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Crocodile Tears

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(Odisha Sahitya Akademi and Central Sahitya Akademi Award Winner)

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After serving for thirty five years elsewhere, when we returned to the village, it seemed as if the village had been transformed into an alien land. It took me and my wife some time before we could win over the people. Initially, our children faced some difficulties in acclimatizing with the village surroundings but they managed to establish sync with it later. School, college and other offices had started opening in the village. The village was gradually proximating towards the town. I marked changes in what people discussed. They were not putting on dhotis anymore but had transformed themselves into city baboos, wearing pants and shirts. I remembered my school friends after a few days of settling in the village. Most of them had disappeared – nobody knew where. I heard only about one. He was Balabhadra. We all fondly called him ‘Balialia’. He stayed in the capital as he had become a minister. At times he came on official tours to the village in his official car. When the schedule of his visit was announced, people were usually thrown into a tizzy. The village roads were cleaned and welcome-gates were erected. People said, “Balabhadrababu doesn’t belong only to this village but to the entire state. He is not only a minister but God incarnate.” I remembered Balialia having passed matriculation in six attempts, that too with my help. He told me once, “Nilambar, I have been a complete failure. You all have made yourselves worthy. Won’t I ever become successful?” that day I had jokingly told him, “Why don’t you become a tout? At least, you can become the village Sarapanch, or an M.L.A. or a minister. You can earn a lot of money that way.”

I was that the same Balialia had become a minister. Time can bring about any change. What had I got after thirty five years service? Only I had taught students, made men of them, but I was unable to own a house or a car or a plot of land in Bhubaneswar. My unemployed son Ramesh sat home. Even my daughter could not be settled anywhere. Finally, I returned to the village after retirement and repaired the dilapidated house, just to spend the rest of the life there. Even then, there was no end to the worries related to children. My wife would always get angry with me and taunt me for my inability.

“Will you only keep sitting at home or do something for the children? You had told me once that Balabhadra was your friend. He is the M.L.A. of this village and the minister. Why don’t you go to him and speak about Ramesh?”

“What are you saying? Is he a man? So what, if he is a minister. He is an uneducated fool. You think a person like Nilamber Ray should go to him. This can never happen.”

“So what? Even God had touched Donkey’s paw at the time of need. He is only a human being. It’s true that you have taught some human beings, but he is managing the entire state. He is teaching lessons in law to hundreds of human beings like you.”

“That’s why I say I’ll not go to him. Ramesh may or mayn’t have a job. He can manage himself ploughing all the land that we have. We can manage with whatever pension we get.”

“Why did you let him receive so much education, then? You could have sent him to the village from the very beginning. Besides, will you get our daughter married off or not? Just heed to my small request – go there once. Something might come off.”

Finally, I had to accept defeat at the hands of my wife. I gathered information from the village people. He had fixed Sunday as the day to listen to the grievances of only the people of his village—from nine to twelve o’clock. On other days, he would listen to the grievances of people of other areas, that too from nine to ten o’ clock. For his own people, the minister had set aside three hours. Everybody praised Balabhadra lavishly for the generosity.

After much thought, I decided to try at least once. He may not recognise me ... but no ... he would surely recognise me – as if someone spoke from within my heart.

That Sunday I left village very early because the people had said, “You have to reach early otherwise you will not get any tickets.” Initially, I failed to understand what it meant but when I reached the minister’s residence, I understood it clearly.

His Private Seretary, displaying a smiling face, said, “Please sit down a while, sir, it’s already time ...”

Then the peon came, handed over another paper and said, “Sir, your serial number is fifty-one.”

“Oh! Then, can’t we meet today?”

The peon smiled a careless smile and said, “Everybody gets five minutes. This way, fifty people need two hundred and fifty minutes. That means, sir, you may meet him or may not. The minister has to listen to everybody. Those who are left today ... will get the opportunity next Sunday.”

“Oh! It’s O.K.” I pulled the chair lying in one corner of the room and sat with a thud. Heaps of abusive words came out of the mouth with the peon in mind. But, the peon had disappeared somewhere else by then.

