

# Harishankar Parsai: The Master Satirist

# Translations by Vikram Singh Thakur

#### Introduction

They say justice is blind. I contend that justice is not blind, it is one-eyed – it can see only one side.

Harishankar Parsai, Crooked Lines

Among various successful vyangya (satire) writers in Hindi that include stalwarts like Bhartendu Harishchandra, Balmukund Gupt, Shrilal Shukla, Sharad Joshi, Narendra Kohli and Barsanelal Chaturvedi, perhaps the most vociferous proponent was Harishankar Parsai (1924-1995). His literary oeuvre was more eclectic than any of his contemporaries ranging from essay to anecdote, reportage to memoir, letter to newspaper column and short story to novel. Though he wrote across genres, Parsai – a committed realist – chose satire as his constant companion. In his own words, the function of satire in society is finding "absurdities, injustice, falsehood, exploitation, hypocrisy, two-facedness" and that of a satirist is "to see these, investigate them in depth, give them meaning and find reasons" (qtd. in Rachnavali-3, 3). He practiced what he preached as he explored the problems of the proletariat, critiqued the exploitative capitalist ideology, exposed various social evils, ridiculed political opportunism, and derided religious orthodoxy in his writing. Parsai never let convention dictate his pen. In fact, his challenge to literary orthodoxy led him to experiment with literary forms and genres culminating in a style that is unique to him. The present selection – "The Story of a Revolutionary", "A Divine Lunatic Mission", "A Middle-Class Dog", "Our Chacha - The Asian Flu", "Obscene Books" and "The Swine" - has been chosen across genres and themes. Though it is difficult to translate a writer like Parsai verbatim for his writing style is too Parsaiesque to be emulated, I have tried my best to remain as close to the spirit of his thought as possible. In case, I have failed, I fully take the blame on myself. If, I have been able to do justice to Parsai's writing, the credit is due to the master himself!

# 1. Middle-Class Dog

As my friend's car entered his bungalow I asked him getting down, "I hope there is no dog here!"

The friend said, "You are so afraid of dogs!"

I said, "I am not afraid of a dog in the form of a human. I can handle it. But I am quite afraid of a real dog."

I don't like houses that have dogs. If you go there the dog welcomes you by barking even before the host has. As soon as you greet your loved one the dog calls you names – "Why have you come here rascal? Is it your father's house? Get lost!"

I am not afraid of a dog bite – let it bite as many times. I am afraid of those fourteen mighty injections which the doctor pokes into your belly. Some people are more poisonous than dogs. A dog had bitten an acquaintance. I said, "Nothing will happen to him. Enquire about the dog and get it injected."

A new acquaintance had invited me home for tea. As I reached his bungalow I found a plate hanging on the gate – 'Beware of the dog!' I returned at once. He met me a few days later and complained, "You didn't come for tea the other day!"

I said, "Please excuse me! I had gone to the bungalow and found a plate hanging – 'Beware of the dog!' I had thought that the bungalow belonged to humans. But it had a dog's name plate."

By the way, some people are worse than dogs. Mark Twain has written – "If you feed a dying dog, it will not bite you. This is the basic difference between a dog and a human."

The bungalow belonged to our friends. We had to stay there for three days. As my friend rang the bell, the same sound of 'bow-vow' came from inside the mesh. I stepped back. Our host came out. He reprimanded the dog – "Tiger! Tiger!" What he meant was – "Tiger, they are not criminals. Don't be so faithful."

The dog was tied to a leash. Though he had seen that his master himself was taking us inside yet he kept on barking. Keeping myself away from him, I almost ran inside.

I realized that he was an upper-class dog. At least that's what it seemed. I respect members of upper-class very much even if it's a dog. My situation in the bungalow was quite weird. I was struck with an inferiority complex – an upper-class dog and I were in the same compound! He would look at me with disgust.

We were sitting on the lawn in the evening. The servant was walking the dog in the compound.

I noticed that two stray and rogue dogs had stood outside the gate. They were proletariat dogs. They would watch this dog intently, returned after loitering around and kept looking at it. But the dog of the bungalow would bark at them. They would get scared and moved hither thither. However, they would return and kept staring at this dog.

The host said, "It's pretty usual. Whenever my dog comes out these two dogs keep staring at him."

