

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 2 [April 2016]

## 7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## God is Even-Handed

**Ramesh Chandra Tiwari**  
**Bahraich, UP, India**

A beggar is as content or unhappy with life as a king; a natural pessimist, however, is an exception because he hates the bother of welcoming an opportunity.

One day it came to pass that I visited Mr Deep Shekhar, one of my college friends, who had been an industrious and keen student and owing to it he entered the highest rank of state administration. Since we had not seen each other for a long time, it was an emotional reunion which we celebrated by having a cosy chat over lunch.

It was an exquisite sunlit room with walls panelled in oak and with floor to ceiling windows that faced north and east and that overlooked a large and beautiful garden full of trees and flowers. In the middle of the room was a long mahogany dining table with satinwood binding, set with white china and silver cutlery and beautifully folded napkins.

“Now you enjoy the position which most people aspire to achieve but a very few succeed,” I asked him conversationally. “I’d like to know if you find your life different from those of typical ordinary folk.”

“That’s a good question, Sunny,” he said, addressing me by my nickname. “Well, you might be thinking that the life of an elite executive is all roses - he can have what he needs, do what he may choose, lives in comparative comfort and is someone special. No doubt he leads a life of considerable luxury and enjoys special privileges, but regrettably he yearns to live like an ordinary man, the same as an ordinary working person craves for a high-profile position. It’s human nature never to be completely satisfied, but at the same time the pursuit of one thing or the other is life, for the person who has nothing to pursue suffers from melancholy and ultimately dies.”

“Do you want to return to your former life, too?”

“I want, of course, but not at the cost of my job,” he replied through a mouthful.

I ladled out steaming broth and sipped it reflectively. “It means you want to live your life with free choice.”

“Why not? But that’s not possible.”

“I wonder why you dream of that life of hardship, Deep? The awful deprivation I experienced in my boyhood days is still imprinted indelibly in my brain.”

“Look, I can afford food and clothing, however expensive; I’m in a position to enjoy all sorts of music or movie; I can travel first class; I have a car, a driver and attendants to help me; most of my personal matters are dealt with with a mere wave of my hand; a good many people

compliment me every day; but these things seem too simple to delight me, or rather, I don't have time to feel the pleasure that they provide."

"These things seem too simple?" I shot back in surprise. "Perhaps you have no idea that you enjoy an income and lifestyle that many people envy."

He laid down his knife and fork and looked into my face. "Perhaps you only know the bright side of the higher station of life and therefore you compare it with the dark side of the lower station of life and thus you get the false impression that I am enjoying a jet-setting life."

"Often we see the dark sides of our own life so the bright sides of other people's life seem even more dazzling. Such is the case with you instead?"

"No, no, no, Sunny! You're right but it's not true of me. You know, hardly a day goes by when I am not under stress; I have a phobia that my phone is going to ring and some higher-position of authority is about to put me to a fresh trouble. You will be amazed to know how we cope with the strains of the job when two grandees give us contradictory instructions. Besides, I need hardly tell you what sort of people the politicians are. In my experience, very few really understand the problem. They think they only have to pass an order, everything could be done. Sometimes they entrap us into doing something that is unlawful. If we do that, we are sure to live in constant fear of a judicial inquiry or a prosecution, but if not, we cannot help but incur their wrath."

"O God, these are delicate situations!" I murmured, observing Deep keenly. "I realize now I was mistaken about the flaws in your position. Tell me how you handle them?"

"At first, we try to convince the authorities that what they ask us to do is technically impossible and to put forward a legal alternative for them to consider. Sometimes we scare them off by the possible consequences and sometimes put them off their plans. But if they are still adamant that they will have that done, we prepare ourselves to face their anger and ask them to sign the document. But then there's the flip side: some ministers are thoroughly venal so they fix the price for the lucrative chairs and annual subscriptions thereof, which most of the officers agree to pay and start making money in any way they can because they are prepared to do anything in return for money themselves."

"Is this true? It means they thus ignore their duties towards the people."

"Of course, but who worries about the people today," Deep responded flatly.

"But then they are already rich people. I don't understand why they choose to be so mean."

"I quite understand your problem. Often, when we think of a king, many of us conjure up images of him as someone who has everything and therefore generous, who is powerful and therefore merciful, who loves everyone and hates none and who is a godly man – quite different from ordinary people. But when we get to know him, he is not as he seems. He is the greatest beggar, always frightened of losing his throne, and therefore usually mean. This is how the world catches

our fancy in our boyhood, when we don't know much about it. But as we grow older, the cruel and ugly form of the world becomes clearer and we start losing the will to live.”

“So the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence,” I remarked with a grave shake of my head. “If I am ever to work under such pressure, I'd prefer to downshift or even to leave the job.”

Deep gave a little laugh, pouring a little of sauce over the chicken. “That's too much for you, Sunny?” he said. “I've still a lot more to tell you. By the way, can you imagine how one mistake may cost the high-profile people dear? Conspirators and opponents never work on farms – they always swarm in the offices and the people who hold them are always alarmed by the prospect of them making allegations of professional misconduct and so a simple error of judgement means that it could lead to suspension or imprisonment.”