I cast a quick glance on all the characters that waited with worry writ large on their faces. Almost all of them carried a paper each. The gentleman sitting next to me said, “Perhaps you have come

here for the first time, so you look worried. When you have come to the minister, should you look so worried? He is a minister ... is he a common human being like you and me?" Really, I was completely drenched in sweat by then.

The peon went on reciting the names one by one.

"Sir, your serial Number is fifty two."

"Take this one Sir, yours is fifty three."

"Oh! It's really very difficult to sit here." I looked at the watch. It was fifteen minutes to nine. Oh! Still fifteen minutes was left for my turn to come. But everybody got up with their papers. Someone carried files whereas some other carried receipt books in the handbag. Someone else carried a number of newspapers. Different types of people came with different works. I marked them – 'triumph' was writ large on each face. Was Balabhadraprasad going to grant them boons? In another corner of the room sat a group of young men, busy in their discussions.

Outside the waiting room, stood many people. Bringing an end to their worries, the first bell rang. I looked at my watch again.

It was five minutes to nine. Really, Balabhadra had learnt how to respect time.

The Private Secretary went inside.

The peon closed the door and stood outside.

The second bell rang.

The peon went inside.

It was exactly nine o' clock by the watch.

The peon came outside and called out loudly, "Amarendra Chaudhury, serial number one." A lot of commotion started inside the hall. Everybody became active though one of them went inside first. The peon closed the door.

"Serial number two."

One gentleman went inside with his wife.

"Serial number three."

I marked that people entered from one side and exited at another. This was because people entered from the waiting room side and went out through the outside verandah. I was not able to see the people while they exited.

"Serial number four."

“Serial number five.”

I looked at the watch. Everyone consumed three to four minutes. By the time my turn came, time would be over. Would I have to wait till the next Sunday? Let’s see. Once I have come here I must test my luck. It would be worse if Balabhadra failed to recognize me.

“Serial number six.”

When I looked inside, I saw that the people at number six were all young men. Perhaps they had come to raise some subscription for the village club or perhaps with hopes to join politics or to get license for wine shops or for shops to sell opium or Ganja. My heart started beating heavily seeing the way they burst the minister’s chamber.

The peon shouted, “Sirs, why are so many of you entering at the same time?”

“Move aside, you fool.”

The door opened and closed.

We all stood up, scared.

After some time, the private secretary also came out.

There must be some secret discussion.

I looked inside the room, unable to control my anxiety in check. The minister looked very grim.

This was the same Balia ... only he had grown obese... (Words came out of my mouth unconsciously)

“Sir, Please don’t do this, Sir... private sir... entirely private”

Even then, I could not take my eyes back.

After all Balia was my friend.

The hippies were banging on the table and talking. The minister, at times, was smiling, whereas at other moments, he was whispering something into the ears of one of them.

After a while, the minister took out a hundred rupee packet from the left side drawer and handed it over to the man into whose ears he had whispered.

“O.K., Sir, we’ll manage with this ... rest some other time.”

The minister raised his hand to say ‘namaskar’.

The bell rang up once again.

The Private Secretary went inside.

The next number was called out. I returned to my seat.

(I was utterly flabbergasted after watching all this. Ten thousand rupees. Oh! Balia has turned a dacoit in the mean time.)

Time was gradually getting over.

Most of the people had left.

After some time, the time for the meeting would be over.

Those whose turn didn't come would be required to come next Sunday. I grew restless and worried.

“Will I not get a chance to meet him? I felt exasperated when I thought of next Sunday. I scolded my wife many times silently. At this old age, I had to bend before Balia. Really, Ramesh didn't become successful ... only because of him; I had to compromise with my dignity before such a person. Lakhs and lakhs of students became successful with my effort. I have now to...”

“Serial no fifty one...”

“Sir, please go in quickly... also try to come out quickly... the time is going to finish... others also have to go in.

I got up suddenly. What should I do? Where from to start and where to finish? At the thought of this, the entire Punjabi of mine got drenched in sweat. The peon shouted once again, “Sir, please go in quickly ... the minister has to go on tour.”

“O.yes, yes... I am going.”

“Will Balia really recognise me?”

