

The Point Beyond The Limit

THEY all had to give up and returned totally defeated. Finally, Satinath himself decided to appear on the scene on the third floor of the house. He was annoyed and said sharply : “Chobi, there ought to be a limit even to bad manners. Yes, I think there must be a limit. But there has been no limit to the exhibition of bad manners and discourtesy to which you have treated us, in front of a house full of wedding guests. You made me appear less than dust in front of all these friends and relations, and also made a fool of yourself! Now have mercy on all of us and come with me.”

They did not have a sanction from the corporation for an extra room on the roof, yet this room with a tiled roof had been specially built for Chobi. Only a few slanting rays of light coming from the decorated, well-lit pandal below dimly lighted up the dark room. Chobi was standing at the door of her room. One could see only a few fingers and one side of her face. But the expression on her face was not quite visible. One could not see whether the expression on her face was hard as before or whether it had mellowed a little. If she retained the earlier expression even after Satinath himself had come to fetch her, then one would have to concede that, like her husband, Chobi must have gone mad.

But then one could not tell quite definitely. Chobi spoke in a strange, dry voice : “Dada, why did you take the trouble to climb the steps ? I have already said that...”

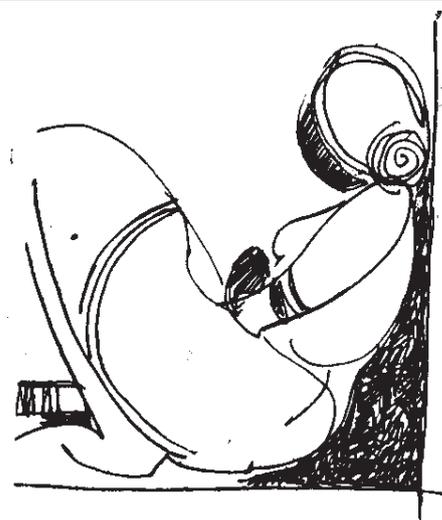
“Yes, I know,” Satinath’s voice was hurt and angry, “I know that each member of the family has come to beg of you, and that you have turned away each one of them, by saying that you will not have your dinner, you will not come downstairs. I

understand your sister-in-law came to you with folded hands, but even then...”

Chobi’s face was not clearly visible. If Chobi would only come out of the room, one could perhaps see her expression, but Chobi refused to leave the room. As though some one had drawn a line beyond which she must not move, as was done to Sita in the Ramayana. As if she would fall into the hands of Ravana if she crossed that threshold. But Chobi could not find an opportunity to lock the door and throw herself on the bed, much as she would have loved to do so. There had been a ceaseless stream of people coming to ask her to come down and join the wedding festivities. “Oh Chobi, there are five hundred guests downstairs, asking for you. Please come, at least for a little while.” “Oh Chobi, come, see what a handsome son-in-law your brother has acquired.” “Aunty, you have left a few things unfinished in the room where the bride will be given away. Baba is losing his temper. Please come quickly, for goodness’ sake.” On and on.

But Chobi was unmoved. Chobi would not give in. Chobi said : “I have a searing headache.” ,

No, nothing of significance had happened earlier in the day. Nothing at all had happened if you come to think of it. Chobi had been in charge of everything from the very beginning. Chobi was supervising the kitchen, the store room, the dining room, the room where the deity is worshipped. From early morning, she had been moving about swiftly. Nobody took notice when that unimportant event took place, towards evening. Nor did any one bother to notice when Chobi took that small event to heart and locked herself in her room. They looked for her when the time came for the bride to be given away.



Where was Chobi ? Where was she ?

Where had Chobi kept the turmeric and *kori* ? Where was the veil for the bride ? Really, nothing can be found in its place when one needs it ! Of course, everything could be found in a minute—if only one took the trouble to look for it. Everything was lying nearby. But then one has to be near and pass every item, one by one, otherwise wouldn’t inconvenience be caused ? And then not only turmeric or *kori* or the veil—every detail and every ceremonial requirement was at Chobi’s fingertips. How many things would the bride’s mother take care of, on her own ? Didn’t she have to receive the guests ?

