



01

## HONEY HUNTING WITH CHAMBILYA

*Prof. Arjun Jadhav*

*Former Professor*

*Department of English*

*Fergusson College (Autonomous)*

*Pune, MS, India*

\*\*\*\*\*

He was called by several names such as Sheshroa, Shesh, Sheshya and Chambilya as a teenager. He was my buddy with a pumpkin body and fair complexion. I would lovingly call him Shesh when we were studying together in the primary school named Jiwan Shikshan Vidya Mandir, Joharapur. He was one year junior to me when I was in the sixth grade. When we had a half holiday on Saturday and full holiday on Sunday, we would always wander in the green fields and wild forest at the riverside and spend the whole day together exploring the mysteries of nature. Shesh and I shared escapades that were both exhilarating and magical. From gathering honey of the beehives in thick bushes and tall trees to catching fish in the river with our bare hands thrusting into the muddy water of the river Dhora served us as a rendezvous. Each moment was etched into the canvas of our memories. We were partners in mischief, concocting elaborate plans to sneak into the maze field of a landlord in our village or feast on ripe mangoes which we would filch from the plantation of Eknath Dhage, a gentleman and an orthodox caste Hindu. Our faces would smear with sticky sweetness after consuming the juicy and succulent summer-mangoes.

Our village, though small, was steeped in simplicity where the sun painted golden hues on the unadorned terrain and laughter echoed through the dusty streets. Amid this serene backdrop, our friendship thrived and transcended the hardship of our poverty. Shesh with his infectious grin and a heart as vast as the endless sky lived with his small family consisting of four members in a small and dingy mud-thatched house in "Mang Wada" at the fringe of the village. Despite our families struggles to make ends meet, Shesh and I found solace and happiness in each other's company. We roamed in and around the village together; our laughter and melody resonated through the lanes and alleys. Our friendship was a testament to resilience, an oasis of joy amidst the desert of hardships as we found richness in the simplest moments, in the shared meals under the starlit sky.

Since we lived in the neighborhood, I would often go to his house and sit on the dilapidated hand-woven jute charpoy which lay in front of his house under a huge neem tree day and night. His father Dhanaji, an octogenarian man would sleep on that charpoy during nighttime. He would sit cross-legged under the shade of the neem tree several hours draped in a tattered dhoti, pink grubby pheta (turban) and worn-out cotton bundi given by an elderly benevolent caste Hindu in the village. His sagging face with deep wrinkles looked grim. With his patchy white beard, half-bald head and lousy moustache, he appeared to me like a mysterious ancient sage in deep meditation. His hazel eyes would gaze in a vacuum and he hardly spoke a word unless necessary. When he wanted to smoke chillum, he would need a piece of burning coal to light it. He would beckon his little daughter Leela to bring it from the chulha which was in front of the house for flaring up his chillum. Sometimes, I saw him using flint and steel in combination to create sparks. Hitting a hard piece of flint against a piece of steel, he produced sparks which he would direct onto a tinder bundle or sawdust to start a fire. Once the fire was created; he would light his grey-colored terracotta clay chillum (smoking pipe). I never



saw him doing some work or helping his wife in domestic chores. During summer and winter, he would sit under the shady tree at the stipulated place for long hours. He would only get up from the place for peeing and defecating. It seemed that he scarcely took a bath or washed his furrowed face. When he commanded, all the family members were at his service instantaneously. Laxa Mawashi, his wife, would always complain about his weird manners and food habits. His ways were bizarre for he demanded a quarter kilo cooked beef every day which he ate voraciously with stale bhakri made of jowar. The old man's wife had to go to the taluka town barefoot to buy beef from a butcher in the specified market which was five kilometers away. For that purpose, she had to beg from door to door in the village throughout the day. She would receive at least a rupee or two to suffice the purpose. Strange were the ways of my friend's old father.

