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Two Vignettes of Gourahari Das in Translation

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Gourahari Das, a Central Sahitya Akademi and Odisha Sahitya Akademi award winning writer, is a novelist, short-story writer, screenplay writer, dramatist, columnist, journalist, editor, translator, travelogue writer par excellence. Six collections of Das's vignettes have been published so far, with the total number of pieces crossing five hundred, written over a period of more than thirty years. A vignette can be defined as a short graceful literary essay or sketch. The researcher presents two translated vignettes entitled "Nityanand Sir" and "Model Teacher" that showcase that the teaching profession, considered the noblest one, has also been subject to degeneration and decay with the passage of time. The first piece shows why teachers are revered even today where as the second points at the black sheep in the profession.

Nityanand Sir

For a long time, they had been swimming in Bada Pokhari. It was a day in the month of Jyestha, well known for its sultry heat. The surface water had already turned warm; what to talk of roads? No one wished to come out of water. It was now about two o' clock, although they had started at twelve. The eyes of Apariti and Nakul had already turned red like a hibiscus flower; it was as if moss had grown on their lips and chins. However, no one refrained from displaying their swimming skills. They held demonstrations of all kinds of swimming styles they knew including backstrokes and swimming underwater in the muddy water.

Nakul, at first, reported that some one was watching them from the back of the school for a very long time. He had marked a red towel shaking in the wind. Who could this gentleman be? Might he be the Headmaster or the Superintendent? ‘No,’ Nakul drove away all such possibilities. Had the person been any one of the above two, he might not have waited with patience for such a long time. Abhaya proposed that one of them should go there for confirmation. He ordered that Sidharth must carry out that task.

Being sent as a special emissary by the friends, Sidharth proceeded towards the spot, cowardly and apprehensively, from where someone had been watching their unruly swimming for a very long time. But, after discovering the gentleman who had kept himself concealed, he became alarmed and amazed. Even the sight of a snake would not have propelled him into that state. The gentleman who was standing in front of Sidharth was none else than Nityanand Sir. Sidharth wished to retreat from there and handover the message to his friends. But Sir advised him, by pressing his finger on his lips, to remain silent.

The fog of curiosity was still not dispelled from Sidharth’s mind. ‘How long will you wait here, Sir? They didn’t seem like coming out of water today.’

Nityanand Sir replied, “They will come out on their own, after some time. Small children; they are feeling delighted to swim. If they find me, they will come out of water without delay.”

Nityanand sir was the most educated teacher of the school. He was the only child of his parents. After passing his M.A. examination, he didn’t go for a job, but rather decided to work as a teacher in the village school. No one knew whether his decision pleased his parents, but this news made the school children extremely happy. Sidharth remembered, when Nityanand Sir reached school on the first day, he wanted to inspect the condition of the school library. Library, those days meant, a broken almirah that contained thirty to forty text books, two dictionaries—one English, another Odia, and a few old magazines. Nityanand Sir announced the decision he had taken; he would not take any salary from school. The amount which he might have received as salary would be spent in purchasing books for the school library. That was exactly what was done. Within a span of two years, the library became extremely rich.

So, it was not at all surprising if the same Nityanand Sir had decided to postpone his time of taking bath for the sake of naughty children who held no constraints of time in mind.

However, one day he got Sidharth surprised. Sidharth was the student of class ten then. He had a very good handwriting and wrote both English and Odia impeccably. Once, Nityanand Sir gave Sidharth the task of copying his manuscript. Needless to say, for Sidharth, it was not a responsibility but a great opportunity. Even when he talked to his friends or went shopping, he would carry Nityanand Sir's manuscript with him. His intention was to prove that he was not ordinary like others; that he was held in high esteem; and that was why Nityanand Sir had thrust such a responsible job on him. He completed the task in seven to eight days and returned the notebook to him.

A week elapsed. One afternoon, Nityanand Sir suddenly appeared in the hostel. The boarders were busy gossiping with each other. They all got up finding him nearby. Sidharth advanced towards him. He had pronounced himself the most favourite student of Sir. Nityanand Sir handed him over a packet wrapped in red paper. Sidharth's joys knew no bound. He opened the packet after Sir's departure and found two story books, one exercise book and an elegant pen. This was the remuneration for the job he had done.

