

## ASHWA THAMA

Man's life is the crowning glory of the entire 'creation'. Even the gods have made use of the gross in order to attain the supreme bliss or 'Bramha tatva', and whenever the need has arisen Ishwar has also assumed human forms. Human life is that result of good sanskaras.

Since - times, immemorial, Himalayas has been the abode of great yogis, sages and Mahatamas. Thousands of years old, Saints, still live in the serene precincts of the lofty Himalayas. During my wanderings, I came across these lofty souls, fortunately I could spend some time in their gracious company and benefit from their wisdom. With my readers, I wish to share my rich experiences, so that they may also redesign the structure of life.

One day, I began the 'parikrama' of the pious river Narmada, 'Pahari Baba' gave me company during the Parikrama of the holy river. There are interesting tales and myths about the river 'Narmada', which have enhanced its religious importance. After walking for some time we came across a dense forest, overgrown, with 'sulfan' trees. The 'Bhilas' are native inhabitants of the forest. These tribals are not insignificant people, but have a long history of notoriety which cannot be ignored. The tribals always looted the pilgrims who happened to travel via the forests. But, whenever they spotted the gypsies they displayed an amazing dis-interest.

We were dressed only in our 'Kopins' when we entered the notorious forest. Some of the tribals spotted us and began to make strange noises. The noises were meant as a signal to invite the attention of their kins. All the noise and confusion could not deter us, and we continued to march ahead. Shortly, we surrounded by hordes of tribals who came towards us menacingly. We were carrying only two bundles which contained some Neem leaves and little, Vibhuti power. The tribals, roughly snatched our meagre belongings and eagerly opened the bundles. But, when they saw the strange contents, their Behaviour under went a remarkable change. After a hurried consultation in soft tones, they signalled us to follow them. We did, as we were told, and very soon found ourselves in front of a couple of huts. We accepted their hospitality and went inside one of the huts. Its interior was neat and orderly. First, they made us sit on mats made from dry leaves, and then they lit a 'Dhuni'. They also gave us to eat a couple of grass chappatis with some fresh honey. We broke the chappatis in small pieces, mixed them with honey and offered to our gentle hosts. We, also ate some portion of their native meal. The tribals were very happy to have us amongst them. They built a small hut for us and collected fruits and edible roots for us to eat. The tribals looked after us with a rare devotion. Though they were considered wild, yet they had a discipline of their own. And no one ever dared to break the rules. Their obedience towards their chief was total. They never questioned his authority on the contrary they almost worshipped him. "Shiva" was their deity. In the morning they either looted unsuspecting passengers or hunted animals. Every morning and evening they came to us in hundreds and sat with apparent devotion. Sometimes, they danced the entire night in a spirit of gay abandon, But, surprisingly enough they celebrated their festival day without any activity. Generally, a majority of 'Bhilas' men and women covered their bodies in mat like pieces. These pieces were either made from dry leaves or bark of trees, still, there were some who preferred to dress in the stolen clothes.

One particular man, who came with the tribals, had a commanding disposition. He was always dressed in yellow, and looked different from the other tribals. We wanted to talk to him, but before we could make any move, he used to walk away from our place.

One day, while we were resting in the premises of Sulpaneshwar Mahadeva Mandir, my eyes got locked into the eyes of that extraordinary being. He looked young and had an admirable height and long arms. He had a sharp moustache and his eyes had a fire like brilliance. He looked composed and had a celestial bearing. His forehead was covered by the characteristic yellow cloth. When I began, to whisper into 'Pahari Baba's ears about the 'special' 'Bhila' he gave a knowing smile and left that place. But my curiosity regarding the 'Bhila' was so overpowering, that I also got up from my place and began to follow him. When the tribals saw me following the magnificent figure, they also joined me. The 'Bhila' turned around and requested us to leave. Since I had reached quite close to him, I caught his feet and burst out beseechingly - "Who ever you are, I want your introduction, whether we are complete or incomplete, we look up to your guidance. Your lofty personality tells us that you do not belong to this age. With great humility I want to surrender myself at your feet. Please reveal your

identity : I want to know whether my guess regarding your identity is right or wrong. The bhilas were infuriated at my act and began to protest, excitedly. The civilised looking 'Bhila' was their revered one and during the festival of 'Shiva Ratri' they worshipped him along with Lord Shiva.

