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## Real Culprits Wallow in Luxury Chambers

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The sweetest fruit that God has ever created is conceit and the frailest thread is ego. There are those who enjoy conceit and nourish ego. They know not that prejudice floats on the surface of deep ignorance and a normal life is possible to have by staying away from it or by expanding the area of generosity and love. A man full of himself causes problem not only for others but also for himself.

It was January 21, 2010. The weather was bitterly cold, with leaden skies that gave minimum visibility. Routine life had become dull and disturbed. Continuous absence of the sun had caused the feelings of emptiness and depression.

“You filthy pig! Out you go!” roared Bhay Haran, throwing a sheet of paper away.

“But, huzoor [sir], they’ll cut down my garden with green and fertile mango trees tomorrow if you didn’t enforce this stay order,” said Jokhan, as he bent down to pick up the paper. “The trees are on my front yard and they were planted by me about forty years ago, when I was a boy. Now one of my neighbours named Ramdeen lays claim to them and has sold them to Saukat, who is a notorious tree felling contractor.”

The Station House Officer frowned at Jokhan. “Quick! Leave the station before you’re in custody!”

“This is a court order,” said Jokhan, looking unmoved. “How can you defy it?”

“The station-house is already short of constables, mind. If you want to save your trees, dip your hand into your pocket.”

“We make an honest living so live on a very low income. I have never swindled anybody, huzoor.”

“What do you think the police are volunteers? Get lost, you impudent creep!”

“You mean you aren’t a public servant? The government pays you salary every month – what for? Mind you, an elephant can kill any animal; it, however, cannot kill an ant,” warned Jokhan, turning on his heel and leaving the office.

Next morning Jokhan went to the higher office to complain to the Superintendent of Police that the officer in-charge of Raniganj police station had asked for bribe.

“Have you any evidence to support this allegation?” demanded the SP.

“No, huzoor, there was nobody around there,” replied Jokhan.

“Then you’re certainly lying.”

“But I have a stay order which he refuses to receive. Inasmuch as you’re his commanding officer, now it’s your duty to make him respect the court order.”

“You’ve come here to make an untrue allegation against an honest officer or to teach me my duties?” snorted the Superintendent of Police. Then he asked a policeman to throw him out of the office.

Jokhan sent the stay order to the SHO by registered post and came back home disappointed. He felt sure that he would not be able to protect his trees. But weeks passed, and nobody came to cut them down. Instead, two cops arrived to serve a summons on him one morning. Jokhan was milking his buffaloes. When they handed him the order, he was very puzzled as to why he was summoned to appear in court on 15 March.

With the advent of spring, the weather warmed up, leaves and plants started to grow again and fresh flowers to bloom. It brought people gentle breeze and pleasant drowsiness, pushing back fog and mists and all their bitter experience.

Jokhan appeared in court on the hearing day. The trial began with the prosecution bringing charges of defamation against him and with the court subpoenaing evidence, affidavits and witnesses. Thus the formal proceedings continued for two months until the court called both the parties to make arguments. The defence lawyer submitted that the evidence for the prosecution

was not admissible given that the witnesses for the plaintiff, Bhay Haran, were his colleagues who would favour him as it is human nature. The clock struck 5 pm by then and the judge adjourned the hearing until June 10.

The courtroom opened at eight in the morning on June 10, 2010. Even in the morning the sun was shining brightly and the heat was unbearable. As the judge entered, everybody stood up as a mark of honour to him. On this day the judge did nothing but asked Jokhan to take witness stand. Then he began by asking him, “You’re Jokhan?”

“Yes, huzoor,” came the simple reply.

“It’s you who went to Bhay Haran, the SHO Raniganj, with a stay order on Thursday afternoon, 21 January 2010.”

“Yes, huzoor.”

“What did Bhay Haran say to you?”

“He said that police are not volunteers. If you want to save your trees, dip your hand into your pocket.”

“Can you prove you’re right?”

“I won’t tell a lie, huzoor. Just think if it is possible for a victim to be prepared in advance to grab evidence. To be true, it’s your duty to find out sufficient evidence to prove somebody guilty because you have every source to investigate allegations.”

