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The Lost Identity

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I am always puzzled over the strangeness of thoughts and actions of human being. It is known that we are mortal and our life is uncertain. There are losses, difficulties, troubles, worry and anxiety, diseases and a series of hurdles. We face many failures in life, but still we have countless desires and dreams. I think for all that we are human beings. And of course, I am one of such dreamers— although till now, I struggle to obtain my identity.

I cannot say why my parents kept my name ‘Kastia’ in my language which means ‘difficult’. This seems unique to many. Some say that my parents had foresight about my life for which they chose such a name. I was told that I had put my parents into lots of trouble during my conception. After getting birth, I was too weak and continuously sick. So, they say that I happen to be pain giver and pain taker throughout.

I was born sometimes in the 1940s in a remote countryside. I do not know any other thing except our green fields where I used to work with my father since the beginning of my memory. My life got affiliated either to the lowly bent thatched house or in the fields and trees surrounding my village. Gradually, I thought probably the world for me would be confined to this part of geographical location of the earth. The fairs and festivals of my village were the greatest entertainment for me. I could get a chance to determine the range of my life right from my adolescence. I was very happy with the simple and natural way of life in my village. But before enjoying the taste of life and livelihood in youth, my father passed away and after a few days I became a leper!

“What is this? Why such changes? What shall I do?” many such questions came to me.

Suddenly, these things made me miserable and I lost my mental balance. People started talking about me. Some passed comment that it was the result of my sins in the previous life. Some others found the fault that I had been torturing my parents since my conception. So, the result immediately came out. But, I was quite in a state of bewilderment owing to the gradual deformities and physical decay. The leper patches, the blunt bloody fingers and the change of my face was almost intolerable for me. I looked down upon my body and felt like destroying the body by some means or drown myself in some medicinal water and come out fresh and cured.

In a few days, the children in the village forgot my name and just called me ‘leper’. I got confused, frustrated and thought probably this would soon bring me death. Then I found that all my friends and relatives were going away from me. I went on spending time in the lonely and desolated places; under the trees in hills; and in the valley and orchards at the outskirts of my village. I realized that I should not come closer to other people. So, I voluntarily remained away from my mother, the only family member left in

the village. Just I went secretly to our backyard so that my mother would place some food at a distance for me just as if I had become a tamed evil spirit. I used to finish eating and then vanish from there onto my so called new open air residence to delight in the tragedy of life in solitude.

“This is too much. You cannot make him stay longer in this area. We banish your family for this,” shouted the village leaders at my uncle and mother. The news came to me. Then, I resolved that I should go away at once to some other place. But, to tell the truth, I did not know anything about the outside world and at the same time, it was very difficult to leave my birth soil. I was going away from village when every pace of my breathe was pumping out drops of tear and losing one unit of strength at each step and this did not stop until I realized that I had to consolidate by any means to my misery. From nowhere, I had to go somewhere. While walking ahead, the image of the faces of my friends and family members were coming before me. In this way, the day past and night settled. I was getting melancholic and at the same time my feet were as if being pulled from behind by some illusory force. I was walking aimlessly; many times stumbling on the way; looked behind many times; and became the victim of many questions that kept on coming to my mind. But I never dared to go back.

I was terribly hungry. I could not control myself. Automatically I said somebody, “Sir, please give me some food. I have not eaten for two days.”

That fellow gave me some food. That was my first experience of eating for survival and I felt the importance of both food and hunger. Also I felt that life wants still to be with me— putting forth a challenge for struggle to step up a new stair of the ever mysterious life.

After one weeks’ aimless movement this way or that way and walking continuously as if set on a pilgrimage, I arrived at a city finally.