I said, "But he should not bark at them. He has a collar and a chain. He has all the comforts. Those stray dogs are famished. There is no comparison between them. Why does he then challenge them?"

We slept outdoors that night. The chained dog also slept on his bench nearby. Now it so happened that whenever those dogs barked around he too would bark. But why does he bark with them? He usually barks at them. When they bark in the neighbourhood he joins their voice as if assuring them that he is there with them.

I have begun to doubt his class. He is not an upper-class dog. A gentleman in my neighbourhood had two dogs. Their awe was

unparalleled. I had never heard them bark. Dogs around them would bark but they did not pay any attention. They would not even pounce when people crossed them. I might have rarely heard their low growling. They usually kept sitting or roaming around. Even if the gate was open they would not go out. They were quite awe-inspiring, arrogant and complacent.

This dog barks at the proletariat dogs but also joins their voice. He says, "I am with you." To have the deceptive upper-class awe on the one hand and to be with the proletariat in the times of trouble on the other – it is the dog's character. It is a middle-class character. He is a middle-class dog. He pretends to be an upper-class but he also barks with the proletariat.

Upon our return, the third night, we found that the dog was intimidated. Hearing our footsteps, he didn't bark but growled in a feeble voice. The street dogs were barking nearby but he did not bark with them. He growled a little and then grew weary.

I asked the host, "Your dog is very quiet today."

The host told, "He is in a bad condition today. It so happened that he went out of the gate due to the servant's negligence. Those two dogs were already out for him. Both surrounded him, chased him away, overpowered him and bit him. He is in a bad state. The servant saved him. He is dull since then and has been caressing his wounds. I will get him a shot by Dr. Shrivastava tomorrow."

I looked at the dog. He was lying wearing a pathetic expression. I guessed that it must have been like this –

He would have got out of the gate arrogantly and barked at those dogs. They would have said, "Abey! You don't recognize your class. You masquerade, wear this chain and collar, freeload, roam on the lawns and show off in front of us. But at night when we bark at some imminent danger you too are with us. You are with us in danger but would bark at us otherwise. If you are one amongst us, come out. Leave this collar and chain. Leave this comfort. Eat food from garbage or steal and eat. Wallow in dirt."

He must have barked again. At this the dogs must have pounced on him saying this – "Bloody imposter and fraud! We will destroy the false pride of your class right away."

They chased him away, dashed and bit him and made him lick the dust.

Lying silently, the dog is contemplating his true class.

## 2. The Story of a Revolutionary

He had chosen 'revolutionary' as his sobriquet. He was well educated – healthy and handsome, and had a good job. He was a rebel. Perpetually quoting Marx and Lenin he was a special devotee of Che Guevara.

He would sit in the coffee-house for long and talk endlessly. He would always be anxious about the revolution. Everything was to be turned upside down. Everything was to be changed. He had long hair and a systematically grown beard.

He would proclaim rebellion. He would look for a reason to accomplish something. He would say – "My father's generation must breathe its last soon. My father is an outright conservative, a casteist and a reactionary. A typical bourgeois. I will neither perform the *mundan* ceremony nor his *shraadha* when he dies. I will destroy all traditions. Long live Che Guevara!"

Someone said, "But your father loves you so much!"

The revolutionary would reply, "Love? Yes, every bourgeois loves in order to kill revolutionariness. Love is a conspiracy. You don't understand. My father, at the moment, is in search of a *Brahmin* with whose daughter he could marry me for a few thousand rupees. But I won't let that happen. I will not marry within my caste. I will marry a girl from a lower caste. My father would keep mourning."

The friend said, "Will you not marry if you fall in love with a girl who happens to be a *Brahmin*?"

He replied, "Never. I will break my relationship with her. No revolutionary loves or marries a girl from his own caste. I love a *Kayastha* girl. I will marry her."

One day he married the *Kayastha* girl in the court. He brought her to his city and stayed at his friend's place.

He was in a martyrizing mood. He was saying — "I broke their neck. My father must be mourning for me. My mother would be crying. Having gathered the neighbours, my father would be declaring, "The son is dead for us." He will abandon me. He will disown me from his property. I don't care. I am ready for any sacrifice. That house will be the enemy's house for me. But I will fight to the end — to the end — "

In a tensed state he would pace up and down in the verandah. He would then sit and say, "The revolution is about to arrive."

