

Manna

Riding the old odd-sounding moped, I was on the way to my friend's residence to collect the survey report on 'Lawless India'. "No, no, you can't skip these things," says my literature-loving friend, "We too want a picture of the present situation in your writings. What a chaotic atmosphere all around, nobody follows any rules, no law anywhere, no order either – right from a small matter to a big one, no punishment for breaking law, in fact, there's nothing called 'rule of the law' – as a result we have today terrorism and corruption as our only facts of life – this is the reality of our society today, you too live in this, write about this world, so how come you skip this very world in your writings..."

"No," I try to be polite, "That's not the thing – I mean, what I write has to be realistic. That means, if there's experience, then only I feel the writings to be right, plausible, and I read about all these things only in newspapers."

"Is that a reason? You write about space odyssey too, have you ever been to space? Leave alone space, you have not even entered a space centre, nor have you met any astronaut in your life."

"No, I have interest in space and its adventures, that's the prime thing. But I am indifferent to the lawlessness in our country, nor have I any interest in corruption or terrorism here – these are allergy to me – these are here and will be there, just like air around us and that does not necessarily make me feel like writing about air – means, there's irregularity all around, let it be, but I am a peace-loving, law-fearing and law-abiding citizen, busy with family and household works, I go to market, attend to my children, don't evade tax, don't offer any bribe, nor take any bribe, I don't encroach on other's land, don't harm and injure anybody, don't park my car in 'no parking' areas, if I see a signboard reading 'Keep to the left' then I walk along the left lane, there are also signs like 'Do not spit here', 'No smoking', etc. – alright, I won't spit or smoke – that means I have no experience of any law-breaking deeds whatsoever..."

"You don't have to have any experience. Just like you don't have to kill or rape someone beforehand to write a story on murder or rape – take for example your 'this' and 'that' stories (my friend mentions the names of two stories) where there's no question of you having a personal experience, you cannot experience everything in life, but you can still write a love story even if you don't fall in love – likewise today's dangerous and destructive situation and its poisonous atmosphere, based on them you can bring alive this situation in your writings – readers want a reflection of reality from a socially-conscious writer, that means –"

"Hah, had I been a socially-conscious writer..." I would say making a half-criminal face.

"Is there any way out by not becoming a socially-conscious man? You too live in this society, not in a vacuum – let whatever happen anywhere, let anybody do whatever they like, I am not into these things, by saying so you just can't escape without touching all these – say for example, you are saying, there's air around us, let it be, I don't feel like writing about it, no need to think about it too – that's right, but if somebody pollutes it, if you feel suffocated breathing in this very air, then don't you have to think about it? Please change your attitude. Look, last Saturday in the magazine section of the *Express*, one survey about the all-encompassing lawlessness today has come out, a number of experts well versed with the subject have contributed to the survey – please go through it, so nice, such minute analysis, such logical explanation, it's so convincing, and you'll see after reading this no longer

will you be able to neglect the thing called lawlessness in today's society – do come to my place tomorrow, I will give you the article –"

Through the disorderly and chaotic traffic, somehow I was managing to move ahead in my moped avoiding accidents – but I was not giving a thought to the survey report on 'Lawless India' – in fact, lawlessness is everywhere, roads, residences, drains, train-bus, business, courts, education, employment, administration-police, market, office, hospital, everywhere everybody is giving a damn to law – right from the office peon to the minister, in fact, the prime minister too (including the judges in courts) misuse law without thinking twice, take bribe, tell lies, make conspiracy, allow as many vile acts under their noses – these are not my subject matters, not my themes – I am being preoccupied with my own necessity, looking for a plot of a story that suits my mentality (have to submit it within 15th of this month) – of course there are a lot of plots, but I am not being able to bring it on the paper, having no idea whatsoever, a satisfactory sketch, only hoping anxiously that something would come into my mind all of a sudden, who knows maybe I would get something at an instant once I go through the survey report on 'Lawless India' – Once I reached the Bhajanka Market crossroad, all these thoughts flew away – a heavy traffic jam, add to that the uproar of the people, vehicular noise and horns, if one does not concentrate, a mishap is a must – right behind a huge row of trucks, motorcars, cycles, rickshaws, push-carts, etc., I was forced to stop my moped, because four pedestrians trying to cross the road in a dare devil manner came right in front of my moped, annoyed I applied the brakes and put my left foot down on the road, and from the corner of my eyes I felt a stick-like object moving up and down beside me – gave a close look, yes, a policeman raising one hand was asking the vehicles behind to stop and waving the baton with the other hand was hinting at something looking at me – I gave a thorough look, I understood this time, he was asking me to get down and come to the side of the road. Surprised, I got down from my moped and gently pushed the moped towards the roadside following the policeman – there's no footpath, it's the ground floor of a huge half-constructed building, there are some small shops – cassette, pharmacy, bakery, PCO, etc., lengthwise the shops have two common staircases, hurriedly I noticed some worthless-looking young boys sitting on the upper stair puffing cigarette reluctant-faced, observing the vehicles (and perhaps the girls) on the road indifferently, once I came and stood near the policeman their aloofness vanished, they all came down to the road from the stair and encircled us, their eyes filled with some joyful curiosity, I heard one of them in fact say, "What's it man, what happened?"

I asked the policeman, "Yes, please?"

The policeman once again shaking his baton and looking at me pointedly said roughly, "You will have to come to the police station (the police station was nearby) or will have to pay a fine."

"Fine? Fine for what? What did I do?"

The boys were looking at the scene in amazement, without giving heed to them the policeman continued, "You are not wearing anything on your head. Where is your 'hamlet'?"

The boys smilingly looked towards me as to what would be my reply, I too felt like when would such a golden opportunity come my way in life, and I said, "Hamlet? Only Shakespeare has got Hamlet, I don't have."

