

BARBER'S TRADE UNION- MULK RAJ ANAND

Among the makers of modern India, Chandu, the barber boy of our village, has a place which will be denied him unless I press for the recognition of his contribution to history. Chandu's peculiar claim to recognition rested, to tell the truth, on an exploit of which he did not know the full significance. But then, unlike most great men of India today, he had a very exaggerated notion of his own importance, though he shared with them a certain native egotism which was sometimes disconcerting and sometimes rather charming.

I knew Chandu ever since the days when he wore a piece of rag in the middle of his naked distended-bellied body, and when we wallowed together in the mire of the village lanes, playing at soldiering, shop keeping, or clerking and other little games which we invented for the delectation of our two selves and our mothers, who alone of all the elders condensed to notice us.

Chandu was my senior by about six months, and he always took the lead in all matters. And I willingly followed, because truly he was a genius at catching wasps, and at pressing the poison out of their tails, at tying their tiny legs to cotton thread and flying them, while I always got stung on the cheeks if I dared to go anywhere near the platform of the village well where these insects settled on the puddles to drink water.

When we grew up he still seemed to me the embodiment of perfection, because he could make and fly paper kites of such delicate design and of such balance as I could never achieve.

To be sure, he was not so good at doing sums at school as I, perhaps because his father apprenticed him early to the hereditary profession of the barber's caste and sent him out hair-cutting in the village, and he had no time for the home tasks which our school master gave us. But he was better than I at reciting poetry, any day, for not only did he remember by rote the verses in the text-book, but he could repeat the endless pages of prose in that book so that they seemed like poetry.

My mother resented the fact that Chandu won a scholarship at school while I had to pay fee to be taught. And she constantly dissuaded me from playing with him, saying that Chandu was a low-caste barber's son and that I ought to keep up the status of my caste and class. But whatever innate ideas I had inherited from my forefathers I certainly hadn't inherited any sense of superiority. Indeed, I was always rather ashamed of the red caste mark which my mother put on my forehead every morning, and of the formalized pattern of the *uchkin*, the tight cotton trousers, the gold-worked shoes and the silk turban in which I dressed: and I longed for the right to wear all the spectacular conglomeration of clothes which Chandu wore—a pair of khaki shorts which the retired subedar had given him, a frayed black velvet waistcoat, decorated all over with shell buttons, and a round felt cap which had once belonged to Lalla Hukam Chand, the lawyer of our village..

And I envied Chandu the freedom of movement which he enjoyed after his father died of plague. For then he would do the round of shaving and hair-cutting at the houses of the high-caste notables in the morning, bathe and dress, and then steal a ride to town, six miles away, on the foot-rest of the closed carriage in which Lalla Hukam Chand Travelled to town.

But Chandu was kind to me. he Knew that I was seldom taken to town, and that I had to trudge three weary miles to a secondary school in the big village of jodiala with the fear of God in my heart, while he had been completely absolved from the ordeal of being flogged by cruel masters as he had left school after his father's death. So he always brought me some gift or other from the town—a paint brush, or gold ink, or white chalk, or a double-edged penknife to sharpen

pencils, and he would entertain me with long merry descriptions of the variety of things he saw in the bazaars of civilization. He was particularly detailed in his description of the wonderful English styles in clothes which he saw the sahibs and the lawyers, the chaprasis and the policemen wearing at the District Court, where he had to wait for the journey home at the back of Lalla Hukam Chand's phaeton. And, once or twice, he expressed to me a secret wish he had to steal some money from the pitcher where his mother kept the emoluments of his professional skill, to buy himself a rig-out like that of Kalan Khan, the dentist, who, he said, performed miracles in the town, fitting people with rows of teeth and new eyes. He described to me the appearance of Kalan Khan, a young man with hair parted on one side, and dressed in a starched shirt, with an ivory collar and bow tie, a black coat and striped trousers, and a wonderful rubber overcoat and pumps. And he recounted to me the skill with which this magician unpacked an Angrezi leather hand-bag and flourished his shining steel instruments.

