



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-19

**Editor of
Autumn Edition 2019**

Dr. Saurav Dasthakur

Associate Professor, Department of English
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal

Title: The Noble People of a Small Town

Author(s): Shekhar Joshi

Translator (s): Ankita Sundriyal

Published: 23 December 2019.

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Yr. 7, Issue 10-14, 2019

Autumn Edition
September-October



Chhote Sheher ke Bade Log

Shekhar Joshi

Having personally met the author, Shekhar Joshi, I felt his strong sense of allegiance towards the *Pahadi* community and a nostalgia that my generation does not possess from having lived in the hills. The first story that I ever read by him was 'Dajyu' which resonated with me so deeply that I knew I had to read more of his work. His themes such as nostalgia for a life lived in the hills, the disavowal of their native roots by second and third generation migrants, the sense of community in the natives and lack thereof outside the state are so vividly and realistically sketched in his stories that he has often been called the Thomas Hardy of Uttarakhand literature. I chose his story, *Chhote Sheher ke Bade Log* because of its simple and sincere approach towards story telling. It is honest in its intention- it aims to portray camaraderie in a small and closely knit community. The conclusion of the story immediately strikes the reader's heart and enables them to see exactly why the author entitles his work- *Chhote Sheher Ke Bade Log* (The Noble People of a Small Town).

- Ankita Sundriyal



The Noble People of a Small Town

Translated by Ankita Sundriyal

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English Literature,
EFLU, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

The story originally titled 'Chhote Sheher ke Bade Log', from the collection *Mera Pahad*, has been translated by taking into consideration the input provided by the author of the story. The title, too, has been approved by the author. For this, I am deeply indebted to Mr. Shekhar Joshi and acknowledge his contribution to the same.

Early morning, a frightening situation was witnessed. Like a wild animal, he pounced upon the table in fury. A while ago, the fishmonger had carried the table and set it down at that spot. Obviously, he might have gone back to pick the rest of his stuff up. The peanut-monger was the first one to establish his gunny there, with the bag containing peanuts beside it. In order to light the dung cakes and wood chunks kept in the iron basin, he had gone over to the tea stall across the road. It was then that the table had gained its spot.

While returning, the moment the peanut-monger set his eyes upon the table at the spot, he pounced upon it as if it were his prey. He flung the table on the road and broke its legs one by one. Now since the table was nothing more than a plank donning four legs held there with a nail each, it hadn't required much effort on his part to break it into teeny tiny bits. Taking the fourth leg, he struck the table repeatedly. The people who had set their stalls in the vicinity watched in shock.



They murmured worriedly but none of them could muster enough courage to stop him.

“I can swear he’s taken a peg or two. He is smothered.”

“These buggers have been quarrelling since yesterday evening.”

“Let’s wait for the other fella. He ain’t no better.”

“True. A person might do anything in anger. He might tear him apart like a fish”

With mixed feelings of fear and doubt, everyone waited for the fishmonger to emerge.

Given the serenity and calm of the hill, this was a sensational event. At the Chowk, where passengers coming from different directions were waiting for public conveyance went haywire all of a sudden. The vendors who were out of their shops enjoying the sweet wintry sunlight saw the lane brimming with people; they could not help but be curious. The marketplace was filled from one end to another. Everybody ran with the anxiety of ‘What could’ve possibly happened?’ towards the Chowk.

The steady lifestyle of winter was affected in such a manner as a thrown pebble affects the still lake. A summer morning was a different world, where the entire town would be filled with the hues of tourists. From early morning to late night, they would be seen chattering and enjoying the marketplace, or observing it from the balcony of their hotels. The town would resonate the echoes of different cars, vans and other vehicles. The fashion of the tourists, their hairstyles, their mannerisms was a subject of interest and of gossip. Alcohol,



gambling and romance would now and then spring out a new blossom. Once the season ended, the town folk kept ruminating over those incidents for the rest of the year.

The summers were followed by the Dussehra holidays. These visitors would bring their family along. Their visit would be somewhat like a well-off relative visiting a middleclass family. These visitors were not in the least like the brazen summer tourists who had a habit of showing off their money. Their familial existence brought a festive mood to the town. Then, winters would come to an end and a majority of the residents would shift to the plains to protect themselves from the cold. It would bring another round of loneliness to the people who stayed back. But this smallish incident had disturbed the calm of the town. Different groups came into existence, and assigned themselves as a task force, voting for either the peanutmonger or the fishmonger. The people seemed anxious of the impending disaster.