A friend of his came. He said, "Your father was asking why didn't you go home straight with your wife? He was quite calm. He was asking to get you and his daughter-in-law home."

He was roused, "Huh! Bourgeois hypocrisy! This is a conspiracy. He would call me home, create a scene, insult me and then throw me out. Why should I compromise when he has disowned me? I will rent a place and live there."

The friend said, "But he hasn't disowned you."

He said, "I know everything – I will fight."

The friend said, "What will you fight when there is no conflict?"

The revolutionary was in his 'fancy'. He was sharpening his weapons. He was drying the gunpowder. The decisive moment of the revolution was soon to arrive. I will fight bravely. I will sacrifice myself.

His best friend came the third day. He said, "Your parents are coming by taxi to take you back. There is a wedding feast this Sunday. This invitation card is being distributed."

The revolutionary banged his head. He began to sweat and turned pale. He said, "Oh! Everything is finished. My whole life's struggle has come to an end. No struggle. No revolution. I am defeated. They are coming to take me back. I wanted to fight. My revolutionariness! My revolutionariness! Oh Lady! Please get me insulted by my father. Che Guevara! Dear Che!"

His wife was clever. She had been watching his revolutionariness for some days and was laughing. She said, "Dear, shall I tell you something? You are not a revolutionary."

He asked, "No? Then what am I?"

The wife replied, "You are a bourgeois dimwit. But I love you."

### 3. Our Chacha - The Asian Flu

'Asiyai chacha' has arrived. I am referring to the 'Asian Flu'. Our ancestors have established the tradition of treating diseases as one's kith and kin. If small pox is called *maata*, it is only fair to consider flu a *chacha*, according to the rules of kinship. Incidentally, a gentleman was saying, "Only God can save them who treat diseases as their kin instead of fighting them." He is right. We have never allowed anyone to do us good. There had been many great people who were passionate to do us good but tell me if we ever let them do so? Despite our refusal, if someone doesn't agree and is hell-bent on doing us good, we even shoot such people down.

'Asiyai chacha' has come to India after touring the West this time. Our chacha had attacked Western imperialism and took away thousands of lives. O, people of the West! If you have bombs, we have diseases. Here you drop bombs on the East and there we will release a flu. As invaders, you had once brought plague, let us send flu with the Goodwill Committee. We were under the debt of your plague. We have paid it back with flu. We will send an ordinary

disease next year as interest. Accounts settled! E&EO! (Errors and Omissions Excepted.)

'Asiyai chacha' came to India from Europe. The doors are usually open here. Every disease is welcome here – atithi devo bhava! A distinguished ultranationalist was saying - "Doesn't our great motherland, the land of gods, have enough of its 'personal' diseases that it needs to import 'foreign' ones? Wheat is imported and so are diseases!" I told him - "Don't be ashamed. We will Indianize the flu." The same flu had come about three years ago as the Japanese Flu. Later on, Japan dedicated it to Asia. Japan has too much pride of the Orient. It sticks the label "Made in Asia" on its disease and spreads it throughout the world. Japan has lesser number of diseases than we have. It had a chronic disease called 'imperialism' which was wiped off in Hiroshima by a greater imperialistic antibiotic. However, it distributes rest of the diseases quite liberally. And here, in addition to the great stock of diseases that we have, we have also established factories to manufacture diseases. But we don't export them though we have begun to export mud. We exported mud worth thirty-six lakh rupees to various countries last year. I was high on patriotism for a week after reading this news. Aha! Foreigners are crazy for Indian mud. Though I have been reading the stories of nectar-rain since childhood, but eventually what got sold - mud! If we begin exporting diseases, we will be able to arrange the foreign exchange required for our Five Year Plans. I am sure that the Minster for Trade and Industry will ask none but me about the disease to be exported. I can't suggest a disease at the moment. Earlier, I could have suggested a chronic disease called 'hypocrisy' to be spread across the world. But the experts of caste-based diseases suggest that 'hypocrisy' is not a communicable disease. Its 'bacteria' keep weakening the body from inside in which they reside.