Then he asked my advice on the question of whether as a barber educated to the fifth primary class, he would not look more dignified if he, too, wore a dress in the style of Dr. Kalan Khan 'for though I am not a highly educated doctor,' he said, I learnt how to treat pimples, boils and cuts on people's bodies from my father, who learnt from his father before him.'

I agreed with his project and encouraged him with the enthusiasm I felt for everything that my hero thought or did.

One day I was thrilled to find Chandu at the door of my house in the morning. He was dressed up in a white turban, a white rubber coat (a little too big for him, but nevertheless very splendid), a pair of pumps in which I could see my face reflected in clear silhouette, and he had a leather bag in his hand he was setting off on his round and had come to show grand he looked in his new rig-out.

'Marvellous!' I said, 'Marvellous!'

And he rushed off towards the house of the landlord, whom he shaved every morning, myself following admiringly behind.

There were not many people in the street at this time, so I alone witnessed the glory of Chandu, dressed up as a doctor, except, of course, that he himself seemed rather self-conscious as he strutted up the street, carefully avoiding the taint of cow-dung cakes which the village women stuck to walls, and the dirty water flowed through the drains. But as we entered the home of the landlord we met Devi, the landlord's little son, who clapped his hands with joy and shouted to announce the coming of Chandu, the barber, in a beautiful heroic dress like that of the padre sahib of the Mission School.

'Ram! Ram! Ram!' said Bijay Chand, the burly landlord, touching the sacred thread which hung over his ear since he had just been to the lavatory. The son of a pig! He is bringing a leather bag of cow-hide into our house and a coat of the marrow of, I don't know, some other animals and those evil black Angrezi shoes. Get out! Get out! You son of a devil! You will defile my religion. I suppose you have no fear of anyone now that your father is dead.'

'But I am wearing the clothes of a doctor, Jagirdar sahib.' Said Chandu.

'Go away you swine, go away and wear clothes befitting your low status as a barber, and don't let me see you practicing any of your newfangled nations, or else I will have you flogged.'

'but Raj Bijay Chand Sahib!' Chandu appealed.

'Get away! get away! You useless one!' the landlord shouted.

'Don't come any nearer, or we will have to treat the whole house with the sacred cow-dung to purify it.'

Chandu returned. His face was flushed. He was completely taken aback. He did not look at me

because of the shame he felt at being insulted before of Thanu Ram, the Sahukar village, who kept a grocer's store at the corner of the lane.

Devi, the landlord's son had begun to cry at this father's words, and I stopped to question him. When I got to the end of the lane I saw the Sahukar with one end of the scale which he had been weighing grain lifted in one hand abusing Chandu in the foulest way. You Little swine, you go disguising Chandu in the Foulest you ought to be bearing responsibilities and looking after your old mother. You go wearing the defiled clothes of the hospital folk! Go and come back in your own clothes! Then I shall let you cut my hair!' And as he said so he felt for the ritual tuft Knot on top of his head.

Chandu looked very crestfallen, and ran in a wild rage past past me, as if I had been responsible for these mishaps. And I nearly cried to think that he hated me naow just because I belonged to a superior caste.

'Go to Pandit Parmanand!' I shouted after him,' and tell him that these garments you are wearing not unclean.

'Ho, so you are in league with him,' said Pandit Parmanand, emerging from the landlor's home, where he had been apparently summoned to discuss this unholy emergency. You boys have been spoiled by the school education which you have got. It may be all right for you to wear those things because you are going to be a learned man, but what right has that low-caste boy to such apparel? He has go to touch our beards, our head and our hands. He is defiled enough by God. Why does he want to become more defiled? You are a high- caste boy. And he is a low -caste devil! He is a rogue!

Chandu had heard this. He did not look back and ran in a flurry, as if he were set on some purpose which occupied him more than the abuse which had been the cause of his flight.

My mother called to me and said it was time for me to eat and go to school, or I should be late. And she could not resist the temptation to lecture me again about my associating with the barber boy.

But I was very disturbed about Chandu's fate all day, and on my way back from school, I called in at the hovel where he lived with his mother.