The issue did not arise all of a sudden. This had been going on for a few days. The peanutmonger had his spot on a slope and hence his gunny was soaked when water from the fishmonger's table had trickled down. Superficially, it may have seemed that this was the case but the seasonal rise in the fishmonger's business had projected the peanutmonger, who had a humble business for the time being, as an envious neighbor. Yesterday evening, there had been a tussle and a threat or two had passed between them.

Now, it was pure coincidence that these two belonged to two separate communities.

The residence of the fishmonger may have been far away or he may have gone somewhere else to fetch his stuff. There had been a delay in his return. The people who had



been awaiting his return with a seed of doubt in their minds were uncertain. They dispersed slowly and started roaming elsewhere in the marketplace. There were two significant centers for discussion, one was Pandeji's paan shop and the other was Hajiji's merchandise store. One group that assembled at Pandeji's was disgusted at the open demonstration of the butchering and display of the fishes. The others were the ones who hated the peanut vendor's erratic and brazen behavior after drinking. They also sympathized with the loss of the fishmonger.

Hajiji had come to be respected as the intellectual head of his community and hence it seemed only obvious for the well-wishers of the fishmonger to report to him. Even though this community had a very few people in it, they formed an important part of the town. While there was Id and Muharram, there was too a Holi and Diwali; all the communities celebrated another's joys and sorrows with an equal interest. Hajiji himself was a respectable member of the Ramleela committee and his son Samad was always expected to be the Tabla player in the shows. However, as human nature would have it, a few were not ready to let the chance slip away so easily. And these were the people who expressed their disapproval vehemently.

And there were many people who were tired of the quiet and wanted a little something just for the sake of fun. They wished to lend a certain context to the issue by letting it float in the wind of the society. Khayalirama, who played the role of a joker in the Ramleela, also played that role in real life. While returning from the Chowk, he scampered around answering to the question, "What happened?" the following sentence, "Yes, this is it. Feels just like the 6th of December Ayodhya *kaand*." Meanwhile, word was spread around by the Manthara Paruli that the Muslims had gathered around Hajiji and were making a call to



Rampur. Mothers rushed to hide their children in the safety of their houses. Several pair of eyes peeped from the balconies to find out whatever happened in the marketplace.

An old man advised all to report the incident to the police so that their interference would lay off the impending misadventure. But the station being far-off and the possibility of something taking place any moment from now, made the public ignore the wise man's words. Suddenly, someone viewed the fishmonger walking down the slope of the hill, carrying his stuff atop his head. Everybody headed to the Chowk. The peanutmonger, suspicious but quiet, continued to perform his chores. People took turns to look at the fishmongers and the peanut mongers, imagining the possible turn of events. The fishmonger drew nearer, filling the distance between them, but the peanutmonger did not bat an eye. He kept raking the fire.

Seeing the remnants of what was once his table, the fishmonger put his pile aside and stood silently. It was probable that he was trying to solve the mystery behind this mishap. Just then, he noticed Khan Sahib's voice ringing out in his ears-

"Lads, did you or did you not take down the number of the truck?"

Pandeji jumped in the conversation with his words-

"Who could have possibly thought of noting the number when such a thing occurred? That blither of a driver reversed the truck suddenly and drove away like a storm."

And another voice chimed in-

"Oh these scoundrels will keep their mouths drowned in alcohol, for devil's sake.



Look, what a pity. What has he done here?”

“Oh, never mind the table. It’s a good thing that he wasn’t there. Just imagine, had he been there instead of that four legged wooden thing? There is nothing more valuable than a life. I say, we call Durga carpenter to repair this mess. But yes, Khan Sahib is right, you ought to have noted down the number.” were the words of another grey haired gentleman.

Everybody wore a sympathetic look and backed up the plan with pleasant smiles. The fishmonger first glanced at the crowd and then at the peanutmonger. He could feel a conspiracy materializing but didn’t have the inspiration to refute such a large number of people.

Durga Carpenter, led by somebody, arrived with his tools on the spot. He began the process of repair.

The crowd dispersed slowly. It was a wind too cold to endure.

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Shekhar Joshi

Shekhar Joshi (born September, 1939) is a Kumaoni author, who is also known for his insight into the culture, traditions and lifestyles of people of Uttarakhand. With Shailesh Matiyani, he created a composite image of ethos of Kumaon. His best-known works are ‘Dajyu’ (Big Brother) and ‘Kosi Ka Ghatwar’ (The Miller of Kosi). His acclaimed story, ‘Dajyu’ has been made into a children’s film by the Children's Film Society of India. ‘Kosi Ka Ghatwar’ and many other stories have been translated into English, Russian, Czech, Polish and Japanese.