

A Dwarf in One's Own Eyes

{Note: In Indian cultural context 'being dwarf in one's own eyes' means to look down upon oneself}

Her name was Dulari but she was a Bilaspuri; but a Dulari hailing from Bilaspur does not remain a *dulari*. *Dulari* literally means a woman who is loved by all, but if she is a Bilaspuri, then her mother, father, brother, sister, husband, son, daughter, friends none have any time to express their love towards her. Immediately after getting up in the mornings they become busy working with bricks, mortar, sand, cement and steel and continue like machines till dusk. Thereafter the women and girls cook food and eat only after feeding the men folk. By this time their body and soul both get so tired that no energy or inclination is left for giving or receiving love.

Dulari was one of those twenty Bilaspuris whom the labour-contractor had brought from Bilaspur and had put them at the site of my house under construction. Among those twenty Bilaspuris there were 10 men, 5 women, 4 children and Dulari. If you have ever got a house constructed then you would know that Bilaspuris are not ordinary human beings, they are robot-beings. They dig the ground like robots, make mortar like robots, carry bricks like robots, pull ground-water by hand-pumps like robots, eat like robots and during work speak only when it is essential for their work. Like Arjun they remain focused on their work alone. They can be seen smiling or sulking only when something connected with their work creates such a situation. Like robots their eyes remain full of such abject helplessness that no other emotion ever becomes visible in them. Like other Bilaspuris Dulari also never spoke or smiled until it became unavoidable, but there was something in her big black eyes which expressed everything without her tongue uttering a word. The expression of permanent helplessness had not yet entered her eyes.

None of us knew among those twenty Bilaspuris who was whose grandpa-grandson, wife-husband, father-son, uncle-nephew, brother-sister, friend-foe, etc. Even the contractor who had brought them had not bothered to go into such

‘unnecessary’ details. However, everybody had soon come to know that the name of the one with piercing looks was Dulari and she was the wife of one named Lokus. This fact of her marriage had become public so soon because of the bulge of her stomach on otherwise a slim and very shapely body. I had often noticed the contractor gazing at the lifted breasts of the women climbing the stairs with bricks or mortar as head-load and he was the one who had told me about Dulari being the wife of Lokus and being pregnant.

One day out of curiosity I had asked the contractor about the rate at which he had brought these Bilaspuris. The contractor had replied that the grown ups were at the rate of Rs. Two hundred, i.e., about four dollars a day and the children were at the rate of Rs. one hundred fifty, i. e., about three dollars a day. Then in a conspiratorial tone he had added,

“Although Dulari is incapable of lifting heavy loads, yet I pay her full Rs. two hundred a day.”

For such a hard work this rate was too low and I had told the contractor, “You have brought them too cheap.” The contractor had replied with a smile,

“In the dry region of Bilaspur hardly anything grows and moreover this is a drought year. If I don’t provide them work, they will starve.....”

The contractor was saying all this with pride of a cunning tradesman, but I was feeling sorry at the plight of these hapless labourers. As the contractor’s blurting of his exploits became intolerable, I interjected,

“But is it possible to even feed the family properly at this rate?”

I was unaware that Dulari was listening to our conversation. Suddenly I looked back and found her looking straight at my eyes as if she was trying to fathom my heart and read that my words had any real sympathy for them or were mere impotent fulminations. I felt that my persona had become an open book before her and in that she had read that my words were hollow and there was no ability or irrepressible desire to do something for them. Then Dulari turned her eyes off me and

quietly got engaged in her work as if nothing had happened in between, but I felt that in the short duration of those moments Dulari had made me a dwarf in my own eyes.

Thereafter, one morning when I went there, I found that no labourer had come to work. The contractor informed me,

“Today the labour will come two hours late as they have gone for the cremation of Dulari’s still born baby. Yesterday while climbing the staircase, she had got a jerk in her stomach and had aborted during the night.”

On hearing this I got so upset that I left the site immediately. After a week when I reached the site, I was surprised to see that Dulari was as usual mixing cement with sand. On seeing me she only momentarily raised her eyebrows and then immediately became engrossed in preparing the mortar. I knew that in her heart a storm of sorrow was blowing but there was no trace of tears in her eyes. Despite a strong desire to express my condolences I could not speak a word to her. Instead, I took the contractor aside and asked him,

“After the abortion why has she come to work so soon?” The contractor looked at me askance and said,

“Then what will she eat? She has also to repay me Rs. One hundred which her husband had taken as advance from me to meet the expenses of cremation of the stillborn baby.”

By the end of the month of February the structure of the house had been raised and the walls had been plastered. Now the plumber and the carpenter had started working on it. One day the contractor had not come. Sitting on a rickety chair I was looking into the book of accounts, when Lokus came to me and told hesitatingly,

“Sahab! The contractor has not given last month’s wages to any of us. He was saying that you have not yet made payment to him for the work done last month.”

On my assurance that I had already made up-to-date payment to the contractor, Lokus’s face turned yellow as if

the blood had been drained out of it. On regaining composure and after gathering some courage, he spoke,

“Sahab, then I think we are being duped in the same way as a contractor had done with us in Delhi two years back. Knowing that every year we go back home in the month of April, he had started delaying payments since the month of February. And when we had reached the state of starvation, we had left for our homes without receiving payments.” Then after a pause Lokus added beseechingly,

“Sahab! Kindly help us to get our dues.”

I got furious and started thinking to do something against the contractor. Lokus’s show of courage to speak against the contractor had inspired me to do something for the Bilaspuris- and particularly so because Lokus was husband of Dulari whose looks had once dwarfed me in my own estimation. I wrote a complaint addressed to police against the contractor and got it signed by all the Bilaspuris. Then I sent a message to the contractor that if the payment to the Bilaspuris was not made by that evening, I shall get the complaint lodged at the police station. Next day on my way to the construction site I was in a great dilemma that if the contractor had not paid the wages, then the Bilaspuris would soon leave for their homes and then how shall I fight the long drawn and most likely a fruitless case against the contractor. But as soon as I reached the site, I found Dulari staring at me and I don’t know how her eyes convincingly conveyed to me that their payment had been made. I felt that I was not so dwarf as I had thought myself to be; and the comprehension that Dulari’s eyes were also conveying the same message elevated my spirit immensely.

But this feeling of heightened self-esteem could not last long because after a few days only when I reached the construction site I did not find Dulari and Lokus there. When I asked the contractor about them, he casually replied,

“Since the time of miscarriage Dulari had started shirking the work, therefore I have fired her and Lokus.”

This reply hardly convinced me because I had never found Dulari shirking her work- not even during those moments when with the piercing looks of her big eyes she used to decipher truth and falsehood, sin and sacredness, ill-will and goodness, selfishness and altruism in other person's heart; but within a few days I could know through gossip that one day when Dulari was working alone in the bathroom, the contractor had made an attempt to violate her modesty. For fear of losing her honour in the society she had not complained to anybody but had left the work here.

Then one day when I was going to the market, I saw Dulari working at the site of a road under repair. She raised her eyebrows and her eyes met mine. She kept on looking at me for a few moments without a wink. In those eyes I saw that she was clearly seeing that despite my desire to avenge her dishonour, I had neither the ability nor the courage to do so. A guilt feeling arose like a lump in my heart that I was not only incapable of avenging the injustice done to her but was also indirectly a party to it.

Again I started looking like a dwarf in my own eyes.