

Virus

Fever. Maybe 'viral fever'. My whole body is aching, and I don't feel like eating anything. It's like what they say about the Flu---'With medicines it will last a week, without medicines, seven days.' I have no energy left, no will, and feel like lying down all the time. Sleep also plays truant. I am just tossing around on the bed and time stands still. I keep feeling thirsty all the time, my throat feels parched, but sips of water bring no relief.

I have not consulted any Doctor so far because I know that this condition has no cure. This happens to me at least once every year and I don't think it is anything more than influenza or a severe cold. Some kind of 'viral' ailment, for sure, since Flu and common cold are also caused by viruses (as are many other diseases, like Typhoid, measles, smallpox, hydrophobia, Yellow Fever, Polio, and even some types of cancer).

But I must pass the time somehow and I can do that in two ways – I can gradually sink deeper and deeper into the depths of despair, groaning and moaning and lamenting loudly, 'Oh my! I am feeling so miserable,' or I can forcibly banish all negative thoughts from my mind and force myself to think of pleasant things, and pull up from the depths of my memory, memorable incidents and emotions laced with happiness... Even a miserable life can have a lot of pleasant memories--they may be fleeting, may even be rare... One loves listening to music, reading a good book, watching a nice movie, recalling snatches of lively conversation with friends and relatives, re-living the sensation of love, recalling

some captivating paintings or pictures, the taste of something one ate a long time ago, or the tune of a song heard ages ago... A tune has come to my mind --- the strains of the raga *Ahir Bhairav* that I had once heard on a gramophone in somebody's house... on the wall above the gramophone there was a longish drawing, sketched over a panel formed by intertwining strips of bamboo, showing a narrow forest trail. Every few steps along the trail were large trees with luxuriant foliage. Sun rays filtering through the leaves were drawing patterns of light and shade all along the trail. With the rhythmic rise and fall of the notes of the *raga*, the patches of light and shade on the trail also seemed to be waxing and waning rhythmically. The lady of the house had brought me a cup of tea and while absent-mindedly sipping the tea I was listening to the *raga*, enraptured. Even now, with my dull, diseased senses, I seem to hear the strains of that *raga*, but now I am finding it difficult to recall whether it was played on a flute or a shehnai—the name of the artiste was surely written on the label of the record rotating on the gramophone and maybe the name was Paritosh Seal. But if it was Shehnai, it had to be Bismillah Khan—Aah! If only I had written down the name of the artiste somewhere!—But that does not matter, the memory of those sounds and images has at least made me pass these last few moments of a sleepless night in sheer bliss ... An image is slowly trying to come up in my mind, an image of the people of our neighbourhood having a community picnic on the sands of Kuruwa, on the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra, flowing placidly in the soft and mellow sunshine of a wintry December ... And there was the river, the sky, the dancing and the singing, the cooking and the serving of food, everyone joining spontaneously in the fun and frolic ... I seem to recall a photograph of the picnic, where our neighbourhood's veteran Lawyer Jagadish

Medhi could be seen trying to play the violin, the violin dangling at an awkward angle over one of his arms. Then there were those boys and girls, all of them laughing and singing something...That was such a precious photo! Where has it disappeared?— Why didn't I save it more carefully?—But even as I am regretting my lapse, a smile has come to my lips just by imagining the scene ...Someone singing *'By the light/of the sil/ve-e-ry moon'* – simple lyrics, simple dialogues...others picking up the song and dancing with it (I suddenly remember that the name of the film was the same as those first words of the song), the hero and heroine of that film were possibly Doris Day and Gordon Macrae---it was a hilarious, pleasing musical – the rise and fall of the song's tune and its lyrics keep echoing in my mind till today—Only if I had the sense to retain a cassette or a CD of the film ...There, I can almost hear the voice of Maakon auntie, "Oh, is that you Bapu? Good that you have come. I can offer you something sizzling hot, something you relish. I have just taken it off the frying pan," "What is it?" I asked, "Something of soya bean like the one you prepared the other day ...?" "No..No, it is *gajar-halwa*." As I recall her words my mouth is starting to water, and my tongue is almost tasting the deliciousness of that carrot pudding all over again, along with its enchanting aroma.--Her soya-bean dish was also equally delicious, though I no longer remember what it was called—How I wish there were ways of storing the taste of something we relish, along with its salivating aroma! ...The resounding notes of an orchestra slowly diminished in intensity, came to a standstill, and then, penetrating the silence, came the unhurried soulful notes of a violin solo—and immediately something tugged at my heart, wrenching my insides, and my eyes welled up with tears—That was Beethoven's First Symphony...Now I don't remember which of its movements had that solo violin piece, or what was its