“What a big place? Can I survive here?” I was confused to see so many big houses, vehicles, and varieties of people and became hopeless. However, I had been used to begging food by then. Also I found many like me begging for alms too. Many ugly and tattered clothed people including children with torn and dirty clothes were moving in the streets aimlessly. Soon, the new city gave the stranger like me the recognition of a leper beggar. I lost all my identity and joined the band of lepers in the slum somewhere at the railway station. I looked around—filthy and ditch like patches or poodles; everywhere emanating a kind of foul smell from machines; movement of diseased dogs and cats; colony of very unusual and varieties of people including lepers, sick, handicap or mad men ! Some of them were having their own dilapidated and temporary sheds made of polythene sheets, broken bricks and tins or tents whereas some others used to rest under a banyan tree there which was full of the filth of animals and birds. At times, I noticed the presence of drunkards shouting at each other, scolding or quarrelling. Once I was greatly frightened to see a stabbing incident as the injured had none to rescue and bleeding heavily to death. That incident made me feel insecure. Still then, I had no other way but to pray God and spend days around there. Although I did not understand much, the confused mass of music and voices from many radios there attracted my attention every

night. I looked at the countless stars in the sky; struggled with flies and mosquitoes and other worms and then slept out of heavy tiredness.

Once I had a strange dream that I was in the throne of a king in the kingdom of beggars, lepers and mad men. All of them were serving me and praising me like anything. They were giving me royal treatment and obeying my commands. But, suddenly it broke as I got up with the sound of a dog barking at me early morning.

While moving around and begging, I had been chased by some people whereas some showed sympathy and gave food or money. However, in my consideration, everybody was generous there. I found that the path of life was getting stretched ahead with the generous donations of hundreds of unknown faces everyday. I accepted whatever they gave— torn clothes, stale food, remaining of the temple *prasad* or parties or thrown away foods from hotels. I realized that I had become a lowest quality human parasite.

In the meantime, the swift wheel of time brought about a series of changes. The color and shape of the city changed with the touch of modernity. People started racing up and down more and more round the clock to taste the fruit of life. Strangely, I started to join the race too! I became laborious and greedy. I did not know why I became so. I learnt from others like me to earn more money than I needed and started saving too.

The railway line brought about a change in me. At times, unknowingly, my attention was dragged at that line. I looked at the distant point till it was merged with the horizon and felt that I happened to be a train in the line of life. I saw the cut heads of people or dead bodies in the track; found some people stealing the pieces of iron and other materials from the railway line regularly.

But, the railway station was the real spot of pilgrimage for me. The passengers travelling in the trains were very sympathetic although the policemen and the other beggars were very cruel. While looking at the ever moving passengers at the station and the varieties of beggars here and there, I started dreaming of doing ‘something’—for example, I would be cured by taking medicine and then I would get settled in the city as a worker or a day laborer like many others and then go back to my village and show all of them the miracle of my fate. The idea of living life like others was getting strong in me!

I found that there were enough of junk materials, bottles, thrown away scraps of papers, empty green coconut cells and plastic bottles remained in the station. I went on collecting them regularly and gave that to the junk dealer in the city. Although I faced lots of difficulties with the sanitation and cleaning workers in the station, still, I collected those things whenever there was opportunity and that added to my income slowly. I went on thinking that train after train should come continuously so that I would collect more and more of these junk materials. Well, in a year, I could build a hut on the railway line near the station. I found an easy means to gather the junk materials and empty green coconut shells by employing the slum children secretly paying them some money. In this way, I went on spending time until some changes came in the way.

“Dear brother! How’re you?” I looked up suddenly with astonishment and thought who could call me brother so politely here! In fact, there were some young men, looking pious and sophisticated.

“Brother, you’re in such a condition. You’re really helpless. So, we’ve decided to help you,” one of them said. Although I could not understand much, I said, with a confusing tone, “You’re welcome then.”

Another of them said, “You know you’ll be cured from this disease if you trust and pray our God.”

Again, I could not understand “our God”. Still then, I remained silent and looked at them. They gave me one book, one pair of new clothes, some money and sweets. They told me that they would come another day to me. I looked at the book and some pictures in its pages and kept that there. After a few days, again they came and that time they seemed to do something which looked like some ritual with me and then told me that I have been converted. Then they suggested me to believe and only in their God. They promised money for that too. Although I did not understand much, I was happy that at least I got an identity there.

