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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

The Last Draught of Water: In Retrospect

Ravi Kant

Sound of celebrations or wedding bell had been reverberating in my ears when I heard the news of one of my cousin's marriage. Surprisingly, this came as a breather amidst the arid and claustrophobic work constraints as if my desire of having a bottle of red wine gets fulfilled in the winters. Soon the day of the wedding approached and we all were looking forward eagerly to have a blast for the day. The *baaraat* was ready to move any moment. *Baaraat* is usually a customary cultural wedding procession practised among the Hindus wherein the bridegroom along with his relatives go to the bride's door to get her hand in marriage followed by a feast and ritualistic celebration of the wedding. It used to be a simple practise of relatives and other invited members to share the joys of matrimonial celebration devoid of any pomp and show. However, over the years there has been an enormous increase in the lavish arrangements to this ceremonial practise, making it an unforgettable experience for the groom. Unlike the other days when the relatives have their differences among themselves, this is the day when they greet each other nicely and indulge in revelry.

There was laughter everywhere. People with brand new flashy attire were flaunting their modesties. Most of the men were brandishing ethnic *kurtas* and *sherwanis*. While, a couple of them had coats and blazers since the chilling breeze could have had a numbing impact on bones. Ladies were all in glittering saaris, cut sleeve gowns, *lehngas* and other traditional attires. I must say that they left no stone unturned, making the winters look absurd. However, one should appreciate the courage they exhibit in their confrontation to the biting wind. One could see an opening of a garment shop right there with the best of the clothes displayed on the mannequins. I was rather dressed casually, deliberately distanced from the razzmatazz of lavish celebration. As the procession started at a slow pace to the destined venue, a banquet hall, relatives and friends started dancing merrily on some of the latest *bollywood* songs. When it comes to an Indian wedding, *Hindi* film songs are inevitably played either through loudspeakers or by the members of the hired brass band. The brass band usually comprises of few members who have expertise in playing various musical instruments. It has an unprofessional male vocalist who sings on the tune played by the band members. They generally transform the song into one of the nightmares. The entire melody of the song is eschewed so terribly that you are left with mere empty lyrics. Paradoxically, it becomes quite amusing when the male singer sings in the female vocal.

As the procession gradually speeded up all of them started moving their legs on the hip hop *Bollywood* numbers and soon it transformed into rioting dance sequences with weird *latkas* and *jhatkas* (unstable, giddy dance moves). They were squeezed up as if travelling in a rickety bus flooded with passengers on a muddy road and the driver effortlessly puts the squealing break that would leave the passenger with no choice except to collide inevitably with the fellow one. I am very much convinced of their embarrassments when they would see their ridiculously animated moves in the video or captured footage, laughing out their hearts aloud. Most of them were flaunting their clumsy dancing skills except a few and that hardly made me any exception. Even those who had inhibitions unto dancing, danced quite well as if inspired by some muse that they might have witnessed among the ladies gathering. It was really an astonishing visual treat to be savoured. Apparently the passersby who were mostly office goers were delightfully witnessing such a joyous procession, probably, reminiscing of their own. Those who just heard the noise had come to their attic, clutching on to their balconies like pyjamas put on to dry.

Usually, the procession is closely covered by few hired labourers carrying electric lamps on their shoulder, making it vividly spectacular. Unlike the normal lamps, these are specially designed heavy lamps for the purpose carried along with the procession. These lamps effectively provide light to the procession. Amidst the hullabaloo of trumpet beatings and wild show of dancing marathon, I saw a tender young boy agitated as he seemed, carrying a gigantic electric lamp on his head. Aged almost 12, the boy had dark eyes with a twisted nose and tattered clothes as they are often hired outside the band members partly daily wage basis or on the condition that they will be given good food later. However, often they end up having leftovers of the food served on the platters for the other members of the procession. The boy had moved hardly an inch when someone or the other would stop him to wait patiently for the next order. Following the commands as obediently as he could he was just waiting for this to come to an end. His cheeks had an unhealthy pallor as if infected with some illness. The ordeal had left him looking pale and drawn as he was in desperate need of some water. He asked for the water to the other members but he received no response as all of them were busy with themselves. It was also least expected from the crowd as well which had already become too inebriated to pay any attention on that petty urchin.

Fortunately, I had a bottle of water. Usually I don't carry it but I might have had a dream of quenching somebody's thirst that may have pushed me to carry a bottle. Anyways, it was quite uncharacteristic and unexpected of me. Though, I was significantly happy to have it in my hand at that perfect time. During the procession, since I already had couple of draughts from the bottle, it was only left with the last draught, just enough to quench thirst for some time. Overwhelmed by the sight and willing to exhibit my philanthropy to that wretched, I moved my hand unto him to offer that last draught of water. The boy might have intuitively realised my concern and anticipated the sweet nectar any second off the bottle pouring into his parched throat when unexpectedly, out of nowhere, one of my cousin's panting excessively took the bottle of my hand and had it all.

I did not even realize what happened. It took me some time to realise the gravity of the situation. My cousin did not even ask me for the permission and it really sounds weird why he would. After all, he is a blood kin. I couldn't have stopped him. Could I! I mustered enough courage to meet those subdued eyes of the boy who had already given up the hope. It was, as if he was standing in the dessert and lured by the mirage; eventually gets disappointed to witness the truth between reality and illusion. I could see the glaring contrast between the two. On one hand I had my cousin who had uninterruptedly been dancing like a lunatic while on the other there was the timid boy and his illness. That makes me wonder sometimes that even if I had the opportunity to decide about to whom I should give the last draught certainly I would have given that to my cousin only. I had lost the battle anyways. The last draught as a matter of fact was gone, leaving him disappointed and me excruciatingly disheartened. My noble intention turned out to be merely a facade to manifest the lack of concern for the others. I couldn't say anything to my cousin let alone the seething anger. Guilt ridden as I was, I went in desperate search of some immediate water resource though I couldn't find any. I looked at him again. We were incommunicado until he spoke with an appeased smile. He said;" *bhaiya*, don't be upset. I will not have water until I reach the venue." It was all that had been communicated between us. I just sadly smiled back as if struck by shaft and yet feeling embarrassed to bear the pain. Words betrayed me and I couldn't respond. I was really embarrassed to the utmost of my humility. The absurdity of my morality haunts me like a nightmare. If I could just be relived from that embarrassment, I would be more than happy. However, I must confront the truth that there is the least possibility of it. I still remember his

pale visage diminishing gloomily, the unsaid hue and cry for the water getting shunned amidst the loud and erratic barbarity. Ironically, the one who illuminated the procession remained in darkness: a naive custodian of morale; a torch bearer. I will inevitably remember the crushing defeat of that hope till the rest of my life.