mention missing her younger dead son, he would be irate: "Woman, he never belonged to us. You know that. In this household, nobody ever had more than one son, so you have that son here. The other one was a stranger who by mistake had arrived, he had to go."

And then, in order to get away from her, he would quickly climb the stairs to his open terrace, to the prayer room, to be beside his *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. While praying, his eyes would soon be shut. He would soon start chuckling as if engrossed in a deep conversation — murmuring quietly, as if secretly whispering to his beloved.

With his eyes closed, he would be

talking to himself. Then, lids lifted, he would be looking towards the sun, laughing aloud. His beard, I always thought, was so white because of his friendship with the sun — the sun with its luminosity seemed to have seated itself in Bhai Jee's beard. I would ask, "Bhai Jee, who do you talk to all the time?" He would reply, "To no one, my little girl." Then he would become serious.

Perhaps he thought that I was also a part of the same house, a part of his son's house, where nobody cared to understand him. Everybody would say, "Bhai Jee has a wonderful life. So carefree. No worries. Jolly and happy all the time." Even my grandmother thought so. At any opportunity, she would be ready to pick a quarrel with him, taunting him for their present and their past. And he would quietly listen, his head bowed because grandma's *Mahabharata* would begin only while serving meals to him. It seemed that my grandmother never enjoyed watching him eat in peace. He would quickly gulp down his food so that he could escape from the kitchen.

After finishing his meals, he would put the dishes and saucers in the sink at the corner, taking with him upstairs the leftovers of *roti* for the sparrows. That's where he was never alone. The sparrows were his family and his refuge. Breaking the bread into tiny pieces, he would spread the bits all over the open terrace. Birds would unhesitatingly drop by to pick at the crumbs. They would be hopping

around while the sun glimmered on them, from their tiny tails to their soft feathers. It created ripples of light and sound, like the gentle laughter of my grandfather. Lost in his musings, he would talk to the sparrows, softly whispering as if he was sharing intimacies with them. I think one reason for his friendship with sparrows was that his body, tiny and slight, was itself like that of a sparrow.



He would climb the four flights to the roof hopping quickly. With his little footsteps, he would walk briskly to the *gurudwara*, and if you ever walked with him, you had to almost run to keep pace with him.

It seemed as though it had been a century that Bhai Jee's room had not been cleaned. At least that's what my father always said, despite the fact that Bhai Jee had come to Lahore only a

few years ago. Whenever the house would be painted or white-washed, my father would be very angry because Bhai Jee would not allow the painters to enter into his room. Grandfather would insist that there was no need for painting the woodwork or whitewashing the walls. He would not even allow anyone to sweep the floor of the prayer room. This made my father cross. But Bhai Jee would quietly listen, and then, putting a large padlock on the door of his room, swiftly leave the house. Perhaps, then, he walked to the *gurudwara*, or to the Lawrence Gardens, or to the canal. Nobody knew where he went.

He would return around dusk, with the day's brightness accumulated in his beard. Nobody could see that except for me. It was a secret shared between me and my grandfather.

As soon as he would return, he would go into his prayer room, open the Holy *Guru Granth Sahib*, and start reciting the lines, which in fact he knew by heart. As usual, he would be laughing to himself and talking away to God.

Describing the journey of his day in short sentences — where he went, what he saw, what he ate, where he hid himself — everything! He had a deep friendship with God, as he had with the sun and the sparrows.

I would ask, "Bhai Jee, why do you not want your room to get painted? Papa was very angry." He usually remained silent, but once, just once, when he was in a really affectionate mood, he drew me close, whispering

into my ears, "Come, I will show you something very special." And then he took me to each corner of his room. He showed me the narrow dugouts of the mice on the floor, the delicate weave of the cobwebs near the ceiling, the sparrow nests in the ventilator on the top of the door, the tiny bird eggs nestled in a bed of straw. Questioningly, he looked at me, "So? Where would these go?"

Following this routine, my grandfather lived to be 103 years old, and that too, with his full set of teeth. For 100 years, he used his own teeth to chew and eat; and without even the aid of eyeglasses, he read newspapers and magazines in Punjabi and Urdu, and never stopped reading the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Just before his death, he was sick for a few days — an ordinary fever. He did not take any medicine, not even his usual glass of milk. He just kept repeating, "The station is about to come. My baggage is ready. It is now time to get off the train. That's all!"

The day he died, the sun had risen early. In the morning it was shining like a ball of light and fire. Suddenly he raised himself up out of bed and looking at the sun directly into its core, he murmured in his usual friendly way, "Yara, I didn't even have time to take my bath today." It seemed he was asking his friend, the sun's, forgiveness for receiving him unwashed. Then he laughed, and fell back on the bed. I shrieked with fear, "Papa, I don't know what happened

to Bhai Jee..." My father came running upstairs. He felt Bhai Jee's pulse, and then put the hand down. My grandfather still had his familiar grin on his lips. His face was staring at the sun.

As Papa closed Bhai Jee's lips and wiped the smile from his face, I felt that the smile on my grandfather's face had drifted from the corner of his lips into his white beard.

You won't believe it, but it is true. I saw it with my very own eyes. So clearly. My grandfather was hugging the sun. There was loud laughter in the sky. The sun was holding my grandfather in its brilliant embrace. □

(Translated from Punjabi by
Balwant Bhaneja)

Tell us a Story



Each of the regional languages of India has a vast and rich repertoire of grandmother's tales, folk stories, poems, sayings, jokes, witticism, etc. Unfortunately, these are inaccessible to those of us unfamiliar with languages other than our own mother tongue.

We invite Manushi readers to share with us what has struck you as significant from this repertoire in your mother tongue, that has not previously appeared in English. We are especially keen on stories that move away from stereotype presentation of women. Please send us the original with a fresh English translation, identifying its oral or written source.

Editor