After some days, one evening, some other young men came to the slum and threatened not to go by what those men said who came to us before. Those men had strips of vermilion marks on their forehead with strips of red threads in their wrists and they strictly instructed for no conversion.

One of them, a one-eyed young man threatened us with rude voice, “If you are converted by those people or receive money and book from them, then remember for sure, I will come and squeeze out all your testicles and give them to the dogs and cats here before you and drive you out of this place like stray dogs.”

I was utterly frightened. I had no idea about religion till then. But slowly I understood that one has to be with one religion in order to get an identity and that too with the brothers who can help us in our need and those who are stronger.

On another occasion, a group of people with flags of one color marched along the slum. One of them stood at a higher place and went on speaking continuously about our plight. However, finally he promised that he would change our lives, build houses for us provided we must support him and his party in the coming election.

The same thing happened before. Another group of people visited us with another type of flag and shouted with slogans, gave high voiced speeches. Although I did not understand anything exactly, I felt excited and felt as if my blood was boiling. I shouted slogans with them and moved with the procession as well. The most powerful looking man among them then threatened us with his stammering talk that if we supported the other party, then he would come to us and squeeze out our testicles and make us out of that place.

I could not understand why they were so vengeful for matters of religion or politics but I was confirmed that I should be with a political party for identity. Of course, after

some days, none of those people were seen in our slum. I did not care much for that because I did not have much knowledge about both religion and politics.

At times, I was surprised to see that the other beggars and lepers used to argue over religious and political matters. Once, they had a fight too for some controversial remarks at each other. From that day, they were divided.

Even, one of the lepers did not allow his female cat to mix with the male cat of his neighbor saying that they belonged to two different religions. Once, one of us brought some food from a party and wanted to share among us happily. But, others did not accept that although they were hungry. His face turned pale. But, I joined him secretly because I could not control myself from the good smell of that food. I ate to my fill.

Once, fortune favored me in a great way. That morning, some people, may be some government workers came to my place. One of them addressed me as brother and said, "Brother! We're volunteers for leper patients. Don't worry. We'll take care of you and cure you by giving medicine. So, come with us to the hospital."

I was afraid of them too. But, they did not look dangerous like the other people as I perceived and these people were polite and like professionals in their manners. They came to us with medical van and official documents.

I felt as if God had sent those messengers to me. They took me and some others like me to the leprosy hospital. They told us that they would help us free till we were cured. They served me in such a cordial way that I felt as if those people were paying back the debt of some previous life to me.

I was under treatment for a couple of months and at last they told me that I was cured. During my stay in the hospital, I got an opportunity to meet many other patients like me. But, I found that some of them knew each other before. Even during their stay in the hospital for treatment, they used to quarrel among themselves regarding their reserved places of begging in the city sometimes occupied by some others from them. Once there was a leper family quarrel relating to that. The leper daughter injured her leper father for not giving his place to her husband to sit begging at a famous temple where he could earn more. Sometimes, these patients would make a hot discussion about the innovative and funny strategies of begging. Sometimes I used to enjoy those events and some other times, I felt pity for them.

However, I met one of them very unique and often crying narrating his life story. He said to me once, "Do you know my friend? I am suffering from this as a result of the curse of my parents! I happened to be a drunkard in my youth. I used to exhaust money in drinking, gambling and womanizing. Most of the time while coming back to home late night with mutton curry from the hotel for my dinner I would find no rice or wheat at home for eating. Then, alone I would finish eating mutton curry; scold them and go to bed. They used to depend on me for food. But, I used to kick them and beat them. They cursed me to suffer in the legs I was kicking."

Although they declared me cured, unfortunately my blunt fingers and disfigured parts of body did not grow anymore. However, I consoled myself that at least I could live like

a handicap. I went out of the hospital with a fresh and renewed mind that I would work more and better so that I could earn handsome amount.