“Did he not receive the stay order?” The magistrate asked, unconcerned about what he said.

“No, he didn’t,” replied Jokhan in a firm voice.

“What did you do then?”

“I went to complain to higher authorities about how the corrupt SHO had showed disrespect for the law. But when even the SP didn’t listen to me, I sent a copy of the order to the police station by registered post.”

“Somebody has cut away the disputed mango trees?”

“No, huzoor,” Jokhan replied innocently.

“Then who do you think you are teaching a law enforcement agency? Since you have failed to prove your alleged defamatory statement to be true, you are convicted of slandering the reputation of a responsible police officer.”

After five hours of deliberation, the court announced the verdict as follows:

‘The court has considered all evidence and testimony and finds that the accused, Jokhan, has made false statement about Bhay Haran, which has damaged his reputation. Accordingly, it is ordered that Jokhan is hereby sentenced to five years’ imprisonment and directed to pay Rs25000 compensation and Rs3000 costs. He is hereby committed to the custody of the Department of Police for execution of this sentence as provided by law.’

Bhay Haran was flooded with joy when Jokhan was led away to jail in handcuffs. He came back to the police station and called his fellow policemen into his office to celebrate victory. “That presumptuous Neanderthal had gone to complain to the SP sahib!” he bragged. “What happened – he got what he deserved.” Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter, too puffed up with his own importance.

Jokhan met a prisoner in the jail. His name was Brahmanand, a very kind and helpful person. They became friends. In their free time, they would sit together and share their stories and griefs.

“Friend, there’s no law, no justice, nor any sort of ethics in present-day society,” said Brahmanand. “We live in a society that is morally bankrupt and preoccupied with corruption. The fire of materialism has burnt the tender sense of common humanity. There are those who can offer their family honour for sale, come to that. Contractors, agents, middlemen and the like

bribe authorities with money, presents or women for favours. In your case, as I think all the officers involved had been paid off. You'll soon hear that your mango trees have been felled."

"Oh, this is yet to come!" exclaimed Jokhan.

"Yes, most prisoners in this jail are innocent. Only they resorted to violence against those who wronged them. If justice had not been denied to them, they would not be here. Real culprits wallow in luxury chambers."

"So, the whole system of justice is inefficient and corrupt. I think the remedy lies in the hands of the Chief Minister only."

"You're mistaken, friend. You fancy that he has everything so he is generous, that he is powerful so merciful, that he loves everyone, and that he is a god quite different from the common man. But as you get acquainted with him, you'll reach the conclusion that he is the greatest beggar, as frightened as a hare, he loves nothing but his throne and is therefore the worst person on earth. This is how we fancy about the world. When in our early days, we do not know much about it, it is the most beautiful place for us; but as we grow older, the cruel and ugly form of the world begins to emerge, and ultimately we stop nourishing the strong desire to live."

One day the District Magistrate came on a tour of inspection of the jail. She was walking in convoy with armed guards. Jokhan knew her. He soon came up and knelt before her, with his hands joined together. "O Muniya [sweetie]! Take pity on me," he pleaded to her. "I committed no crime even though I'm in jail. The real culprits are out enjoying life and freedom...."

"But I can't help," she put in. "It's up to the court to make a decision."

The winter came again. The morning dawned bright and it felt warm and nice sitting out in the sun. The prisoners were brought out into a compound. The visitors began to come in to see their incarcerated loved ones. Jokhan too sat waiting for his wife to enter. Then, as they saw each other, they dissolved into tears. "Saukat and his men have carried away our trees last night," said Sarjudeyi sadly, as she handed him a packed lunch.

Jokhan was shocked to hear it. The box fell from his hands. He looked up at the heavens with a severe expression on his face. Brahmanand was also there. Jokhan slowly turned to look at him. “Things unfolded just as you had predicted,” he said to him, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself down.

“I know their ways,” replied Brahmanand. “They can go to any lengths to satisfy their craving for money. There are those who easily believe in everybody else and those who always doubt others. Both kinds of people are easy prey for cunning devils. A sagacious person stands between a cynic and a naïve – they doubt and believe but show proficiency in dealing with a difficult situation. Anyway, small fry help the big ones outlive them.”