The great Bhila gestured to the crowd to stop and then gathered me affectionately in his arms. He said, " Kapil: I am Acharya Dronacharya's son Ashwathama. I was the senapati ( the chief warrior) during the days of the historical Mahabarat. Those days have become a history, but , I still live in the past. This temple is my residence and these Bhilas are my companions. Once in a while I go to the Himalayas to meet " Kripa Charya' and Vidhur. But most of the times I involve myself in the activities of the tribemen. For us, time has become stand still , Ironically enough we are moving ahead of time common man is trying to keep pace with time, whereas with us the opposite phenomenon, is occurring, time is trying to keep pace with us. Sulpaneshwar becomes a small Himalayas, whenever great souls like Kripa Charya and Vidhur visit this place. An occasional encounter with Gorakhnathji turns out to be a blessing. In his company we evoke the past of 'Bramhand' and watched with rapt attention the Jeevas repeated cycles of birth and death. We are changeless. Life has come to terms with us and we have come to terms with life. We are well acquainted with 'past' 'present' and 'future'. Though we are aware of the three states of 'Time' 'past' 'present' and future, we cannot do anything. This is because we are not what we used to be in the past"

When Ashwathama removed his head gear a bunch of unruly curls tumbled on his forehead. A strange light lurked in the deep wound mark which was in the centre of his impressive forehead. In a reflective mood Ashwathama again said ' - " Due to the appearance of this gem on my forehead all my war tactics and divine potential have come to an end. All these powers have forsaken me. But in return I have received the boon of immortality, which could not be taken away by Lord Krishna and Pandavas . Since then I have been living on the face of the earth. When I watch my contemporaries in the yonis of animals, birds and snakes I began to ponder the helpless dependence of ' man'. In the ' human yoni' man in his ignorance does certain acts which force him to become birds and animals in the next birth. Consequently he is caught in the endless, vicious cycle of birth and death.

Since I am not entangled in this mesh, I have reached a level where ' time has become still. Even in the past I have never given guidance to anyone. So, in the present I am not inclined towards any guidance and sermons. Today, I am totally immersed in Shiva's Aradhana and do not bother about anything else'.

We spent about six months in the company of the exalted being ' Ashwathama'. We used to go on long tours and move around as common men. During my stay, I discovered how a man who is thousands of years old can remain unaffected by the ways of the society in which he is living. In the company of the great soul how time flew away we did not know. One day the 'great man' blessed us, bade us farewell and disappeared. Before departing he uttered these words - you go ahead with your journey now. We were suppose to be together only for this allotted period.

After this brief interlude, we proceeded on the 'Parikrama' of the Narmada river. On the way we met a young saint who was also on the similar mission. One morning while we were having a dip in the river, a huge snake crept towards us. Our first reaction was to run away. But something held us back. When I looked into the eyes of the venomous snake, it covered momentarily but his next move was totally unexpected. Instead of slithering away it came to us with a threatening speed and threw us out of gear. Pahari Baba sought refuge in the waters and the young saint picked a huge stone with intention of killing the snake. But before he could strike a lethal blow, the snake bit him. Dharmanand became unconscious and fell on the ground. The snake glided away to a distant rock and returned to his former watchful position.

Pahari Baba tried his best to revive the unconscious Dharmanand. But his efforts proved ineffective. In a fit of fury he rushed to kill the snake. The snake remained unmoved by the menacing form of 'Pahari Baba' And, before Pahari Baba could crush it, it transformed into an aged saint. The old man with folded hands began " Pahari Baba spit your anger. I am none other than Awadhoot Baba- I belong to Varmdeshwar - I for the last twenty five years, I have been waiting for "Dharmanand" . Finally, today my patient waiting has borne fruit. Now Dharmanand is liberated from his crimes. Hence onwards he can wander in the state. I request you not to take any action in this matter because every thing will be futile". With these revealing words the old man once again returned to the guise of snake and hid itself amidst the cluster of stones.

I tried my best to dissuade, Pahari Baba from taking Dharmanand's unconscious form to the other side of the river, but all my pleas fell on deaf ears. Pahari Baba lowered Dharmanand in a boat and rowed him across the river. By this act he unknowingly broke his 'Parikrama'. The doctors tried their best to save Dharmanand's life, but failed. Even Pahari Baba's indigineous methods could not bring Dharmanand back to life. All these days, while I awaited Pahari Baba's return, Avadhoot Baba brought food for me.

One afternoon, while we were basking in the sun, Avadhoot Baba spotted the floating corpse of Dharmanand. Overcome with excitement, he discarded the body of the snake and entered the physical form of Dharmanand. But before leaving he told me to throw the snakes body in the water since it was no longer useful to him, I did as I was told.

Pahari Baba was dumb founded, he simply blinked with disbelief to see dead Dharmanand coming out of the waters. When Pahari Baba looked at me inquiringly I told him about Avdhoot Baba and how he had made use of Dharmanand's body. Dharmanand's episode had broken Pahari Baba's Parikrama. So, there was no choice left but to go on seperate paths, because I still had to finish my parikrama.