I was never tempted towards making a family. But, in the meantime, my attention was diverted towards Gopal, a mad man staying at the slum of the same station. I came to know that although he was from a poor family, he was a very intelligent student. He became mad over burdened by study and lost mental balance. But, some others give another controversial version of the cause of his madness. They used to say that in his college days, Gopal was in love with a girl from a rich family who got married against her will and left Gopal frustrated. After a few days, that girl committed suicide at her in laws place and after that incident, Gopal went mad. Every time, he would keep talking something indistinctly, people said that he used to reproduce the knowledge his college days still he had in his memory.

Gopal had deep love and affection for Ruli, an abnormal lady and looked pretty aged than him. They were staying in the same place. Gopal used to bring food for her. Both of them would sit together, gather and count their income together every evening. They were never couples. But, strangely, I used to see Ruli beating Gopal for mistakes and negligence in counting money properly or misusing something they collected. She would behave as if she had complete mastery over him and Gopal would seem to approve of that too. Every time, she beat him, Gopal would remain silent like a shy boy with her mother. Then, I found that they had one child too! Gopal used to show affection to that child very much touching slowly her with his dirty beard and tattered body and making her sit in his lap. People say that actually, the child was with Ruli before she met Gopal. But, Gopal took her to be their child and Ruli as his wife. Looking at this coincidence, I felt romanticized. I was full of dream too.

There was a major change in my life when I came across one of our companions, my neighbor there, the old beggar Ramulu who remained sick continuously. He had one daughter named Jaya. After several attempts, I could not guess her age from her appearance. I could not know if she was young or middle aged. Both father and daughter used to talk in Telugu which I never understood. Ramulu used to smoke *bidi* and drinking liquor. That resulted in his sickness— always coughing and lying on the floor in their hut. ‘Probably, he would die soon,’ I thought.

His poor daughter always served him a lot and in return, Ramulu used to scold her. One night, his daughter came to me and went on telling something. Although I did not understand much, I realized that she was looking for something helplessly. I thought that there would be some problem. I went and saw Ramulu dead. The municipality vehicle took his dead body early morning and soon and life became its usual.

In a few days, relationship grew between us. Although I did not understand her language, still I tried to understand her expressions and gained some idea about her intention. But, there was no excitement of youth or romantic dream in me anymore. I did not have a plan to settle with a family because I knew that I was useless for that and had no identity as member of the so called human society.

I came to know that Jaya had no one in the society too. After her father's death, she was all alone. Soon I discovered that in that slum, many of those sick people, mad and beggars had no relation and nothing to identify them. But, strangely, these characters were together there at the slum with their own world!

Slowly, our huts were connected through the rope of mutual help and friendship. Jaya and I started understanding the nature and habits of each other. I also understood that Jaya was badly in need of a male companion for her recognition. So, after some days, the two huts of mine and her slowly merged to become one. I could not decide whether I should give her the status of wife or daughter or something else. But, I was confirmed that she was very much interested to live with me.

Then, I wondered "Living with such a distorted and damaged fellow like me! How come?"

Jaya was amazing. She went on providing services to me as she was to her father. She collected charcoal or firewood and cooked for me; washed my clothes and did massage to my body at night. Soon, I could not control my emotion to recognize her to be somebody mine own. She continued her service to me as the near and dear and we lived together. After some days, I

I thought of making a house for us. I had some money which I wanted to utilize. Thus, I went on dreaming of my last life with her in my village. I became excited that I would go back to my village and get back my identity. My father had a patch of land and a thatched house left for me. I had my friends and relatives there. I explained her in broken Telugu mixed with my language Odia. By that time, she was able to understand my language to some extent too. It took almost six months to convince her to go back to my village with her to live the rest of the life.

Finally, one day, we set off for our village. We packed all our belongings in two big suitcases. Then, we took up the train to reach one of the stations from where we could reach our village. While travelling in the train, I was looking at Jaya again and again. I was very happy to see the passing fields, hills and places all along. I felt as if I was recovering from long lost beautiful memories.