His mother was well known for a cantankerous old woman, because she, low-caste women, dared to see the upper caste people as they never dared to see themselves. She was always very kind to me, though she spoke to me too in a bantering manner,

Which she had acquired though the suffering and humiliations of sixty-odd years. Turning to me she said: 'Well, you have come, have you, to look for your friend. if your mother knew have come, were here she would scratch my eyes out for casting my evil eye on your sweet face. And you, are you as innocent as you look or are you a sneaking little hypocrite like the rest of your lot?'

'Where is Chandu, Then, mother?' I said.

'I don't know, son,' she said, now in a sincere simple manner.

'He went up town way and says he earned some money shaving people on the roadside. I don't know what he is up to. I don't think he ought to annoy the clients his father served. He is a child and gets funny notions into his head and they ought not to be angry with him. he is only a boy. you want to see him and go out playing, I suppose. very well tell him when he comes. He has just gone up the road, I think.'

'All right, mother,' I said, and went home.

Chandu Whistled for me that afternoon in the usual code whistle which we had arranged to evade the reproaches of interfering elders that our association often provoked.

‘Come for a walk to the bazaar,’ he said. ‘I want to talk to you.’ And hardly had I joined him when he began: ‘Do you know, I earned a rupee shaving and hair-cutting near the court this morning? if hadn’t had to come back to on the back bar of Hukam Chand’s carriage early in the afternoon I should have earned more. But I am going to teach these orthodox idiots a lesson. I am going on strike. I shall not go to their houses to attend to them. I am going to buy a Japanese bicycle from the gambling son of Lalla Hukam Chand for five rupees, and I shall learn to ride it and I will go to town on it every day. Won’t I look grand, riding on a bicycle, with my overcoat, my black leather shoes, and a white turban on my head, especially as there is a peg in front of the two-wheeled carriage for hanging my tool-bag?’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, greatly thrilled, not because I imagined the glory of Chandu seated on a bicycle, but because I felt myself nearer the goal of my own ambition; since I felt that if Chandu acquired a bicycle he would at least let me ride to town on the elongated bolt at the back wheel or on the front bar, if he didn’t let me learn to ride myself and lend me the machine every now and then.

Chandu negotiated the deal about the bicycle with an assurance that seemed to me a revelation of his capacity for business such as I had never suspected in him, from the reckless way he spent his money. And then he said to me in a confidential voice: ‘You wait for another day or two. I shall show you something which will make you laugh as you have never laughed before.’

‘Tell me now,’ I insisted, with an impatience sharpened by the rhythm of the excitement with which the spirit of his adventure filled my being.

‘No, you wait,’ he said. I can only give you a hint at the moment. It is a secret that only a barber can know. Now let me get on with the job of learning to handle this machine. You hold it while I get on it, and I think it will be all right.’

‘But,’ I said, ‘this is not the way to learn to ride a bicycle. My father learned to ride from the peg at the back, and my brother learnt to ride by first trying to balance on the pedal.’

‘Your father is a top-heavy baboon,’ said Chandu. ‘And your brother is a long-legged spider.’ ‘I,’ he continued, ‘was born, my mother tells me, upside down.’

‘All right,’ I said. And I held the bicycle for him. But while my gaze concentrated with admiration on the brilliant sheen of the polished bars, I lost my grip and Chandu fell on the other side with a thud, along with the machine.

There were peals of laughter from the stop of the shahukar, where several peasants congregated round the figure of the landlord. And then the shahukar could be heard shouting: ‘serve you right, you rascally son of the iron age! Break your bones and die, you upstart! You won’t come to your senses otherwise!’

Chandu hung his head with shame, and muttered an oath at me, ‘you fool you are no good!’ though I had thought that he would grip me by the neck and give me a good thrashing for being the cause of his discomfiture. Then he looked at me, smiled embarrassedly, and said: ‘we will see who has the last laugh, I or they.’

‘I will hold the machine tightly this time,’ I said earnestly, and I picked it up from where it lay.

‘Yes, break your bones, you swine,’ came the landlord’s call.

‘Don’t you care!’ Chandu said to me. ‘I will show them.’ And he mounted the bicycle as I exerted all my strength to hold it tight.

Then he said: ‘Let go!’