Several addictions, if not diseases, have definitely travelled abroad. It seems that Indian marijuana and hashish are quite popular in the West. We are on top in matters of addiction. There are various addictions – religious, caste based, racial and spiritual. Two of them are quite special – inferiority and superiority. You won't find such addiction of inferiority even in the most backward country. Drawing a few puffs on it causes such collective utterances – "Alas! We are

miserable; we are fallen people. Alas! We are always victimised. We are innocent and yet we are traumatized. We are very backward people." The specialty of this addiction is that its intoxication makes one feel good being victimized. It feels bad if someone says that even you have victimized. The addiction of superiority makes us rant – India is the world guru. Our forefathers had acquired all knowledge. There is nothing beyond that. The addictions of inferiority and superiority work alternately. Actually, we have never been disintoxicated!

Doctors say — Sir, this is a 'viral infection'. A virus keeps mutating its nature. There is one kind of virus this year and another one the next. I got it! A virus is like an intellectual in post-Independence India. The doctor says — "That's why it's impossible to find a permanent cure for the virus." He's right. There is no permanent cure even for an intellectual.

Then how do you treat flu? The doctor replies – "We only treat symptoms." Treating symptoms is a matter of convenience. Treat symptoms when you are unable to find the cause and cure of a disease. Lock the university down if there is a student movement. Impose section 144 if there is an agitation for food. Call a meeting of the National Unity Council if there is a riot. It's just the symptoms that are being treated. There is no need to cure the disease.

There is something called a 'broad spectrum antibiotic.' Doctors keep giving it to the patients without even bothering about the disease. It kills several kinds of infections. The most convenient thing about it is that the doctor doesn't know the disease but the treatment is in progress. There are many broad spectrum antibiotics – proposals, boards, assurances, judicial enquiries, commissions. If all of these fail, there is the Indian Penal Code. They say – "Why don't you see a specialist?" A specialist is equivalent to the name of Ram. Our ancestors believed that in the end salvation is achieved through the name of Ram. Nowadays, salvation is achieved with the intervention of a specialist – I mean that one can be relieved from this life and death cycle if a specialist tells the cause of death before one has passed away. However, how does one find a specialist all of a sudden? When I had last fallen ill, a few well-wishers had brought

some specialists and every well-wisher had wanted that I was cured by his doctor. I was in a dilemma. If I was cured by a particular doctor, the other one would get upset. I had to borrow some money from one particular well-wisher. I didn't want to upset him. So, I received treatment from his doctor. Though I did get the loan, the disease lasted quite longer. How does it matter? Even this country has been taking the medicines prescribed by its well-wishers' doctor. Out of hesitation, it can neither change the medicine nor the doctor.

People around are groaning with pain due to the flu. There are different styles of groaning. Someone's groan is like begging for mercy while someone else's is like a roar. The way Congo groans is different from Burma. In fact, Vietnam has got a unique style of groaning. Everyone groans but it should not become a habit the way it has become with us. We groan whether the steel production is high or there is a famine.

'Asiyai chacha' has made the entire world groan. My Asian pride is bursting. We have enough diseases to distribute as freebies. If there is a charitable dispensary or hospital, there is also a charitable disease-distribution center. It is producing new diseases and keeps sending them here. Not a big deal! We have released a Chinese yellow fever as a result of which the ambassadors of China and America have been trying to find its cure together in Geneva for the past ten years.

### 4. A Divine Lunatic Mission

India faces a big question now – What shall it send to America now? They have read the *Kamashastra*. They have seen yogis, saints and ascetics. Their youth has tasted *charas* and *ganja*. They have seen the Indian cobra and the Gir lion. They have also bought 'ancient' sculptures from Janpath. America has even imported spirituality and has been giving wheat in return. It has even had enough of *Hare Ram*, *Hare Krishna*!

What after Mahesh yogi, Baal Yogeshvar, Baal Bhogeshvar, etc.? I am a patriot. But I also understand the American generation. I know that an American belongs to a 'bored' society. He is quite a

bore. His shares automatically give him dollars. A television set and bottles of liquor are available at home. He says, "How do you do?" in the evening to a few people. But these are no cure for boredom. America may drop as many bombs in Hanoi but it doesn't excite him. He needs something. He needs it only from India.

I am equally worried about Indians as I am about Americans. Even they want something.

