

At the Bus stops

Four perspiration – drenched creatures stood in the scorching afternoon sub at the Bharalumukh bus-stop, making a straight line inclined at an angle of about thirty degrees to the lamp-post. On looking for a reason for their standing in that fashion one could see that the creatures were looking for shade – a six-inch wide shadow of the lamp-post lay crookedly on the ground, and the creatures were taking shelter along it. The first person was yours truly, under my arm in a big brown – paper wrapped cardboard box were some vitamin tonics and injections, the second one was a middle –aged bespectacled professor –like person dressed in the spotless dhoti and kurta with a packet of books in his hands, he wiped his face very often with his handkerchief. We were waiting for a city bus. The third creature was a half dead, skinny, emaciated dog, his original colour almost gone with the dust and sunshine, flies covered his body completely, every now and then he tried to chase them away with his tail, involuntarily. He was asleep with his tongue hanging out, vapours rose from his tongue, he seemed to half-open one eye and even in his sleep an earnest watch over the fourth creature, an old chanawallah. The chanawallah had placed the coiled heap of cloth, which he normally used on his head to support his glass case, against his neck and was reclining against the lamp-post, sitting comfortably on the ground with eyes closed and was snoring audibly, one elbow rested on the glass box in which he carried his chana, sometimes his head would nod off and his the lamp-post with a sharp bang, and then he would begin to nod off again, and again hit the post. Perspiration flowed over his scraggy half-shaven beard and neck. A girls' high school was located just behind the bus-stop, from which a monotonous drone floated out.

With a loud ear-drum-splitting double horn, two heavily – loaded trucks rumbled past, and with a lot of noise and commotion, a row of bullock-carts, every time a wave of dust rose up to the nose, the professor – like gentleman seemed irritated and repeatedly put his wet handkerchief to his nose and cleaned his spectacles, the dog gave his body a wipe-over with his tail. But the chanawallah continued to snore at full strength, undisturbed, totally unperturbed, he did not move at all, except for the occasional nodding of his head.

Something like a mist was rising from the river. The entire road was gapingly empty, not even a gust of wind. Occasionally there was the 'haitcho, haitcho' sound of washermen washing clothes on the river bank. The pan-shop in front of us was closed; the shopkeeper had probably gone for lunch. The tar of the road was beginning to melt. The professor looked around once or twice. No, there was no place to sit down, no shade anywhere except that six-inch wide inclined line. At some point, a groaning creaking rikshaw and materialized on the road. The professor immediately raised his hand and shouted, 'Hey, Rikshaw !' but the rikshaw – wallah made a quick getaway after saying, 'have a fare, Babu'. Ages went by, no sign of the city bus. The drone emanating from the girls' school and the snoring of the chanachurwallah seemed to be playing at a synchronized pace – same tune, same beat.

Of course we were forced to talk. Of course our complaint was the same – the city bus is taking very long in coming today. Of course, not just today, the city busses were always very irregular, -- there is nothing called 'time' left anymore, complete disregard towards public convenience or inconvenience, -- and weren't even the public too very callous? Everyone busy with his own selfish motives, where was the time or need to think about others or the public in general? Nothing called 'public spirit' exists anymore (only left were four and a half persons who wrote letters to the editor). That a shade was required by the public at a bus stop to shelter from the rain and, that they needed a bench to sit on, did anyone care a fig for these elementary things? Everyone just wants to run and rush and push and scramble onto a bus and be done with it. And Vanmahotsavs are held every year with so much fanfare, but has anyone thought about planting a tree to give shade of even one cubic foot at a bus stop? (of course, you and I are also to blame, neither of us have probably ever taken any initiative in this regard – I was speaking only in general, do not take it personally).

Things were not so bad in the olden days, the professor said. People were not so selfish. Take the case of Ashoka for example. Big king, such a lot of work, had to run the administration of an impossible country like our massive India, also had to spread Buddhism, so many worries, so many problems, so many crises, but in the middle of all this, did he forget to get trees planted on both sides of the streets for the tired traveler?

I remembered these few facts (also that he had set up hospitals) about Ashoka from my history lessons in school, and I liked the direction our discussion was taking – conveyed my complete agreement to his views by vigorously nodding my head. You're right, people these days can do longer think about others. Everyone is bothered only about himself, or maybe only about a certain little specific thing about himself, he is insincere about everything else – right from the peon in the office to the minister – each and every one of them. Take my own case, for example, the professor wiped his neck with his already soaked handkerchief, there was a stream flowing by his neck – nowadays, my only worry is my promotion – other things I think of only mechanically – my promotion is the only thing I think about, sleeping or walking, Yes I said, I also have a couple of pre-occupations like that, everyone else has too, maybe even this Chanawallay who seems to have forgotten the heaven and earth in his deep slumber. (We did not mention whether the dog also had some or not, there was no point in making things more complicated in this heat by going into canine –psychology). It is like my transistor, I said, knocking softly on the box under my arm – these days, it can only tune in to any other station in this world, no matter how much I turn the dial, hit it, smack it – totally indifferent. Yes, it is somewhat like that, he said, is there something wrong with the radio? Yes, it was not working, I said, and wiped my neck with a handkerchief after loosening the two top buttons of my shirt, I had given have to change a lot of parts, would cost me almost as much as a new one. In other words, it is not at the repairable stage any longer, more or less like our people. Yes it is somewhat like that, he said, once again.