Knowing all this, how could Chobi disappear just in the nick of time ? Shame on her ! She must be consoling her husband who had been rebuffed. Was this any time for it ? Who does not know that he is a mad man—he may create another problem. Why not give him a sleeping pill, and come down to help on this busy day when a wedding is on ? When the wedding was over, well, she could then take the festive food to her room on the third storey, and pamper her husband ! But why now ? Now, this is going beyond the limit !

The house is full of guests, and you are showing your temper, sticking to your husband in the room ? Saying: “He won’t eat— I won’t eat either.” Shame on her ! What a handsome son-in-law, what fun and festivities, all the rites and ceremonies at the time of giving away the bride — and

she ignored them all? She is showing her temper, even about food? Are they determined to go on a fast on an auspicious occasion, when there is so much food, fish, sweets and everything? Wouldn't her behaviour bring bad luck to her own niece? Wouldn't her brother, sister-in-law, all be put in an awful position? There should be a limit to one's meanness, really!

"Your brother is twenty years older than you, almost like a father. He has brought you up as if he were your father, and didn't he arrange your marriage too? And then, he is maintaining you and your husband the year round. He has built a room for you on the third floor. If that priceless brother has scolded a mad man, or maybe has pushed him a little, should you behave like this? Isn't there such a thing as gratitude?"

To see how Chobi looked after committing such an act of ingratitude — that curiosity perhaps motivated so many of them to crowd in front of the door of her tiled-roofed room, as if there was a fun fair on. Some of them were also showing her sympathy. Quietly, of course, because you couldn't take sides if you belonged to the party of the host. It was better to say quietly: "Poor thing." It was wiser to whisper: "My heart breaks to see this, really. The younger brother-in-law is not in his senses, who does not know that he is insane? He acted that way because he has no sense. But then, you are a normal person, you are the elder brother. It is the day of your daughter's wedding. You push your younger brother-in-law on such a special day? You could do this only because your helpless younger sister is obliged to live under your roof. Had she been rich and well-to-do, would you dare act this way?"

But as soon as these people returned downstairs, they could not hide their wrath and started singing a different tune. And why not? Were they Jesus Christ or Shri Chaitanya that they would be above anger and averse to pleasure? Instead of shedding tears at their sympathetic, kind words, Chobi had said: "I am really not in a mood for these words. Please go downstairs." Then? Even Christ or Shri

Chaitanya would have lost his equipoise.

All this had taken place early in the evening. At night, quite late at night — when almost all the guests had gone, when Satinath was feeling overwhelmed by the wonderful son-in-law he had acquired, and was congratulating himself on his ability — he suddenly asked: "Has Khitish eaten?" Perhaps he remembered just then that when Khitish had brought in a whole heap of luchis, fried fish and sweets and was about to start eating right in the midst of a roomful of people, he had lost his temper and had pushed his brother-in-law



—Bharti Mirchandani

out of the room where every one was enjoying themselves. Now, Satinath was not denying of course, that he had been rather hasty and harsh about the whole thing, but then he was also made of flesh and blood. And it was such an unbearably uncivilized act on the part of Khitish. The bridegroom's party had just arrived, Satinath had been without food all that time because he was waiting to give away the bride. He was anxious, worried and nervous. How could he stand such a terrible sight at that critical moment? Satinath could not stand it, of course.

But he hadn't expected the mad man to be so shattered by this act. "He will wander back to the kitchen" that is what he guessed. He understood everything when Chobi was found absent. It wasn't

only he who was inconvenienced by Chobi's absence, the whole household had been reduced to a shambles, and there was only one name that echoed all around: "Chobi." Then the elder sister-in-law revealed the whole thing at the time of giving away the bride: "I don't know — but I heard that you insulted your brother-in-law, you pushed him out of the room, so your sister has taken her husband to her room, and will not come downstairs. Your brother-in-law had managed to collect the food by threatening the cooks. All that food was scattered near the stairs, in the verandah and courtyard. He threw it away in a temper. But then he is mad, not normal — but your sister is not mad."