Now, for dollars and rupees, what shall we, Indians, take there? They have got bored of Ravishankar. Enough of yogis and saints too. Now they want something new— to kill their boredom and to excite them. They are ready to pay dollars.

My humble suggestion is that we take a "Divine Lunatic Mission" this time. Such a mission has never gone before. It will be unique - a "Divine Lunatic Mission" from India.

I know that an average American would say – "We have seen one. His name is Krishna Menon." Our agents will the reply – He was neither 'divine' nor a 'lunatic'. Real spiritual lunatics are coming from India this time.

I know that spiritual missions often indulge in 'smuggling'. The Indian government and the masses don't know that people are even smuggled in 'heaven.' This happens from the Department of Spirituality. In a great country like India when somebody can destroy an entire village in Gujarat by distributing holy water, isn't he capable of 'smuggling' an American into heaven?

Smuggling may be of goods and spirituality too. Let somebody with a grown beard go to America with a *chela* and say, "I am one thousand years old. I had been meditating in the Himalayas for a few thousand years. I have talked with the God a few times." The believer, yet doubtful, American would ask the *chela* – "Is your guru speaking the truth? Is he actually one thousand years old?" The *chela* would reply, "I can't be sure as I have been with him only for the past five hundred years."

This means that the *chela* himself is five hundred years old and can establish his own company.

Even I think that most Indian stuff has been already exported to America – the *Kamashastra*, spirituality, yogis, saints, etc.

We can now send just one thing to America – an 'Indian spiritual lunatic'. Hence, I suggest to establish the "Indian Divine Lunatic Mission" at the earliest. I know that there are more important people than myself in this country. However, I too want to contribute in the service of India and in lessening the boredom of my big brother America. By the way, I know that even after chanting "Hare Krishna Hare Rama" for thousands of years, one still doesn't get sugar from the co-operative shop but in the black market – so what would these Americans get by singing the Rama-Krishna bhajan? However, the members of a rich and degenerate society have their own ways of finding peace and relief – and if they find these in India, it only furthers India's pride. By the way, Bertrand Russell has said – The American society has gone directly from barbarism to total degeneration – it hasn't crossed the stage of civilization. It has missed out on a step.

What do I even care for Russell? I am only interested in establishing a new international business — "Divine Lunatic Mission". The lunatics of the world are just lunatics — the lunatics of India are spiritual.

I want to establish a "Divine Lunatic Mission." Its members can only be those who have never stayed in an asylum. We need lunatics outside the asylum – those who can act like lunatics. It's easy to act like a yogi. Even to act like the God is simple. But, it's very difficult to act like a lunatic. I am in search of talented people. I have a few professors in mind whom I have been appealing to join the mission.

The mission will be established for sure. Our agency will advertise in America – See real Indian divine lunatics. Our arrival at the New York airport will be reported in newspapers. Television channels would be ready to roll.

Mrs. Robert will ask Mrs. Simpson, "Have you seen a real divine Indian lunatic?"

Mrs. Simpson will reply, "No! Is there one in this country 'under God'?

Mrs. Robert will say, "Yes, a Divine Lunatic Mission of Indians is reaching New York tomorrow. Come on, we will watch it. It will be a real spiritual experience."

There will be thousands of men and women at the New York airport to have a *darshan* of our Indian Divine Lunatic Mission – it will relieve them of their routine boredom. We will be welcomed. They will garland us. There will be great arrangements for our stay.

And then we will hold our programme of lunatic spiritualism. Each non-lunatic will have been already trained to act like a real one.

The entry fees would be 50 dollars and thousands of Americans will spend thousands of dollars to watch 'Indian divine lunatics.'

Our business would flourish. Being the chair of the mission, I would deliver a speech: "We are real Indian divine lunatics. Our saints and sages, thousand years ago, said that the way to real internal peace and salvation lies through lunacy.".

After that my fellow lunatics will perform various acts of lunacy and dollars will pour.

Those who are interested in joining this mission may please contact me. The condition is that they must not be real lunatics. The real lunatics will not be included in this mission – the way real saints are never included in the class of saints.

After our return from America, there will be a great welcome for us at the Ramleela grounds or the Red Fort in Delhi. I will try that the Prime Minister inaugurates the event. In case she is busy, we will get plenty of politicians meditating in the political exile.