After a few days, they all had to leave school. The memories associated with high school days are hardly forgettable. These memories are deeply entrenched in the heart and therefore, very intimate. After a few days of leaving school, Sidharth was informed that Nityanand Sir died of incurable cancer. On receiving the news, Sidharth felt completely disheartened.

Nityanand Sir was no more there; but most of the time he would emerge out of the crowded memories. In this city life where everyone was bent upon dealing with others professionally, Sidharth remembered Nityanand Sir.

These days, one finds the sahibs and the rich as well as the renowned so fond of beating their own bush that wherever they go and whenever they come, they behave as if they are accompanied by a storm. Their followers shout, "here we come," "move aside," "make some space". Move away, you common folk; make way for 'babu' to go or 'sahib' to come. The moment they reach calling bells jump into action; noise of orderly's shoes can be heard; telephones start ringing; the sound of motor cars deafen one. The more noise, the more buzz surrounds one, the more respect and importance he gets. One who is lonely and silent is considered backward, weak and lonesome.

Sidharth was reminded of Nityanand Sir the moment he found the strong people in the society trampling upon, like useless bits of paper, the emotions and sentiments of the poor. A

slightly dark person of an unknown village, was he. Sidharth would remember how he had waited on that sultry afternoon of summer, tolerating the mischief of indisciplined boys. He felt as if the comfortable *Chaitra* breeze was blowing, pushing away the sultry heat and hot breeze of *Jaistha*. The fragrance of fresh siuli flowers, carried by the hot breeze, pervaded Sidharth's entire existence.

Model Teacher

I distinctly remember, when I was a student of standard four or five, and when I read the magazine 'Manapawan,' I would give preference to the stories and poems of those writers under whose name or in whose introduction the words "Governor's Awardee (Teacher)" appeared. Regarding the word 'Governor', I had a half lucid and half muddled idea. Similarly, towards the governor's awardee teachers, I bore a strange sense of respect and reverence. I bore no misgivings that in such a big state the teachers who could attract the attention of the governor himself by their intelligence, noble character, and dedication, must not be commonplace teachers. The sorrowful experience of not having met such an awarded teacher, till I was twelve years of age, only strengthened my earlier argument. When I left the primary school and came to the minor school, it would not be wrong to mention, that I was compelled to read the grammar, essay, story, and poem books penned by these teachers. While reading their books, I would consider myself inferior; I would also curse myself for having not got the opportunity to be educated by them.

Had I ever imagined that the idea nurtured since childhood would be shattered like a castle made of sand, so suddenly one day?

The incident took place that day in front of my eyes. I was paying a visit to the office of an editor of a newspaper on some work. When I was sitting inside his office, a slip was sent inside; someone wanted to meet him. The editor called the gentleman inside. The dhoti-punjabi clad grown-up person came in, with folded hands, saying 'namaskar'.

Before the gentleman started the conversation, he looked at me. I understood that he was not feeling comfortable to talk, in my presence. I was compelled to come outside the chamber.

Later I came to learn that the gentleman was the teacher of a high school. His name was included, at the block level, in the list that was sent for the governor's award that year. He had but one deficiency—lack of literary publications. The gentleman had not produced any literature during his lifetime. On the other hand, a few stories, poems, or criticisms of his competitor

headmasters had been published in different magazines and journals. He had come bearing the doubt that his name might be excluded at the last moment.

The reason of meeting the editor was something like this. If the editor could issue a certificate mentioning that some of the articles, which were published in the newspaper at different times earlier without mentioning the names of the writers, were actually written by him, then he would successfully pass the model-examination.

I don't know if the editor helped him or if the gentleman was awarded by the governor that year. I was no more interested to know those. Once I learnt how one of those people, whom I had considered models of exemplary character and noble conduct since childhood, could try to collect a proof of false qualification without any regret, I was not interested to know anything more.

After many days, I asked an officer of the education department, what the hidden secret behind the model award why was there so much eagerness to acquire it? He smiled a little and said, "Perhaps you don't know. The service period of the governor's awardees is increased by two years. That's the reason for the greed. Besides, there is the added attraction of the awardee's photo being published in the newspaper and the consequential publicity."

By the time I turned twenty seven or twenty eight, light had been shed on many an ignorance but the one related to the ideal teacher was by far the most disheartening.