scale—I only remember that it was towards the last part of side 1 of my long-playing record –Those record players are not available anymore, but I may still get a cassette or a CD of the symphony, though I don't know if it would be by the same conductor or by the same Orchestra, or if it would sound the same as my old LP record on my old gramophone. Can it still make my eyes well up with tears like it did when I first heard it...The movement came to an end, and the vibrations of sound petered out... And I am back again in the present, to the restlessness of the fever, back to my sleepless eyesAnyway, I am remembering a lovely story, not the entire sequence of events, but I am remembering bits and pieces of the paragraphs one after the other—the captivating presentation and superb analysis of a mystery---- Agatha Christie's 'At the Bells and Motley', one of my all-time favourites...I am making another futile attempt to get some sleep—some more coughing—All these disjointed fragments of memory popping up in my mind one after the other are full of the reassurance that life is full of joy, full of sweetness and the very pleasure of living is a boon, and even a miserable life can have so many beautiful experiences to invoke and recall with pleasure and thrill... The morning post on that distant day had brought me a postcard, in Rumi's handwriting, it did not have the sender's address, was dated the previous day, and contained just one single sentence, "If it doesn't rain please come without fail to the Curzon Hall on Wednesday at five in the afternoon."—I had become a little anxious, what could be so urgent –So I went—Rumi was standing outside the Library gate clutching two books in her hands, her face sullen with resentment –I said, I was away only for two days, what could have happened in between? Rumi said, "If you had to be away, why didn't you inform me before going – I haven't seen you for four days at College—don't you know how empty it feels if I can't see

you even for a single day?" What an avalanche of unbelievable sensations at those words...But, where has that postcard gone, where has that scene remained stored, if at all ?...

* * *

They are all stored in the brain---all images,all scenes, all sounds, all smells, and all sensations are stored in the brain, in its trillions of nerve cells. And the images stored are not just those of the joyous experiences,but also the pangs of sorrow and pain, anguish and heart-breaks, insults and disgrace, desires and wants, cruelties of destiny, evil deeds, senses of guilt and remorse, jealousy and viciousness, loss of near and dear ones, accidents, suicides, estrangements with friends, failed love –That unbelievablesensationthat day in front of the Curzon Hall gradually dwindled and then dissipated into nothingness even before the year was over, and the events started unfolding in a rapid pace, and one day, Rumicame out to the front verandah of their house and told me, "I have told you repeatedly—don't ever come to meet me again," and not giving me any chance to reply, had gone rushing into the house... Like a madman, I had roamed the streets, and remembered a few lines of a poem she had once read aloud to me—*"While going down the road, the flowers drop off into the dust,And then comes the time when westart forgetting the past..."* –I don't know when the memory of thousands of sorrowful moments got lost within the abyss of oblivion, do not know if the laughter of bygone days, the tears of yore, the sweet fragrance and the fetid smells, the arching of eyebrows and the frowns, the yearning, and the apathy, remain stored somewhere within the trillions of memory cells of the brain...