We will have full support of the 'smugglers' of Delhi.

We are also in conversation with the Customs and the Enforcement Department. We are hopeful that they too will contribute towards spirituality.

The welcome event would claim, "This is another victory of the Indian spirituality that our spiritual lunatics are coming back after delivering the message of peace and salvation to the world. We hope that this tradition of spiritual lunacy keeps growing forever in the country."

The "Divine Lunatic Mission" must go to America. When our political relations with them are improving, it is imperative that the mission of the lunatics go.

#### 5. Obscene Books

There was an uproar in the city that obscene literature was being promoted a lot. News and letters from citizens were published in newspapers that obscene books were being sold openly on the roadsides.

Around ten spirited young social reformers formed a gang and decided that they would confiscate such literature wherever they found and burn it publicly.

They raided a shop and got hold of some twenty-five obscene books. Each one had two-three books. The chief said – "We are late today. We will inform the newspaper tomorrow evening and burn these publicly the day after. The propaganda will also impact other people. Let's meet at my place tomorrow evening. I cannot take all these books home together. They are around twenty-five. My father and uncle are home. If they see these it will create a problem. You hide these two-three books and take them home. Bring them tomorrow."

The next evening all of them met but none had brought the books. The chief said – "Give me the books so that I can hide them in this bag. We can then take the bag to the venue for burning them tomorrow."

None had brought the books.

One of them said – "Not tomorrow. Burn them the day after. Let's read them first."

Another said – "We are reading the books at the moment. Let's burn them after two-three days. We have confiscated them in any case."

The programme to burn the books could not materialize that day. It was decided to meet the third day along with the books.

None had got the books the third day.

One of them said – "Arre yaar! My father laid his hands on the books. He is reading them."

Another said – "I will bring once my uncle finishes reading them."

The third one said – "Bhabhi took them away and told that she would return them after reading in two-three days."

The fourth one said – "Arre! An auntie from the neighbourhood picked them up in my absence. We will burn them once she has read them in two-three days."

The obscene books were never burnt. They are now being read in a more organized way.

### 6. The Swine

I took Chaubeji to Pandeji's house.

The marriage proposal of Chaubeji's son and Pandeji's daughter was being discussed. We were sitting in the verandah of Pandeji's house. The girl had served snacks. Chaubeji had seen her. It was Pandeji's paternal house and was in the old neighbourhood of the town. The locality was dirty. Heaps of filth was visible from the verandah. Sounders of swines were loitering around.

Chaubeji was watching this and was feeling retched. He said – Horrible! Swines loiter around your house like this!

I was to carry on the rest of the conversation. We returned. I met Chaubeji after two-three days. He said – Look! The girl is very good. But Pande's house is at a very filthy place. Pigs loiter around his house. Horrible!

I said – But what have you got to do with that house? You just have to get the girl married.

Chaubeji said – But will my son not go to his in-laws'? Or will I not keep any relation with them? I hate pigs. I am feeling retched on merely imagining that house.

I said – Do think. The girl is very nice. The family is good.

Chaubeji said – I agree with that. What if I reach their place with the marriage procession and start vomiting? Those pigs! I cannot tolerate them.

I said – By the way Pande will pay well.

Chaubeji asked – How much? Ten-fifteen thousand?

I said – No. Fifty thousand and jewellery. He has just one child.

Chaubeji began to think. It took him some time to return from the pig to money. After some more talk he said – If you are forcing so much then let's fix the match.

Chaubeji reached Pandeji's house with a splendid marriage procession.

Fifteen thousand rupees were offered at the gate.

Chaubeji was sitting under the canopy. His eyes were fixed where the rituals were taking place. He was waiting that thirty five thousand in a tray would be on his way.

Meanwhile a piglet barged in. Two-three men began to chase it away. Someone hit it with a stick. The frightened piglet lost its way. It was unable to find its way. It moved towards Chaubeji. People were chasing it. Chaubeji said -Arre! Don't bother it. Piglets are so beautiful. Very Sweet!

And Chaubeji started caressing the piglet. In the meanwhile thirty-five thousand rupees arrived in a tray.

The piglet was standing so satisfied as if it was with its own father.

### **Works Cited**

Parsai, Harishankar. Parsai Rachnavali 3. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2005.