I released my grip.

He had pressed the pedal with a downward pressure of his right foot, hard, and, as the wheels revolved, he swayed dangerously to one side. But he had pushed the other pedal now. The machine balanced, inclining to the right a little, so that I saw Chandu lift his rump from the saddle in the most frightening manner. He hung precariously for a moment his handles wobbled dangerously. He was tottering. At this juncture a mixed noise of laughter and sarcasm arose from the congregation at the shop and I thought that Chandu would come to grief with this confusion, if not on account of his utter incapacity. By a curious miracle, however, Chandu's feet had got into the right rhythm for pedaling and his handle had adjusted itself to his stiff hands, and he rode off with me running behind him, bursting myself with enthusiastic 'shabashes.'

A half a mile run and he repeated the trick.

Thought I was very eager to share the joy of his newly acquired skill, I didn't see Chandu the next day, as I was being taken to see my aunts in Verka, straight from school.

But on the third day he called for me and said that he would show me the joke he had talked of the other day. I followed quickly, asking the while: 'Tell me, what is it all about?' 'Look,' he said, hiding behind the oven of the village potter. 'Do you see the congregation of who's there.'

I explored the various faces and, for moment, I was quite baffled.

'Only the peasants sitting round waiting for the landrod,' said.

'Look again, idiot,' he said, 'and see. The landlord is there, his long-jawed face dirtied by the white scum of his unshaved beard.'

'Ha! Ha!' I shouted hilariously, struck by the contradiction of the big thick moustache (Which I knew the landlord Dyed) with the prickly white bush on his jowls. 'Ha! Ha! I roared a sick lion! He looks seedy!'

'Sh!' warned Chandu. 'Don't make a row! But look at the Sahukar. He looks like a leper with the brown tinge of tobacco on his walrus moustache which I once used to trim. Now you run past the stop and call "beavers, beavers". They can't say anything to you!'

I was too impetuous a disciple of the impish Chandu to wait to Deliberate.

'Beavers! Beavers! Beavers!' I shouted as I ran past the shop to the edge of the platform by the banyan tree.

The peasants who were gathered round the shop burst out laughing, as they had apparently been itching to, for they had noticed the strong growths on the elders' faces, though they had not dared to say anything.

'Catch him, catch him, the little rogue! Shouted the sahukar.

'He is in league with that barber boy, Chandu.'

But, of course I had climbed up the banyan tree, from which I jumped on to the wall of the temple and shouted my slogan at the priest.

The rumour about the barber boy's strike spread, and jokes about the unkempt beards of the elders of the village become current in every home. Even those who were of high castes, even the members of the families of the elders, began to giggle with laughter at the shabby appearance of the great ones and made rude remarks about their persons. And it was said that at least the landlord's wife threatened to run away with somebody, because, being younger than her husband by twenty years, she had born with him as long as he kept himself in trim, but was now disgusted with him beyond the limits of reconciliation.

Chandu did good business in town during these days and saved money, even though he bought new clothes and new tools for himself and gave me various presents.

The village elders threatened to have him sent to prison for his offences, and ordered his

mother to force him to obey before they committed him to the police for a breach of the peace.

But Chandu's mother had for the first time in her life touched the edge of prosperity, and she told them all what she thought of them in a language even plainer than that in which she had always addressed them.

Then they thought of getting the barber of Verka to come and attend them, and offered him an anna instead of the two pice they had usually paid to Chandu.

Chandu, however, had conceived a new notion this time, newer than those he had ever thought of before. Having seen the shop of Nringan Das, the barber of the town, he had applied his brain to the scheme of opening a shop on the wayside at the head of the bazaar Dhunoo and the other barbers within a range of seven miles with Dhunoo and the other barbers within range of seven miles from his village. He proposed his new idea to his cousin and Dhunoo and all the other barbers at a special meeting of his craft, and by that gift of the gab which he had, besides his other qualities of head and heart, he convinced them all that it was time that they should dance attendance upon their lords and masters.

'Rajkot District Barber Brothers' Hairdressing and Shaving Saloon' has been followed by many other Active Trade Unions of working men in our parts.