After this rational speech, Satinath also felt mad with rage. It was fortunate that he was in the ceremonial seat, giving away the bride, otherwise he would have taught her a good lesson. But now he was feeling quite generous, now he could enquire: "Has Khitish eaten?" He was then told that since early evening, at least fifty people had been trying to coax Chobi to come downstairs, to watch the wedding, mix with the guests, partake of the feast. But Chobi had remained unmoved like a mountain. She could not be persuaded to come downstairs. He heard this story of uncivilized behaviour from his wife. After that, no one could expect that he would continue to remain generous.

He went upstairs in a temper, and said: "I fold my hands to you, Chobi, come and eat with us." Did Chobi's voice quiver? Or did Satinath imagine it? Perhaps it was his imagination. Chobi said in a clear voice: "Why are you talking like this, Dada? I told you I will not be able to eat, I cannot eat. I have a frightful headache." Satinath remembered the horrible sight of Khitish eating. At once he thought of another point: "Even though mad, he is her husband."

He said in a gentler voice: "All right, whether or not you can eat, come and sit with me. I will ask them to send up Khitish's food. Come down after he finishes eating." Chobi stood there and said calmly: "He won't eat, Dada." It was not surprising that Satinath once more lost his patience. He came downstairs and commented in a

harsh tone: "This is nothing but ingratitude." Almost simultaneously, Amal came up the stairs. He had promised to serve and attend to the last batch of diners. Because of the obstinate vow of this woman, it was getting really late, almost one 'o' clock. He was no relation of theirs—just a neighbour. He had no reason to feel so responsible but he did. That was his nature. But he could not wait any longer, he had his own folks to give explanations to.

He almost collided with Satinath on the stairs.. Satinath looked at him for a second, then said in angry sarcasm: "So you were the only one left out?" and went downstairs. Amal was a neighbour whom he had known for a long time. He was not surprised to see Amal going up, but he didn't think it would work. Amal didn't either. Amal had heard everything—facts and comments. So he didn't have much hope. But he was inquisitive—how did Chobi look when she became so determined? Amal wanted to see her. Chobi was about to close the door. Seeing him, she left it half-closed. Amal asked himself: "Should I light a match and see what she looks like now?" But he did not light a match. Instead, he said: "Why don't you switch on the light?" Chobi said in her expressionless voice: "What's the use?"

"There is no particular, use, but you are looking like a ghost, that's why..." Chobi did not contradict him, did not show any concern, she did not even smile in remembrance of their childhood friendship, when he cracked this joke. Chobi stood like a picture (*chobi*) in the half-light, half-shade.

"I heard Satinath dada was a little unkind to him. But, Chobi, you need not have taken such a drastic step. I was feeling quite embarrassed." Chobi now laughed outright. Once again, Amal thought that Chobi really looked like one haunted. Even her laughter. As she laughed, Chobi said: "Why should you feel embarrassed at my audacity?"

Should Amal really light the match? Should he see this not only audacious but heartless Chobi? What does she look like now? He was finding it rather difficult to

recognize Chobi in that gathering darkness.

Chobi's brother had been cheated. Unknowingly, he had arranged his sister's marriage with a mad man. But Chobi never complained against her brother. Chobi's brother-in-law had sent her and her husband away to her brother's house. She had no say, but she did not complain. Chobi did not even comment unkindly on Amal's cowardice. She carried on her household duties normally, and took over all responsibilities as she had done when she was an unmarried girl living in the house.