Lost in such thoughts, I entered the minister's chamber hesitatingly. The fragrance of sandalwood in the chamber fascinated me. On the four walls hung pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Neheru, Indira Gandhi, Satyasai baba, Swami Sivanand, Takur Anukulchandra, Thakur Nigamananda and many more. My mind changed completely.

“Hello, can't you recognise me Professor sahib?”

I was startled. Before I could say 'Namaskar' with folded hands, he had already embraced me. “Hey, you are saying Namaskar to me! ... Have you gone mad? I am in politics but that doesn't mean I will forget my friends.”

I was living in a different dream world then. “Then ... Balabhadra hasn’t forgotten me ... Balia hasn’t changed at all ... I remained silent for some time.”

“Her, friend... Could you not recognise me? I thought you would have forgotten everybody after becoming a minister... I am meeting you after such a long time.”

I marked Balabhadra intently. He had gone obese, no doubt. He wore an expensive dhoti and an expensive Punjabi ... hung a gold chain around his neck ... had grown beard, in sync with his facial appearance... He had expensive cigarettes on his table... had placed two or three coloured phones, some paper and a few files.

“Hey, why are you looking like this, Professor Sahib? Tell me something about your family. How are they? Have they grown up? What are you doing after retirement?” He buried me with many such questions. He stopped for a moment and instructed his secretary, “Tell others, I’m sorry for not being able to meet them today. Ask them to come next Sunday.” The Private Secretary went out. Only I and Balabhadra were left in the room.

Really, professor, when I saw you, I was reminded of my childhood. Only because of that I drove everyone away. We two meet each other today after twelve or fourteen years. Let’s talk our hearts out. What do you say? Tell me... Why did you so suddenly remember Balia? You must be thinking about how I became a minister. That is only a contribution of my fate line, my sweet talks, and my cunningness. In this field, there is no need for any education. The custom with political is, “Don’t at all tell the truth, don’t reject the words of others outright.” These are the ground rules of politics. I have been following these golden rules thoroughly. That’s why, you must have marked, how our village people simply adore me.

“Really, Balabhadra, our village people consider you God.”

Ha! Ha! Ha! The honourable minister laughed loudly. After that we discussed a lot about each other’s family. I reminded him at one point, “You were talking about going on a tour. I have taken much of your time.” Balabhadra again laughed loudly. “Hey, those plans are just to get rid of people. Friend, now let’s talk about other things.”

During the discussion, I spoke about Ramesh.

He had passed in first division but had not landed on a suitable job. Should the son of a teacher like me, sit at home, unemployed? Wherever he went people demanded money. Your Bhauja has sent me here forcibly. The Education Department is going to engage some adhoc lecturers. There also, bribes are being given. If you request the Education Minister, the job may be done. Besides, his younger sister is also ready for marriage. She has also passed B.A.. If the son gets into something, I would think of the daughter’s marriage.

Balabhadra picked up the phone even though I had not completed.

“Is the Education Minister there?”

“I’m Balabhadra Das, the Supplies minister.”

“Namaskar! Are you doing well, brother?”

“What’s the news, Rambabu? Your Education Department is doing quite fine. Schools and colleges are being opened everywhere. New posts are being sanctioned too. What about the case which I had talked to you about?”

“Oh! Thank you ... Thank you very much... I have something else to request you for. Your department has advertised for posts of adhoc lecturers. One of my close relations has applied for the job. But you know the times very well... yes, yes... his name is Ramesh Chandra Ray. Please see to it that he gets it... I’m making necessary arrangements.”

“OK.,OK., I will see... But, did you note the name? Namaskar...” The honourable minister put the receiver down.

“Friend, the job is almost done. Only fifteen days are left for the interview... then he will get the job... tell bhauja to bring me sweets... I will not feel good if I don’t eat sweets from Bhauja’s hands.”

I didn’t get appropriate language with which to thank Balabhadra. Only, drops of happy tear rolled down. I embraced Balabhadra excitedly. “Hey, you... you are my friend. It’s my duty to help you.”

The expected five minute meeting had already consumed fifteen minutes. I got up.. paid obeisance to God.. also to Balabhadra.