* * *

I have slowly recovered. My wife had called up a nephew of mine, a Doctor, telling him about my fever—he came, placed his hands on my forehead and body, checked my blood pressure, asked about my symptoms, and said, “Uncle, you had contacted something viral—the attack is now over, so nothing to worry, now a little caution would be enough –don’t catch a cold, try to be a little more regular about your meals –”

I nodded and my wife asked, “I keep hearing of everybody having viral fever. What is it, anyway?”

My nephew replied, “It’s a general name for diseases that are caused by a thing called virus—the word Virus is a Latin one, it means poison.”

“But what is it?”

“Oh, aunt—it is tough to describe it in one sentence. It is a very evil stuff—quite tiny, tinier than the tiniest bacteria, but causes all sorts of diseases. It attacks even the bacteria too. But nothing can attack and harm it —as if it is invincible, immortal—that’s why antibiotics fail against it. It is essentially an RNA or a DNA molecule—the stuff that determines heredity in men. It has a molecule of that stuff at its core, surrounded by a layer of protein. It is neither a living organism nor a non-living object, I mean, it is neither alive nor inert—it is not like a cell in our body (or in plants) and does not undergo cell division or reproduction like our cells, but usually stays put like an inert object, and so, it can’t do anything as long as it is all by itself, but the moment it somehow gets an entry into a cell of a human being or any living organism, it becomes active, destroys the DNA of the

cells, spreads that process of destruction to other parts of the body and proliferates as it goes along – that way it demolishes the natural processes of living cells, makes the cells sick to produce diseases. So, it is a vicious parasite—“

“it seems to be a real nuisance, does it not?” I said, “But where did they spring from?”

“Oh, Uncle, no one knows for sure. Maybe viruses are, what they call, a degenerate form of life, produced when the earth came into existence or some fragments from the DNA of the living cells might have got detached at the time of creation – but these fragments, or viruses, are widespread and can be found everywhere, it’s quite a dangerous stuff, found in plenty in places like the seas, ponds, water bodies and as a result, through fish and ...”

* * *

My doctor nephew had also said that our bodies are not helpless against viruses—our bodies produce a protein called ‘Interferon’, that prevents the devastation caused by the viruses from spreading to other cells in the body – maybe that’s what saved my brain. Otherwise, once I got affected by viral fever, I could not have spent my time blissfully bringing up old memories to my conscious mind –and though I have understood that innumerable viruses are ready to pounce on us from all sides, it may be this counter-protein that is protecting our brains... But then, the brain keeps going out of kilter even without viruses, I have read here and there that people lose their memory with old age, that the disease called Alzheimer’s brings in near-total amnesia, and sufferers cannot recollect

anything –Of course, there is a simple way out, one can jot things down in a notebook, or keep them stored in a computer –but the pages of a notebook would get worn out one day, the ink would fade, worms would burrow holes in them – and even otherwise, one would get only the barest facts in these—one would not get the sounds, the smells, the sensations, the way someone glanced, the stances, the actions—. And in the case of computers –they may store the sounds as well (and even the smells in the coming days, who knows!), but the computer’s storage would hold only the lifeless data, empty and devoid of the warmth of heart—

But even that would be enough,because all other sensations connected with them may be retrieved from my brain, (if memory remains intact) – so I decided I would go and buy a computer—

* * *

I opened the encyclopedia and read about viruses—it was more or less what my nephew had said, only in greater detail and supported by data in numbers and measurements. Just beneath the main article,I came across another note on ‘Virus”:

“Virus: Any software, which, in the realm of calculations, is capable of making a replicaof itself and is also capable of transmitting those replicas from one computer to anotherwithout the owner’s knowledge. Some viruses are relatively less harmful, but some others can corrupt or destroy data. Such software is written by some unknown programmers with malicious intent and

circulates through telephone lines or floppy discs. Most are very difficult to root out."

I have heard computer users say that such viruses abound in cyberspace, i.e., within the realm of telecommunications. I am pondering, with hands on my cheeks, when such viruses would also intrude into the carefully preserved memories stored in my computer ...

* * *