Chobi had constructed a facade of lightheartedness over everything, and hidden herself behind that facade. Amal knew all this. He visited them almost daily. If Chobi had not seen her husband for some time, she would express her concern with an amused smile. She would stop chatting and would get up suddenly: "Dear me, it seems I haven't seen my priceless gem for some time. Let's go and see if he has renounced the world altogether by now" or "What is the time now? It seems quite late. Let's see if the lord has started to attend to himself in the kitchen" or "See, he is going away displeased. He can't stand us enjoying the gossip with so much relish. It seems I will have to go now, or else the lord will become angry."

Chobi never showed annoyance if anyone made fun of her husband's mad pranks, or commented about him. Rather, she joined with them: "Go tell him, so that I have less to say. Don't spare him because he is your jamaibabu." She said all this with a smile. And yet today, just because of that little insult, Chobi changed her attitude?

Then Satinath's wife must have divined correctly. Chobi behaved that way as an excuse. Actually she was jealous that her niece had such a lovely wedding, such a handsome husband. She was really dying of envy! Of course, one couldn't imagine such a thing about Chobi. But then by her behaviour she was compelling others to think thus. Such a strange attitude, such unseemly conduct! It must be jealousy! Otherwise, when did she have so much

respect for her husband? In fact her sister-in-law often remarked: "Does Chobi have any regret because her husband is mad? If she has, nobody knows it. What a strange, strong mind she possesses, truly!" That strong mind of Chobi's had cracked—then it must be due to jealousy!

However, Amal did not express any of his inner thoughts. He just said: "You seem to be very heartless, Chobi." Chobi responded: "Have you come to know that just today? Was it necessary for you also to come and persuade me to have dinner with you all?"

Amal tried once more to be understanding, though he felt hurt. "No, I am no such daring person as to come and fetch you. I was thinking that you haven't really punished dada so much by not allowing Khitish babu to go for dinner and detaining him in that room, as you have published Khitish babu. He was very enthusiastic about sitting down with the others and joining in the festivities. He said to me: 'You will serve my food, all right? See, these people don't serve generously.' Amal smiled at the end of the sentence. "Of course, he didn't say 'these people.' He said 'these rascals.'"

Was Chobi's throat getting dry and choked due to her prolonged fast? Or was she repentant for her unseemly behaviour? Because Chobi had a musical voice—why did it change? Chobi said in a dry, expressionless voice: "Well then, he did not wait for you to serve him, be himself..." "Chobi, please let us not go into that again. If you have decided not to eat, well then, please wake him up—at least, let me keep my promise."

Chobi seemed to ignore all the ties and memories of their childhood. She remained obstinate: "He will not eat." "Chobi, I am sorry to see you behaving so rudely. Everything has a limit. You won't let him eat tonight because you are angry. What about tomorrow? What then?"

Chobi laughed aloud. Really laughed noisily. She said; "He won't eat tomorrow, Amal, nor the day after, never." Did Amal lose his nerve at these words thrown off in anger? Or did Chobi really look like a ghost when she laughed thus? Is that the

reason why Amal cried out pathetically: "Chobi!" Chobi did not respond, nor did she move. Looking at that silent figure, Amal suddenly made a mistake. He did something he had not done for years. Amal moved very close to her, took the hand which was on the door into his own hands and pressed it with all his strength: "Switch on the light, Chobi, please."

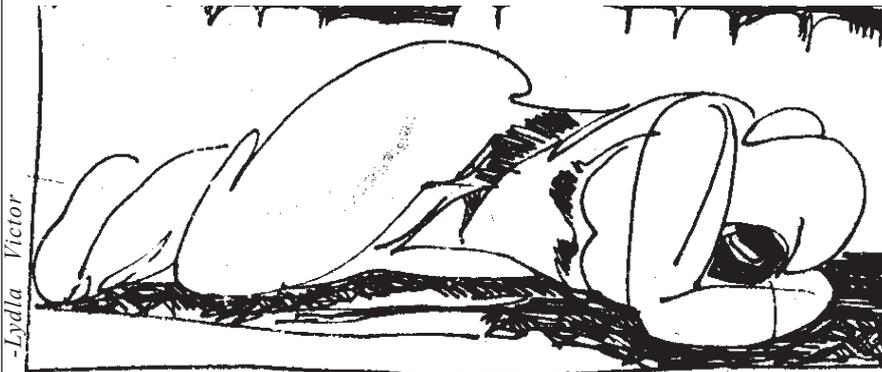
Chobi released her hand gently, and said: "What's the use?" "I want to see for myself." "There is nothing to see, Amal."