Could not be repaired?? Japanese, isn't it? No, Indian, I mean made under Indian license. Oh, Indian? Say that. Otherwise there is no real reason for it to give

trouble like this. I have a sanyo.... The twentieth century is about to end, our people have not even learnt how to assemble a radio properly, he said, irritatedly. In reality, I added, our people are like bad radios themselves, the pointer on the dial of each one stuck at his own station, no matter how much you try, it cannot tune in to anywhere else, nothing emanated from it but some strange, unrecognizable sounds, Yes, you're right, after a very long time the professor gave a satisfied smile and said, each one a bad radio. Ha, ha, ha look at our literature. There are so many new and novel though-currents reaching us from all four corners of the world, but our littérateurs and writers, how much of all that have they been able to grasp and make us listen to – isn't that true? It was not like this before. (And even these things have had to be pointed out by a foreign writer) – the professor went back again to his favourable subject matter --- earlier, much before Ashoka's time, our people, our rishis and wise men, understood that one could send messages across the universe without using wires and batteries, pictures and ideas could be transmitted using a medium or energy that exists everywhere, the whole universe is filled with the vibrations of thought and action, all the ideas, pictures and happenings of the past, present and future are filled with this energy. They had tamed that force using their own will-power, corrected, modified and changed it, and by using that they had overcome the obstructions of time and space – their radio was very sensitive. On that radio they could easily catch all the thoughts of the mental world and all the sounds and pictures of the world outside. With its help, they had written the Vedas and the Vedantas, made scientific discoveries, created splendid verse and prose. Our people of today have not only forgotten how to manipulate those marvelous valve transistor-less radios, they have also lost the ability to imitate and assemble a set of the imperfect, rough and insensitive wireless machines and televisions that today, after many thousands of years, the people in the west have made. Uff, where has the bus gone off today?

Suddenly with a loud grating sound, making the air of the earth and the sky tremble, the city bus made an appearance, the driver honked loudly a few times trying to chase a cow that had suddenly appeared on the middle of the road, the ears got clogged. The dog opened his half – opened eye once disinterestedly, looked obliquely, and then closed it again. But the chanawallah did not stop snoring. Both of us got onto the bus. The conductor pulled the bell and said 'Go' and then pulled the bell again and said 'stop'. A man was running towards the bus from the end of the road, painting, shaking his open umbrella vigorously. The driver got impatient and honked again, looking out of the window I saw the chanachurwallah's head still nodding, the sound of the engine, of the bell, the horn of the bus, nothing had entered his consciousness, as if he had pulled out the plug of his radio, (I felt like saying), just then there was a soft tinkling sound –

What was that? Oh, it was the school – bell. Instantly, as if just struck by an electric shock, the chanawallah set up bolt upright and then with lightning speed put his glass chana box on his cane stand and clicked open the lid of the box. In a trice, the sleepy lazy look on his face vanished, the lifeless lines of his face came alive like magic, his dull eyes began to blaze like bright embers, his wrinkled hands came alive like the hands of an expert conjurer – and with great speed he started making little paper cones and filling them up with corn and peas and garnishing them with salt, pieces of onions, chillies and the like, and his tired lips began to quickly repeat a low chant, like some mantra. The gate of the school opened, simultaneously the dull monotonous drone rose to a gurgling pitch and a whole flock of little girls, dressed in

frocks and in mekhela – sadors, rushed forward, with peals of laughter and chatter, and surrounded the chanawallah.

So, his radio was locked at his station, I said. Yes, said the professor, and his radio is not totally useless either, what do you say? He surely knows how to get his work done. Our work is also done after all this while – somehow we have spent the time in the sun and boarded the bus – but in the meanwhile doing that our two radios tuned in to many stations. I said that his set was one-wave, ours was multi-wave.... The man who was coming running somehow scrambled onto the bus even while trying to close his umbrella and the bus started. Yes, right, the professor said, sitting down comfortably, but is his radio any worse than ours ? At least he has, in the meanwhile, done nothing unnecessary, not spent his time talking about needless things that do not interest him, whereas we..., -- the professor smiled weakly. Maybe you are right, I said, after putting the box down and looking for money in my pocket, in fact, I have unnecessarily, without any reason, lied to you. First of all, my radio tunes in to many stations, and secondly I said that this box is a transistor...

I also wanted to smile a weak smile of the quality, but the professor stopped me and said, oh, that box, and he took off his spectacles and started wiping them with his handkerchief; he said, no, no, that is nothing serious, even he had through it looked like a shop – box or something like that, he had deliberately not wanted to spoil the conversation....