

LOGISTICS (Translation of the story Garinth)

Ramlal owned a buffalo. He milked it morning and evening, and distributed the milk to a few regular customers. He minded his own business and was not interested in irrelevant chit chat. He was reserved and spoke only when he had to. He was a practical man who had no time for reasoning or emotions, and did what he considered best for himself. He went to the customer's house, rang the door-bell, measured out the milk, and quietly left. If there were complaints, he just listened, and never argued; should someone say that the milk was watery, he only nodded, and did not refute the charge; should he be advised not to dilute the milk, he again shook his head in acquiescence; should someone reprimand or chide him, his jaws tightened in anger, but he kept his head down, swallowed his wrath and just went away.

On such occasions, when he returned home, sometimes he found the buffalo standing beneath the thatched roof or beside the *ladavani*, a trough containing feed, chewing the cud; sometimes she would be sitting comfortably, trying to doze, blinking her eyes. Beside himself with anger, he picked up the *danda*, a big solid stick, and began to rain blows on her back, regardless of any thing. The disconcerted buffalo staggered up bawling. Having vent his rage, he entered the house, changed, and set out to work.

The buffalo received similar blows when she failed to produce milk; he would almost beat the life out of her. Hardly ever had Ramlal caressed that lactating buffalo, fondled her head and neck with affection, or expressed his indebtedness to her. He didn't have time for such trivialities. He had purchased the buffalo. It was her duty to produce milk, and his to extract it, sell it and thereby earn money. There was no other bond between him and the animal. She was stupid, and looked at him, eyes wide open with expectation. She tried to understand him and also to express herself. But he did not have the patience to read the lines of her face or fathom the meaning hidden in her eyes.

One day her calf died, and she was demented with grief. She bawled and leapt around in anguish, often breaking free of her *khoonta*, the tether-pin. She didn't even glance at her *saani*, the feed. And she didn't produce any milk either. Ramlal was furious. He thrashed her with the *danda*. She writhed and stomped around hollering, but he continued pummelling her. She refused to lactate even though he almost beat the life out of her.

Ultimately, he went to some *paint*, the cattle market, and sold her off.

* * *

Ramlal left the town and settled in a neighbouring hamlet. He started a *dhaba*, a small wayside eating-place alongside an orchard. Initially he did everything himself. He lighted the brazier, cooked the food, mixed the dough, made *rotis*, and served the customers. Soon it became impossible for him to manage alone. He tried his best to cope, but customers had to often go without meals on account of long delays.

He employed a youth from the nearby village who did most of the cooking. Ramlal assisted him, served the food, and managed the finances. The employee came early in the morning, stayed throughout the day, and left at nightfall. On his

way home he never forgot to collect his wages for the day. After all, no one could understand or depend upon an uncommunicative man like Ramlal.

He spoke only in monosyllables except when he had to give directions or instructions. Both, he and the Assistant, would be busy with their assignments. Within a short period of time the respective duties and *modus operandi* were agreed upon, and certain unwritten principles followed. The employee cooked the meals before dusk, and prepared the dough for customers that came at odd hours of the night. He then made *rotis* for himself, ate his fill, washed his hands, belched loudly, and presented himself before Ramlal who gave him his money. Keeping the cash safely in his inner pocket, he took his bicycle and left. Ramlal was able to manage the late-night customers on his own. They were never numerous so he used to put his cot within the *dhaba* itself and sleep.

One day while he was fast asleep, thieves made off with his pots and pans. Though the cash box was securely locked in the *kothri*, a small room, other things had been lying around. He was sad at the loss of his utensils.

Once when he returned from the commons after relieving himself, he was followed by a puppy. It seemed the best solution to his problem. There had been discussions pertaining to a *chowkidar*, a night-watchman, but that involved money. In this case no upkeep or salary would be required; without the additional use of alum or any other herb the dye would be bright and lasting. There would be no altercations or complications relating to absenteeism either. He would survive on the tidbits thrown by customers; even if each person spared him a morsel, he would be full, and would do his duty conscientiously twenty-four hours a day.

Within a few months the puppy grew into a big clog and lived up to the expectations of his master. The whole day he loitered around the place or slept under the benches. His experience and Ramlal's rebukes had taught him to identify the needs of customers, which of them wanted food or tea. Barking at them would not gain him anything except his master's ire. By evening he was vigilant: and after the Assistant's departure, he became more alert. If a customer appeared dubious, he was ready to pounce upon him. When his master slept, he was all in all and moved around like a tiger. If a vehicle passed that way or he heard any unexpected sound, he would bark and bring down the place. A latecomer who was familiar would remain in his vehicle and call out. Ramlal got up and shouted at the dog before the person could alight and enter the *dhaba*. At such moments the canine wagged his tail, and approached his master with drooping ears, as if he were guilty and apologetic saying, Excuse me. I wasn't aware that I didn't have to bark at him". Ramlal simply pushed him aside and got on with his work.