“What a horrible life to live!” I exclaimed, with my hand resting lightly on the salad.

“You know, we have no time to raise our pulse except spending countless monotonous hours in our offices. Besides, we are duty bound to be always ready to travel anywhere, anytime if needed and therefore hardly have time to enjoy leisure activities or outdoor pursuits. Strictly speaking, an official is more of a slave to higher authorities than a public servant.”

“Indeed, your life is nothing like how I imagined it,” I remarked before forking some fish into my mouth.

Deep looked serious for some moments “Generally, people believe that money brings happiness,” he said, at last, “but their wealth is often in inverse proportion to their happiness. Now to talk of poverty, it's no less agonizing too. It, however, prompts a family to have a sense of purpose which ultimately makes it engage in the pursuit of wealth. Then the future generations of it keep rising to riches till the one is blinded by its opulent lifestyle and thus let their fortune slide again. Yes, the middle station of life may be considered to be better than the other two. But then again, the conspicuous consumption in them doesn't let them enjoy their life peacefully. If you have one thing you cannot have the other thing also. In both the situations your yearnings for one thing or the other are at the same degree. However, a life without perpetual longings has no taste like a good meal to a sated person, so happiness is originated from our endeavours to fulfil the aspirations. This is how life journeys with equal degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction at every walk of life.”

“Oh well, I've concluded from this debate that life is a race in which we keep running to achieve our desires one after the other and every achievement is a delight that lasts for a short period of time, that the thing that we achieve after a lot of effort satisfies us more than which we get very easily and that an abundance of a thing reduces its value.”

“You're right. I can remember a few incidents of my boyhood days that are quite pertinent to what you say. On holidays I used to go to graze my cattle on the harvested fields. My Mohokia (cow) did not eat the clump of mowed grass half as covetously as she did when she was freed to graze the same grass. Her hankering after it was worth watching. Another example: my

grandfather had an old mango orchard at our village. During my summer vacations in May and June, I used to spend most of my time climbing the trees, plucking mangos and gathering them. Whenever I succeeded plucking one, it looked not like a fruit but like a grail and tasted so sweet – ah, it beggars description – or to be more specific, the best fruit purchased from the market here in the city cannot taste half as sweet as it did.”

I leaned forward to raise my glass. “Ah Deep!” I cried. “How pleasant it is to be in an orchard, tasting fresh fruit plucked by our own hands! It’s really tempting to hark back to how things used to be.”

“You, too, are overwhelmed by that life of hardship now. How strange! You would also want to remember how, during the winter, we used to go with a group of our elders, each with a blanket for warmth, to a nearby village to see Ramleela or Nautanki and come back in the early hours of the morning. The bed of straw before the stage under a tent was more comfortable than sitting in a high class theatre now. That rhythmic boom of nakkara, that hauntingly ethereal flute melody – it was such a delight! How great it used to be to join our village elders for the Keertan Assembly, held at the Shiv Temple, on Tuesday evenings. Ah, it was wonderful to hear a group of them performing keertans (hymns), with a few others accompanying them on the tabla, harmonium and other instruments!”

“Those were the days of sport and fun. I can remember that in my village the harvest was celebrated in a traditional style with kabaddi contests in which both the young and the elderly people took part. In the moon light, the senior teams played on the one side of the threshing floor and on the other side of it we made our own fun and had varieties of sporting competitions among the teams of children in our village.”

“Threshing floor,” Deep repeated, looking up from his food and turning to me with a dreamy look in his eyes. “Oh it brings back bitter-sweet memories for me. I had to drive a pair of oxen, yoked together, round and round in circles over a circular bed of dried wheat plants in the heat of the midday sun and to continue doing it until dusk. Sometimes my father would harness the animals to a threshing sledge and ask me to drive them, standing on the runners, so that the stems and husks might be crushed and seeds could be separated from the straw faster. It was sort of a very exhausting job because we had to work in the blistering afternoon sun and the dry blades or bristles on the glumes of spikelets made tiny cuts in the skin. Sometimes I was so tired of the merry-go-round of the job that I longed for someone else to do that for me. But my father, on the contrary, would go off, leaving me to carry on alone. I could do nothing except look out for someone in the vain hope that he would replace me. By then my father would return and instead of relieving me he would start turning over the sheaves. Sometimes when my inner voice prompted me to do my revision, I would implore him to drive the oxen for some time. But he often went mad at me and commanded me to get on with that. The harvest and threshing season during the summer vacations required the most concentrated labour activity. I was not allowed a break, even if I had hay fever. Anyway, it was all a tough life but not always without charm. A good many people would gather at the threshing ground after the sun went down and the evening cooled off. We would sit on the soft circular carpet of the trodden out straw in groups. The grown-ups told us fascinating stories of kings and queens of ancient India and with that we

would forget the hard day's work. After dinner, we would come back to that bed of nature and fall into a deep dreamless sleep which no king had ever had on their royal beds."