'Jaya,' I told her with an animated voice, 'now, we're free and fair. We may not get money and city life anymore, but we must get peace, safety, faith and life with an identity.'

She listened to me but did not reply.

We reached the station in the afternoon. From there, I tried to find a taxi. But, the taxi drivers there were reluctant to drive us doubting that we were lepers. But, somehow one trolley puller agreed to take us to my village. We kept our suitcases and sat flat on the wooden strips of the trolley. While going, I felt as if the entire world looked fresh and fine and anew. It was bringing me peace to see the open sky; earthen road with bushes and trees all along; and the smell of paddy field stretched till my village.

It was almost dark when we reached our village. I saw some of the villagers passing me in cycles and some going in the bullock carts. I could recognize them and talked to them before I reached my village. Those villagers interacted with me reluctantly and soon some of them left for the village to declare about my arrival. The moment I arrived at the beginning of my village, I was expecting at least somebody to greet me or ask me something happily. But, to my surprise, some people along with the grown up son of my uncle were waiting for me and all of them were looking grave and worried.

“Well, you’ve come here finally. But, you should have contacted us before you decided to come here,” said one of the village leaders.

“My dear brother, why should I contact you before coming home?” I asked with a note of surprise.

“Okay, but we’ve decided not to allow you to enter our village. You’re a leper after all,” said another who was one of my friends too.

“But, Sindhu please believe me that I’ve been cured by treatment. I’m no more a leper!” I tried to convince them by saying this.

Then, they suggested me to stay in the school verandah. I had no other alternative but to follow them.

The news of my arrival soon spread in the village. I spent that night with Jaya in the school verandah with an idea that the villagers would see me and get confirmed that I am totally cured. Next morning, some of the villagers along with the son of my uncle came and gave a clear cut clarification to me that I had no identity any more in that village. They said that my mother was sick and bedridden for a long time before she died. So, my uncle took a legal agreement paper from her that she would adopt his son and write the will that she had no one to inherit her property. In this way, she entitled my uncle’s son to be inheritor of her property because he only provided her treatment and services during her sickness and performed all her rituals after her death. In addition, some other raised the objection that they cannot allow a leper with an unrecognized woman to stay as one of the villagers. I was greatly perturbed. I felt dizzy in the fire of repentance and agony. I could not decide what to do.

I struggled to convince the village leaders and other people. I asked them for food and stayed in the same school verandah for one week. One night, the heavy rain drenched us like anything. Both Jaya and I started shivering and could not sleep. We came so closer to each other that we had never before. I felt as I am more related to her and she seemed to have equal feeling too. I looked at Jaya with a great humiliation. I was surprised to see her mature look and silence. When she realized that I was totally helpless in getting justice in the village, she held my hand and requested to go back.

Before the eighth dawn, I looked at my village for the last time and then we started walking with the suitcases on our heads. I felt as if we were carrying the world of us exclusively at our risk and nobody from around the rest of the world was there to share with us. We went on walking towards the distant horizon. I could recognize our paddy fields at a distance and the hills and orchard where I spent my childhood. Also I

remembered the painful days that I had spent in the midst of them when I suffered from leprosy.

I resolved to delete all my memory of my village painfully and decided again to plunge into the mess of lights, vehicles, buildings and millions of people together in the city. I began to hurry to reach the city by train and reach my hut there at the slum near the railway station.

We reached there at night with a great hope of getting settled in our so called house. But, to my surprise, there was no trace of it. We could not even recognize the place since it was completely bulldozed and made plain. Probably, some construction work had already started with a great pace there.

I looked at Jaya pale faced. Till then, I had never seen her smiling. But, strangely she smiled there for the first time and called me to follow her, may be to go somewhere to look for another place to start life again. I thought, “Her smile was like a mockery at my misery or may be a ray of hope for renewal of life.” While following her, I was still in confusion how to obtain my identity the rest of my life.