It was more than a year since the dog had arrived, but Ramlal had never even patted him. He only used his feet. Perhaps he abhorred the species. Sometimes in a fit of devotion and fondness, the dog would lie down before him in a posture of total surrender, expecting his master to stroke and caress him. Instead, seeing the dog on his back with all fours in the air, enraged Ramlal. Is he going to guard the place in such a sentimental state of submission, by rolling around on the ground? Repulsed at the sight, he gave the dog a hard kick in the stomach. The huge dog went away whining and sitting at a distance, licked his wounded tummy.

Ramlal looked upon the dog as a mere animal whose duty was to safeguard the place, so he was nonplussed when a customer enquired its name; afterall, what name could a dog have?

"Brother, you must be using some name at least to call him?"

Ramlal thought, "Where's the need to call him? He's always lolling around. Where's he going that I have to call him? As it is he's forever making a nuisance of himself; sometimes he licks my feet; sometimes he makes for my face; rather, I have to keep driving him away."

"Come on Ramlal, give the dog a name. It's a very loving animal, more loyal than a human being"

Ramlal kept thinking and at last came up with a name 'Bahadur'. In his village there had been a *chowkidar* called Bahadur, so he thought that name would be most appropriate for his dog. It did much the same work, so the name too should be the same. Bahadur came to imply guard.

Bahadur was dauntless. One day Ramlal was in his room, and the Assistant was in the *dhaba* catering to a lone motor cyclist who harboured malevolent designs; perhaps he planned to make off with the cash, box. The Assistant had made him a cup of tea and was chatting with him, while cutting vegetables. However, Bahadur had guessed his malafide intentions so had become vigilant. No sooner had the malefactor touched the safe than Bahadur, who had been lying under the bench, pounced upon him and caught him by the leg, even before the Assistant could reach him. His teeth deeply penetrated the felon's flesh; screaming, he left the cash-box, and ran for his life with the dog pursuing him.

After some time the victorious Bahadur returned panting and puffing. His throat was parched so he immediately made for the hollow beneath the tap to quench his thirst. Suddenly he sighted Ramlal who had come out on hearing the commotion, and was busy checking the bill. Bahadur was very glad and proud of his achievement, and expected commendation from his master. Showing off, he moved towards him, wagging his tail and gyrating his hips. He was sure that his master would pat and caress him.

Ramlal was counting his money while Bahadur kept coming at him; lifting his face, he nudged at his master's arm with his mouth; he wanted to lick his face and express his affection. That annoyed Ramlal. First he tried to thrust him aside. When that did not work, he gave him a hard kick.

Bahadur may or may not have been baffled at the unexpected reaction of his master, but the kick made him leap, and he landed against one of the tables, the edge of which pierced his eye. He was hurt and blood was oozing from the eye. He began whining and screaming. Can't say for how long he kept whining, screaming and whining. Soon the sounds became subdued; he was fagged out. Unsteadily, he stumbled towards the water hole and collapsed.

Observing the Assistant looking at the wounded dog, Ramlal yelled at him, asking him to get on, with his work. He himself went on with what he was doing. He didn't like to waste time on inconsequential things.

* * *

The *dhaba* was doing well, and the management was satisfactory. There were regular customers who brought with them passengers of their vehicles. Sometimes there was a crowd, and it would be difficult to cater to everyone.

Business was picking up, and Ramlal required additional help, but was deterred when he thought about the handsome salary he would have to dole out to another helper. As it is the first Assistant was taking a fat amount, but there was no other alternative. Besides, he cooked delicious meals, and the customers were crazy about his food; infact, they came to the *dhaba* only because of him.

Ramlal often thought how wonderful it would be if he could get voluntary help. The second assistant could not be adjusted anywhere on his budget. But the crowd of customers! Sometimes a whole bus-load of passengers arrived. He and the Assistant managed everything, but the subsequent pile of used plates and glasses got on his nerves. Was he to wash the crockery, prepare the comestibles, or serve the customers? If only he had a little boy who could just keep washing the cups and plates.

One day Ramlal went to his village and returned with a nine to ten year old *chokra*, a boy who got to work the very, *next day*. From morning till evening he kept collecting and washing crockery. After a month an old man came and collected the boy's salary. Its beside the point to mention that Ramlal gave only half the money which had been agreed upon, having deducted the remainder as compensation for the plates, cups and glasses that the *chokra* had broken while washing. Another grudge was that the boy ate too much. The old man protested and grumbled, but left with whatever he was given. He cursed Ramlal saying that he made the boy slog the whole day and then too did not give him enough to eat. He also threatened to take him away and engage him elsewhere. He would earn much more in the village as a labourer.

Ramlal remained silent though he gauged that the boy wouldn't pull along for much longer. The old man came regularly every month like *Yamduta*, the angel of death, and haggled over the money. He also kept threatening. Under such circumstances the boy too became difficult; instead of working, he acted pig-headed. When the old man arrived next, he sent the *chokra* packing with half the salary as usual. But the problem persisted.

Ramlal consulted some of the truck and bus drivers who were his regular customers. They comforted him saying that they would look for someone to help him.

Once his Assistant proceeded on leave for four days. He was getting married.