“Dear Brahmanand, I’ve ever been regarded as an honest man, a respected mukhiya [chief] by the people of my community. They might be having doubts about me and there is no way to restore my tarnished reputation. I’ll kill those big ones for sure and then come back to spend the rest of my life peacefully in this jail.”

“Bear in mind that aggression often hides consequences,” advised Brahmanand. “What will happen to your family members then? A clever person gives way to his nemesis when circumstances are unfavourable and waits until an appropriate time.”

“But I tell you this, I won’t rest until they are in jail,” Jokhan persisted.

Sarjudeyi, numb with grief, had trouble speaking. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. “Just pull yourself together,” Brahmanand consoled her. “Wait, time heals all wounds.”

Meanwhile, a bell rang and the prison guards began to ask the visitors to leave.

It was typical of Jokhan to fall prostrate before some authority making their visit of the jail. He would say to them, “I’ve lived a life of values, never cheated anybody in my life and always made an honest living. I never even thought of committing a crime. Even then, I am in jail. I wonder why. It has left my reputation in ruins. My green and fertile mango trees have been chopped down and carried away. Now those who ought to be in jail lead a life of luxury and enjoy high status.”

A month passed and Jokhan went on doing this. Slowly word began to get around the town and villages that a low-caste family had become the victim of the system. When the MLA of the area heard this news and came to know that it was among the most widely discussed matter, he thought that this would be the best opportunity for him to gain support among the big community by offering his sympathies to the aggrieved family. He got ready and went to Jokhan's house. As a fleet of vehicles pulled up in front of his house, the villagers clustered around them. Jokhan's wife, Sarjudeyi, came out of the house, crying and with her palms joined together. She sat down in front of the MLA, looking up at him with beseeching eyes. "Vidhayak Babu [respected MLA], thana [station] in charge answered our request with a flat no and refused to comply with the stay order," she said in a choked voice. "Look at those stumps of our mango trees. We were in dispute with our neighbour, Ramdeen, over them. He sold the whole garden to a tree cutting contractor, Saukat, before the settlement of the matter. The contractor cut away our green, green trees about two months ago."

"Trust me – I'll help you in every way I can," the MLA assured her, "and none of those who harmed you will go unpunished. The culprits are ignorant of the fact that an offence harms both the parties. I'm going to see Jokhan in the jail right now. Stop worrying about him. The jail authorities will take special care of him until the government does something to get him out of prison."

After the convoy of vehicles had pulled away, the villagers began to admire the MLA'S benevolence and to discuss about the possibility that Ramdeen, Saukat and Bhay Haran might get punishments. This news spread rapidly across wider areas like a viral email and became so common that the media sensed that they could increase their TRP by covering this issue. Everyday a team of reporters reached his house to do an interview with Jokhan's family and to take photos of the stumps. It became one of the most hyped news stories on television and in news papers and finally compelled the attention of the government, which soon ordered a public enquiry into the affair. A committee was appointed. The people on the committee shrank from being enticed into changing the facts owing to public pressure. After a thorough and impartial investigation, the committee published a report whose findings supported Jokhan's claim. The government finally released Jokhan from jail using its prerogative.

Bhay Haran never expected such a big turnabout, nor did he ever imagine that a grain of sand could cause intense pain in his eyes. His anxiety was bordering on hysteria. On the one hand, he was frightened of the punishments which were expected to be meted out to him by his own department and by court. On the other hand, he had no excuse to avoid facing public humiliation. Anyway, it took the Superintendent of Police no time to suspend him for perverting the course of justice. Saukat and Ramdeen ran away from their houses in order to hide from the police.

Now Jokhan brought a malicious prosecution against Bhay Haran and filed a lawsuit against Ramdeen and Saukat, alleging that they did not obey the rules of a law court and that they conspired together to cut down his green and fertile mango trees and to sell them. They were finally convicted of the crimes. The court sentenced each one to ten years' imprisonment and ordered each one to pay Rs250000 compensation and Rs5000 costs to Jokhan.