"No, no, you will have to have," the policeman said a bit excited, "Everybody should have."

"Yes, Uncle," one of the boys said looking at me, "these days, helmet is compulsory, even if you ride the pillion." I said, "Yes, I too have a cap, but today in

my hurry I couldn't put it on." The policeman said, "Cap? What kind of cap? Cap made of what?" "Made of cloth, but of sturdy cloth, just like iron, comfortable to wear in the winter -", "No, no, those caps won't do," said the policeman, over these talks one of the boys said, "You buy one, Uncle, there will be less chance of injury during accidents, otherwise you will have to cough up fine unnecessarily here and there -", "Yes, you are right," I said, "I will have to buy one," the policeman then said, "As per rules you should keep your moped in the police station, unless I realize the fine from you, today -", over which one boy uttered, "Eh, let it be, he has forgotten his cap by mistake, why stick to it, let him go -", looking at the boy I bowed my head in gratitude, then gazed at the policeman - young man, much younger than me, and said, "Look brother, people may not keep a tab on these new rules and regulations of yours, there might have been a mistake today, let it go - and you have seen me, will I drive a vehicle in supersonic speed like them (I pointed my fingers towards the boys) - with utmost precaution how I move on the road, and what accident would I cause, this vehicle of mine, it does not even have a good pick-up -", one boy then asked another, "Oh, what is this man?" Another one said, "Hero Majestic, ya, Hero Maje-sotic!" In derisive amusement a riot of laughter floated in the air (the boys might have a notion that riding something lower in grade than Hero Honda is degrading). The policeman then glanced at the boys once, thought something, looked at me in hesitation, then said, "Okay - you can go today - but you can't ride this way, either just push your moped or take it on a pushcart", "Yes, yes, okay, let him go today," said the boys and dispersing again began to climb the staircase, their faces half-unhappy, they were expecting something interesting, but nothing of that sort happened -

I waved to the boys with a smile, bowed my head in gratitude looking at the policeman; the policeman said, "But please arrange a 'hamlet' today itself -" Making an anxious face I said, "O' yes, where shall I get a hamlet here - it's available in Denmark only -"

"No, no, you will get it here only, in every shop - that one you can see, BR Traders, you will get it there -"

Pushing the moped I went back the same road to a distance, once the policeman appeared out of sight I started the vehicle, felt an unusual happiness within me - whatever I was searching for I got it, just as I was thinking 'something will come into the mind all of a sudden', an idea will come from somewhere, just that was happening, what is said 'manna from heaven' - and for those boys too the incident of my distress must have been a welcome relief of fun, the boys must have felt bored (sitting in tea stalls, stairs how long will they witness the same repeating scenes everyday), and how much would they glance at girls, the incident of this old man pushing his moped following the policeman was no doubt interestingly exceptional, where there was nothing new happening this was an 'incident' there, for the boys I and my moped were 'manna from heaven'. And now the survey report on 'Lawless India' does not have that urgent necessity, right now I myself have played the role of a lawbreaker, my direct experience, means from this lawlessness I have not been left out (be it intentionally or not), that means with this aspect of the society my consciousness is personally involved, which means I too am in fact what can be termed a 'socially conscious'... but this 'manna', that is food falling from heaven - what was that? What comes to my mind, some people were roaming in a desert hungry and thirsty, suddenly food started to fall from the sky, delicious 'manna' - but this 'manna' which suddenly fell from space for me, what is this actually, will I be able to 'eat' it -

Reaching home I quickly went through books – O' yes, almost guessed it right, an incident in the *Bible (Old Testament Book II, Exodus)*: For a long time the Israeli clan people had been slaves in Egypt; after ten epidemics, under the leadership of Moses they started exodus towards the Promised Land of Canaan. Journeying ahead they reached the shores of the Red Sea, chasing after them were the troops of Egypt's Pharaoh and a Pharaoh. But the Israelis were the 'chosen ones' by the God, so the Red Sea made way for them by splitting its water into two sides, thereafter in the return wave of water the Pharaoh and the Egyptian troops got drowned in the sea. The Israelis reaching the other shore of the sea found them amidst a dry desert, had to roam there for several years, no water to quench their thirst, no bread to ease hunger – but all of a sudden there started to fall from heaven 'manna', all delicious food – a superb divine incident –

But what was this manna? Why it is called manna, manna means what? Turned the pages of dictionary, encyclopedia whatever I got: It is called *man's ash* – sweet juice secreted from trees. It is an Arabic word, roots Hebrew '*maan-hoo*' means 'what's it?' Or '*maan*' means 'a gift, donation, boon'. (O yes, maybe the Israelis, astonished, first uttered 'what's it!', then after tasting it they might have understood it is a 'gift', a divine gift!) Juice secreted by trees like ash, birch, jhau, etc., or some mosses. It's sweet. Used in medicines too. The dictionary also says: 'Delicious food for body and mind', 'as if some gift, convenience by divine grace...'

While going all through these, I felt a kind of uneasiness in mind – Ash? Jhau? Moss? Are these found in an expansive dry desert? And if there was any oasis or something like it anywhere, how come this tree-secreted juice had fallen from the sky above? OK suppose, in the cool skies above the desert somehow there formed ice, this ice while falling to the earth mixed with this and that matter in the atmosphere transformed into sweet ice before reaching the Israelis, as if a kind of atmospheric ice-cream – but was it possible that such strange ice-cream would have fallen from the sky all those years to feed so many people?

Already my mind was engulfed in an apprehension that this 'suddenly-coming' idea of mine, my 'manna' instead of taking a concrete shape has been spreading like anything – I opened Issac Asimov's *Guide to Bible*, it is written here: 'An ancient folklore given elaborate shape later, no point to believe it to be true.'