"Chobi, please don't consider yourself

to see."

Had Amal also turned into a ghost? Why was he looking so pale? Had he forgotten that there were going to be a lot of comments and remarks downstairs at this long absence of his? Surely everyone remembered the history of their childhood? After a long time, Amal did remember that there was another world downstairs and that he had to go there. So he said weakly: "Chobi, how did this happen?"

Chobi said in a strange voice: "The prank of a mad man, what else? He started



infallible. There may have been a mistake. Move away from the door. Please let me see." Chobi did not move away from the door. She only said more firmly: "I am assuring you, Amal, there is really nothing

hitting his own head and saying: "The shala (brother-in-law) did not let me eat!

"Chobu are you made of stone?"

"Perhaps."

"What shall I tell them downstairs?"

"Nothing. Please, Amal, I beg of you. The bride and bridegroom are there — please don't ruin this night for them. Please!"

"Chobi, how can you control yourself like this? How?"

"I have to, Amal. Why forget the limit? At this time of their happiness, can I take my burden of sorrow..."

"Are you going to remain like this the whole night?"

"No, I think I will lie down. I am feeling unbelievably sleepy. I think I shall fall down if I keep standing any longer."

"Rude" and "uncivilized" Chobi closed the door. She bolted the door with a click. Yes, Chobi had come to the end of her tether, she had to bolt the door. It seems Satinath was right—there must be a limit to everything, yes, everything!

If Chobi could immerse herself totally into the cool of the darkness for a few hours, perhaps she could gather strength again. She could then go downstairs tomorrow normally, and say in an even voice: "I did not want to upset you all last evening because of the wedding. But I am afraid I have to bother you all now. Please come and see. After all, it is you who have to do all that needs to be done for his last rites." □

Sexual Abuse Of Women In Haryana Roadways

Sex scandals have rocked the Haryana Roadways depot at Ambala. Some weeks ago, Balwinder Kaur, a woman employee, disappeared. She was stated to have been the subject of gross misuse and to have drowned herself in the Jansuk headworks. Soon followed the case of 16 year old Surinder Kaur, allegedly raped by a minister in a government rest house. The latest case is that of Mohinder Kaur, another employee, who recently filed a complaint alleging ill treatment and harassment at the hands of male colleagues. According to allegations, the depot has a "well organized coterie of officials", high and low, who indulge in "corrupting" women employees. Flouting regulations of recruitment through advertisements, girls

are hired on daily wages, and fired if they do not "cooperate."

The police were indifferent till an all-party Sangharsh Samiti was formed and started a campaign in the city, holding street corner meetings and putting up posters.

On February 13, more than a month after the woman disappeared, superintendent of police Raj Singh issued a press statement that, sick, of her disgraceful life, Balwinder had committed suicide. It is reported that three employees of the depot had come to Balwinder's house with a message that she was wanted by a VIP. When she expressed her inability to go, they used indecent language and left. Her husband rebuked her, and the next

day, she was summoned by a high official at work, who also scolded her. This led to an altercation. Balwinder took half a day's leave and disappeared, never to be seen again. Her mother has given a statement that the decomposed body recovered from the canal, was not that of her daughter. But on February 24, Balwinder's husband signed an affidavit saying he suspected no foul play.

Meanwhile, the general manager of the depot has been transferred and made general assistant to the deputy commissioner, Ambala. The new manager took over last week.

—sent by Banmali, Ambala
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