By the time I reached home that day, it was already evening. I could hear happy noises all around. The moment my wife heard me she said, “You know, I went to the Jagannath temple. A flower dropped from the lord’s head the moment I got up after paying my obeisance. Finally, the lord heard my prayers... go to the temple and pay respect to the lord.” I added, “Balialia has changed a lot... God has given him the skill to embrace an outsider and convert him into one of his own.”

Thereafter, days flowed by like water. Time didn’t wait for anyone. Ramesh appeared at the interview. He was confident of getting the job with the minister’s intervention. Balabhadra was a powerful minister. Word had spread in the village that nobody dared act against his wishes.

It was the following Sunday after the interview. I reached at the minister’s residence at the appointed hour. This time when the peon heard my name, he saluted me. He informed, “Sir has ordered me to let in as soon as you reach. Your needs will be attended to before that of others.” I felt overjoyed.

That day, Balabhadra embraced me when he saw me. He said, “Brother, I knew you would come today. So, I have already talked to the Education Minister over phone. He said everything had been finalised. It will take another five or six days. Come after another fifteen days. I’ll write a letter. Meet the Education Minister with the letter and take the appointment letter from him. Only then ask Bhauja to serve me sweets; is it fine? What news have you carried from the village? Are all the villagers well? I haven’t visited my constituency for a long time. The people must be thinking Balabhadra isn’t taking care of his village. What to do? Now I have to take care of the entire state. Eventhough I wish to visit the people of my village, I don’t get sufficient time for that. Therefore, I have fixed a particular time every Sunday to meet the people of our village.” Balabhadra said this very proudly and laughed a hearty laugh.

Balabhadra – How should I thank him? I searched for words to praise him but in vain. While taking leave, I only told him, “Balabhadra, I don’t know how to repay you for the kindness you have bestowed on me. But, I’ll try to repay it somehow.” Balabhadra rested his hands on my shoulders and said, “Those things can be taken care of later; let Ramesh get his job first.”

That evening I returned home and told everything to my wife. She heard without any display of emotion. She only said, “It’s OK, everything depends on the wishes of Lord Jagannath; what else can we do?”

I waited – with much patience – carrying much hope.

The next time, the minister’s answers were different. However, there was no dearth of good treatment. The minister said, “The Education Minister is very busy. Of course, he has promised to do your job. The election time is approaching. That’s why he isn’t getting any time. Tell me, what else I can do. This is politics. However, I’m dealing with your problem myself. You needn’t come so frequently. Tell everybody at home, I’ll visit you myself and handover the appointment letter there.”

It came out of my mouth suddenly, “You had told me that everything had been finalised and that if I carried your letter, I would get the order... but...”

“ Yes... Of course I had said that but for that, the minister must be available at the headquarters. Don’t be worried at all. Is Ramesh only your son? Is he not like my son?”

That day I realised I had gone off the track and following a mirage only. I worried about how to console the family members on return.

I didn’t have to tell anything at home this time. My wife only told me, “What has made you so tired? You needn’t go to Bhubaneswar again.”

Of course, I took very long to forget the hurt. After that I didn’t visit Bhubaneswar for a very long time.

About one year after that incident, I went to Bhubaneswar on some work. Suddenly, I met the Private Secretary of the minister. During the discussion he said, “I am not Balabhadrababu’s private secretary anymore.”

“Have you been transferred?”

“Yes Sir. Did your son get the job?”

“No, he didn’t. I ran many times but finally became hopeless.”

“You are not the only person, sir; there are many more like you. So long as you take care of the minister, he will take care of you in return. When he feels you are not taking care of him anymore, then he will start avoiding you.”

I looked at his face in surprise. Did Balabhadra really expect something from me?

Looking at the storm of numerous questions arising within me, the former Private Secretary smiled and said, “I’m no more the minister’s Private Secretary; hence there is no harm in exposing his tricks. You must have seen two or three phones on the minister’s table – they are used sparingly when required. Suppose the minister wants that your job should be done, he’ll pick up and use the red phone. If he doesn’t want your job to be done, he’ll pick up the black phone. That phone has no connection with the outer world. He uses the trick just to make fool of the people. I was surprised when he used the black phone for a friend like you. The day I got a hint of his secret tricks, I was transferred to another department.

I praised Balabhadra silently; he was the fittest parson to become a minister.