Shesh's mother Laxmibai, a middle-aged woman to whom I called Laxa Mawashi, wore a worn-out sari, put vermilion in the parting of her greasy thick hair and applied a big vermilion bindi on her narrow forehead. She was a fair-complexioned dwarfish lady with light brown eyes and a high-pitched tongue. She often chewed paan (betel leaf) combining other ingredients such as slices of dry areca nut, slaked lime and a pinch of tobacco. Her tongue and lips appeared red when she spat in a jet of red saliva wherever she minded. The color of her teeth turned yellowish and brown overtime. While talking, red saliva oozed from the corners of her reddish lips. She would tell interesting stories of the people as she knew the politics of every family in the village. She often enjoyed sharing personal and sensational details about others lives. She would be frequently seen roaming about in search of stale food in the narrow dusty lane of the village. She would try to please every person she met in the village by flattering him /her. Her art of persuading people made her popular in the entire village. Everyone in the village knew her skill of coaxing elderly people into giving her some food grains or stale bhakri and curry.

One day, I visited my bosom friend's house in the afternoon. Laxa Mawashi as usual wanted to make delicious tea of jiggery for us but she didn't have tea powder in her house. I gave five paise to Shesh's younger sister Leela who was then very small. She went trotting to the only grocery shop located in the middle of the village and brought a small sack of tea powder. Till then, the process of tea making was halted. As soon as Leela arrived, her mother lighted the firewood in the clay-chulha with a matchstick and put all the necessary ingredients of tea in a small tarnished aluminum pot. While making tea and blowing with an iron pipe into a chulha raising scanty smoke she said in a low painful voice, "Arjun, we have not had food for the last two days as there is no flour of jowar or bajri in the house. My old man who is sitting there vainly does not do any work. He sits all day long under this shady neem tree and smokes chillum. My son Shesu refuses to go to school on an empty stomach." My heart melted with pity for the plight of the family. I decided to do something for the family members of Shesh. My friend's mother served us tea in a cracked and stained ceramic teacup and saucer. We drank the heavenly tea and chatted on variety of subjects under the sun. The evening sun peeped through the branches of the margosa tree under which we were sitting on the charpoy. My mind began to think about how I could help the starved family. My mother and father had not come from the farm work till that time. I decided to give some jowar grains to the family so that they could grind them on the hand-grinding millstone at home and make some bhakris to fill their hungry stomachs. As I stood to leave his house, I told Shesh to follow me with an empty vessel and wait behind my house. I vividly remember that there was a small window at the backside of my mud-thatched-house. All the neighboring people had gone to farm-work. I asked him to wait there with the vessel. He did as I told him to do. I opened the front door of my house. The house in which we lived had two small mud-thatched dark rooms. I went into the rear room where some sacks of jowar were stacked. I noticed that one sack containing jowar grains was half open. I took off my white Gandhi topi (cap) and poured some jowar into it with my palms and handed over the topi full of jowar grains



to my friend to be poured into the vessel he had brought with him. Nearly four or five times I gave him the cap full of jowar grains. I asked him whether it was sufficient, he chuckled and said, "It is enough for four members of my family." I told Shesh to vanish from the scene immediately. He sauntered in the direction of his house in a fraction of a second and disappeared. I came out of the house latching the front rusty-wooden-door. I was happy and felt guilty at the same time. I was happy because I could help the family with the food grains. I was guilty because I gave some jowar grains unmindful of what my parents would say to me. I did not want to disclose my act of thieving some jowar grains from my house in the absence of my parents.