Marriage! The word resounded in his ears. He too could get married. Nobody had ever thought of getting him married. He consulted his driver customers. They patted his back saying that marriage was a gamble which he should gambol without a second thought.

He then studied the contents of his till, and tried to work out the logistics. He analysed various aspects of the proposal using different variables, and discussed the problems with his customer friends. They tried to explain things. Ultimately he realized that a wife would not be a bad bargain. She would take on the entire work, including cooking, washing and cleaning. There would be no bickering about salary or division of labour. The only things involved would be food and clothing. This was apart from the other comforts that a woman could provide. Besides, clientele would also increase because of her presence. The light

in his eyes revealed that he was able to comprehend this logistics. And one day, with a wad of currency notes in his pocket, he drove off with one of the truck drivers.

He returned in the same vehicle some days later, accompanied by a woman. Most of her face was covered by a long *ghunghat* that came right down to her nose. The dirty finger nails of her dark fat hands had a red coat of varnish. Her feet painted with pink *alta* were covered with dust. Her plastic slippers made a slapping noise when she walked.

Getting down from the truck, Ramlal hurried into his room, removed the *chadar*, a thick woollen shawl, that he was wearing, and went to the rear of the house to wash up. He had on a new coat, and was careful that it should not get wet.

The woman got down from the truck and hesitated, while it moved off. In the open she began to feel cold. She wrapped her coloured, cotton sari closer over her back and shoulders. Then with two fingers she parted her *ghunghat*, and looked around her.

Bahadur, who had been warming himself beside the brazier, stood up. The Assistant had been sitting on a *takhat* beside the brazier, preparing to season the *daal*. He welcomed the new bride, "Come *bhauji*, come! Allow me to touch your feet."

The lips of the woman quivered; may be she smiled. Seeing her conversing with the Assistant, Ramlal called out, "Come! You can come here. This is the *kothri*".

Timorously, she crossed the tables and benches, reaching the rear. The Assistant laughed, saying to himself, "Indeed, Master has brought a woman, but he has not bought her any warm clothes".

Ramlal was scrubbing his feet below the tap while his mind was elsewhere. He took out the remaining currency notes from his pocket, counted them, and put them back. The woman was in the room. He could hear scraping sounds; maybe she was rearranging things to make place. She then came out. The *ghunghat* had moved up from her nose to her forehead.

Ramlal was at the till. Seeing her emerge from the room, the Assistant offered her the glass of tea he was holding. She just stood where she was. She held the *danda*, the same that Ramlal had used to hammer the buffalo. She asked him what was she to do with it; where was she to put it she wanted to find out exactly where its place was in the room.

Ramlal growled. He said, "Just leave it where it was". She understood, and went in.

* * *

Ramlal was brooding about the portion of work to be assigned to the woman. The logistics revealed only a marginal difference between his profit and loss. He thought painstakingly about getting his arithmetic right. Then he came up with the idea of setting up a cigarette and betel-leaf corner in the *dhaba*.

Now, the woman was the first to get up in the morning. She swept and cleaned, lighted the brazier, and chopped the vegetables. She had become Assistant to the Assistant. And the Assistant, who had been persistent regarding increments, gave up his demand.

Ramlal controlled the cash-box, ran the cigarette and *paan* shop, and served customers. He was satisfied that his business was flourishing, and his wife was able to manage the work. But there were times when he became concerned. The Assistant now made *rotis* only for himself. The woman baked for her husband and herself, and apportioned the helpings. She brought the two *thalis*, having similar food content, and sat on the bench beside him. He did not like that. Once, when he told his Assistant so, the latter retorted, "Master, do you intend to keep your woman also on tidbits?"

A day came when things got out of hand. Ramlal returned early after relieving himself only to find the woman holding a big glass of tea, rather milk, all that was left over the night before; she was dipping a bun in it, and eating away. Bahadur was sitting near the *takhat*, and pieces of fresh bread were being flung at him which he tried to catch dexterously, his single eye shining with enthusiasm. He was sliding closer to her in the hope of getting more, and that woman . . . she was gormandizing . . . as if things were for gratis. Ramlal, standing at a distance ... didn't figure in the picture at all ... didn't have an identity either ... nobody thought of him ... he didn't even exist.

Indeed, he was furious!

" *Haraamzaadi!* Gorging ill-begotten stuff . . ."

The woman turned around to find Ramlal standing with the formidable *danda* ... poised to bring it down upon her back with a thud. Seeing the agent of chastisement, Bahadur timorously stood up, ears drooping and tail wagging.

But the woman glared at the *dhaba* owner with scorn and turned back to finish her tea. Emptying the glass with a big gulp, she sprang up and snatched the *danda* from him with her strong hands. Looking into his eyes, she coldly spat out, each word being hammered in like a nail. "Look here, you had better mind your words! Nothing is ill begotten. I slog day and night... and this is what I get..." She jumped down from the *takhat* and threw the *danda* into the blazing fire.

Ramlal just stood there staring at her. Never had such a thing happened before. It was beyond his imagination. He had miscalculated, and his logistics had again gone awry some how.

* * *