"Generally parents do everything to educate their children. They encourage, support and succour them. Your father was so causal about your studies – it's amazing!"

He leaned on the back of his chair, "Yes, he did not want me to go to school; he wanted me to help him with farming. But my mother's view of my career was diametrically opposed to him. She used to wake me up early in the morning and ask me to wash up and then to get on with my schoolwork. 'If you want to become a gentleman you ought to be diligent about your studies,' she would say. These words left a lasting impression on me. I obeyed her without question."

"So it's a tribute to his determination and to his mother that he achieved where so many of us had failed," I said to myself.

"But, you know," he continued, "my father would call me out when doing something outside the house in the morning. It often happened when I was engrossed in my book. At first, I would choose not to listen to him, but at the thought of him, I shuddered and rushed out of the house to see him. 'You were in the bed!' he would yell at me. 'Don't you see the cattle are bellowing? Go and feed them, you little rascal!' When it was done, he would ask me to do some other thing. 'I've to do my home work,' I'd mutter. He would explode with rage and say, 'You aren't going anywhere else. Go fetch a bucket and help me milk the cows.' He would thus keep me busy till my friends had all gone and I was late for school, so, after I was set free, I would rush into the house to get my school bag. But my mother would not let me leave until she had put a box lunch in my bag. She would also ask me to eat something but I would have to deny due to the time constraints. Often I made a sprint for the school, but by the time I reached, the prayer assembly had started and I got bawled out for being late."

"Indeed, it was a very difficult situation. It's strange how you kept your end up."

"You are mistaken, Sunny; the more my father forced me to do farming, the more I was interested in my studies, or rather every difficult situation galvanized me into achieving my purpose. But, as a matter of fact, I never took anything too seriously, for I would invent fun things to do in every situation. You'll be astonished to know what we did in our lunch hour. We would climb a tree that had overhanging branches and have lunch on them. In those days, irrigation systems were too expensive. Only rich farmers could afford to grow wheat and paddy and it was because of this the boys who had wheat roties or rice with butter and seasoning would display it and those who had chickpea roties or maizemeal porridge with salt would eat their meal hiding it from other boys."

"How strange! It was both piteous and wacky."

Deep went on as if he had not heard me. "Lunch was followed by an agriculture class as it was compulsory for the schools to offer agricultural courses then. We would go straight out to the garden to learn horticulture, floriculture and how to plough the fields, sow seeds, irrigate and harvest the crops. I never enjoyed this class because it made me think back to how nervous I was



the other day when my father had browbeaten me into doing some agricultural work, particularly when it was time to go to school. But then, I never failed to have fun here too. One of our friends who came from a rich family was good at farming. We would call him Mahatava i.e. the experienced farmer, because he often instructed us how to mow the grass and then to prepare beds. Two of us would hold the handle of the fork, one on either side of it, like a pair of bulls yoked to a plough, and while we pulled the fork he would press its points into the ground. We thus ploughed the small fields.”

“I already know you have the ability to make the best of things. By the way, did your father not let you do your homework in the evenings too?”

“After school, when I reached home, I would hang my bag on a wall peg and have a quick wash up before opening the wooden platter with which my mother had covered my afternoon meal in the inner courtyard. Words cannot describe how delicious the meal tasted. I would say the royal cuisine cannot satiate anybody half as much as that simple chapatti made from mixed cereals, a pint of salt and fresh butter did to me. After eating the meal, I would hurry out to help my father herd the animals into the cowshed and prepare evening fodder. After everything that was necessary had been done, my mother would light an oil lamp near my cot. It was at this time that I did my studies undisturbed for a few hours.”

“Really, our present day lifestyle is a complete contrast to our old village life,” I concluded, dabbing my mouth with a napkin. “Mud huts with grass roofs had been home to the common people, but they had their hearts in the right place and time to sit together in the evenings. They ate simple but tastier and healthier food and drank water from a well; the air was pure and fresh; atmosphere friendly; climate pleasant; the politics straight; the sun neither too intense in May and June nor too dim in January and February. I agree with you that if we have one thing to enjoy, we are deprived of the other; or that if a man is proud of his beautiful wife he is sure to suffer the anguish of watching someone else ogle at her – this is the law of nature. Now we have cars, computers, mobile phones, shining houses and all that luxuries. But this life has devoured all human relationships; we are always under a lot of stress; we face cut-throat business competitions; nature has withdrawn its boon and all is artificial.”

“You’re right,” Sunny, said Deep gravely, as he stood up. “Each living creature, situation, position, place, season of the year, or rather everything in the world has its advantages and disadvantages. Nothing is absolutely useful, and neither can anything be absolutely useless. Yes, it is human nature to dream of something idyllic which does not exist. Perceptions change over time – the present economic, political or social system slowly takes on a more sinister aspect and we start calling for some other one. In fact, what we yearn for sounds like an ideal thing but as we attain that, it is no longer the same. An ideal situation is like the horizon that always goes on ahead.”