The next day, I met Shesh on the school ground of the village where some boys were playing "atya-patya". As it was Sunday we decided to go for honey hunting along the riverbank. Shesh had an intimate knowledge of the native environment and behavior of honeybees. He could identify potential locations of the beehives by observing the activities of honeybees. He was able to find the exact locations of the beehives by the buzzing sounds and the presence of bees flying in a particular direction, or the flight of bees returning to a specific area. Shesh said to me, "I will go home and fetch "katti" (meaning sharp sickle tied to the one-end of a long bamboo staff for shaking and cutting the branch on which the beehive rested). Meanwhile, I waited for him on the podium of the community well located in the periphery of our neighborhood. We need not take permission from our parents as we were free roaming gypsy. Neither did our parents inquire about our day's activities when they returned from the pastoral duties. As we started walking in the direction of the river, we met some urchins who were throwing stones at the flock of parrots sitting on the top branches of a mango tree at the edge of a brook where most of the women folks would sit for defecation in the wee hours of the morning. As soon as one of the urchins shot stones from a slingshot in the direction where the parrots were squawking, the birds flapped their wings and flew in the sky blue. These urchins had stolen fresh long stalks of sugar canes from the plantation of Bhaiyasaheb Kulkarni, one of the landlords in our village, who often came riding a brown-blond mare to supervise his working-farm-labors. One of the urchins blew a whistle by putting the thumb and index finger of his left hand in his mouth suggesting that the owner of the sugarcane field was coming. We had nicknamed Bhaiyasaheb Kulkarni as "Baman". He was known for his parsimoniousness in the vicinity of our village. At the sight of approaching Baman, all the hooligans fled helter-skelter. However, Shesh and I continued walking barefoot on the pathway on both sides of which there was a canopy of variety of lush-green giant trees leading to the riverside. Crossing the crystal clear flowing-river, we went to the other bank and started looking for the possible bushes in which beehives could be found. Shesh's eyes fell on some bees hovering over a thick bush in front of us. He yelled, "Aare mitra, there in that bush is a beehive, I am sure of it." We both rushed to the bush surrounded by thorny shrubs. Shesh adeptly and cautiously removed the hindrances of thorny huddled- twigs and branches of the bush without disturbing the colony of honeybees. He always carried a matchbox in one of the pockets of his shabby and tattered shorts to burn the fallen dried leaves of the trees nearby to make smoke in order to drive away the bees hanging together by their legs. We collected a handful of dried leaves which lay scattered around the bush in open spaces and lighted them with a matchstick. The flame was extinguished with the sole purpose of making smoke in a controlled manner to calm the bees. When the bees perceived a threat to their hive, they released alarm pheromones to signal other bees to be alert and potentially defend their colony. Smoke that we created disrupted their communication by interfering with the chemical signals and cues they used to convey information. The disruption created a temporary state of confusion and prevented the bees from organizing a coordinated defensive response. They instinctively started to abandon the hive due to a latent fire. We could see swarms of bees hovering over our heads covered with white Gandhi caps. When almost all the bees fluttered away from the hive, Shesh cut the branch on which the honeycomb rested with utmost care. He wriggled to take the same branch out of the



bush. Once we were out of the danger of swarm of the bees hovering around, we breathed a sigh of relief.

We were in the seventh heaven and felt a sense of accomplishment as we successfully located and collected honey from the beehive. Then, we sat in the middle of the lush green field beneath the blue sky and savored the fresh, sweet and delicious honey we had gathered. Sharing the collected honey fostered in us a sense of camaraderie and strengthened our loving bond of friendship. As we approached the riverbank and beheld the river's mild rumble, the rustling of the delicate heart-shaped leaves of an old peepal tree giving off a gentle breeze, our joy knew no bounds. This connection with nature offered us a feeling of fulfillment, adventure and exploration. We were immersed in the glory of nature that beautiful and mesmerizing dusk. We washed our hands and mouth clean in the gushing river-water and started walking homeward hand in hand rejoicing, humming and giggling along with the cowherds guiding their cattle adorned with bells around their necks home. The sound of the bells added a musical quality to the pastoral evening.



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

**To Cite the Prose: Jadhav, Arjun.** "Honey Hunting with Chambilya". *Literary Cognizance*, IV - 4 (March, 2024): 04-07. Web.