

THE MAIMED TIGER (EK PAIR WALA SHER)

Radhey suddenly jumped into prominence when *Chotey Bhayya* of 'Dhaanmandi *Kothi*' sent for him during the election campaign saying that he could help for a couple of days. The wound had not healed and his leg still hurt, but he managed to move around. There was no point in sitting idle, so of late he had started accompanying his mother to help her with the household chores. That's when Deshbandhu noticed him and asked him to report for work the next morning as it would serve a dual purpose. People would throng the temple early to join the procession of Bhuyan Devi goddess who rode a tiger; besides, he could be useful the around the house.

Ramprasad Babu's campaign was going well, as expected. Posters on the walls showed him with folded hands; there were banners across major roads; handbills depicting a tiger his election symbol, with its tail cocking up were posted on shops, trees, and along roads; microphones installed on rickshaws proclaimed his name and symbol. In the last election his workers had let him down, each expecting a share of the party fund, with the result that there was hardly anything to show for all the money spent. He had served the people diligently for fifteen years and put in arduous work, pandering to leaders from the District to the State... throwing parties, presenting himself at their levees, sending big donations to the party fund. Finally, when he did get the party ticket, it was doomed. The city came to be engulfed in a terrible communal riot at this critical juncture. Nobody could expect that Pandit Harishankar's spat with the Safai Karamcharis would result in such a conflagration. He was not only President of the Traders' Union, but ran a transport company and was President of the Bus Operators Union as well. It could not be determined whether the Safai Karamchari actually hurled a brick at him, but during the tussle he sustained a head injury and lost a front tooth.

The entire city bore the brunt of the repercussion. Markets were shut, all vehicular traffic suspended with bus and truck operators on strike. Not only was Pandit Harishankar's status among Brahmins tantamount to a Deity, he was looked upon as the God of Mammon as well. The wrath of Panditji and his followers was not restricted to the city, it wreaked havoc on the locality of the *Harijans* and other oppressed classes. The whole *basti* would have turned to ashes had not the police intervened on time.

Poor Ramprasad 'Pathik'! He was in a flurry, meeting victims of the arson, and ringing up the Collector and Police authorities. He also presented himself at Panditii's darbar with the plea, "*Maharaj!* Have mercy! It's enough!" Panditji, with a prominent blood-red *tilak* on his forehead was holding fort... *saale*.... Rogues ... have turned into sons-in-law of the government.... have forgotten who they really are...." Pathik deluded himself into thinking that Pandit ji had not seen him... obviously a furious person is oblivious to everything and everyone around him!

He swallowed the humiliation, and again appealed in a placating tone,

"Pandit ji! Why allow yourself to suffer like this? You must put an end to this carnage! You are not planning on doomsday, are you? After all, just as I am your obedient servant, they are also subservient to you. I need your blessings. Votes will be cast after ten days, and I'm totally dependant on you."

Pandit ji's battered ego and pride may or may not have been rejuvenated, but Ramprasad Pathik had to pay dearly. Pandit ji mustered up consensus in the city against the government's reservation policy with the result that the ruling party's candidate, Ramprasad Pathik lost the election. The Harijans and other backward classes, being in a minority, could not make much of a difference.

This time Pathik decided to contest as an independent candidate. He had guessed that during these elections, leaving aside reservation and caste, the anti-incumbency factor would prevail, and he was no fool to board a sinking ship when even mice desert such an ill-fated transport.

He had been in politics for years and had his hand on the pulse of the masses. He had acted wisely in the last election, and saved half the money which could be used now. However, he would have to spend judiciously because then he had had the support of the ruling party whereas this time he had to rely on his own resources. Though there were a number of workers, mainly from his community and relatives, he left the entire campaign in the hands of his nephew, Deshbandhu. He was a young graduate, and had been very active in the Students' Union. In all his speeches, Ramprasad Pathik made it a point to reiterate that Youth were the future of the nation and society.

Deshbandhu organized the whole campaign along modern lines, keeping in mind the psychology of the voters because in today's competitive world that is of paramount importance. While advertising a commodity on television, be it some soap, oil, or blade, the company presents it in various attractive ways ... the brand being repeatedly flashed ... so that it leaves a deep impact on the consumer's conscious and subconscious mind; when making a choice, the latter comes into play, and automatically that make and symbol come to the fore. Hitler used the same strategy, and tried to establish that if a lie is blatantly repeated, it will ultimately be accepted as truth.

Deshbandhu knew that a proper publicity campaign would make all the difference, and the candidate's symbol should be stamped on the psyche of every voter. Loudspeakers fitted onto innumerable *rickshaws* went around every corner of the city incessantly blaring, "Tiger.... Tiger.... choose the Tiger.... vote in the Tiger!" Perchance the Tiger's vehicle confronted that of another ... a terrible competition ensued. They had categorical instructions not to be subdued on any account else it would adversely affect the confidence of the voters ... thereby demoralizing them It was imperative that the Tiger's roar should prevail!

Huge plywood cut-outs of the Tiger were placed at prominent places in the city, on buildings, above hoardings and signboards. They seemed realistic as if a live tiger had come from the wilds and was standing ready to attack. The idea greatly appealed to the masses. and instantly became the subject of discussion.

When people passed that way, they automatically glanced up at the ferocious animal, below which was the caption: "Your humble servant Ramprasad *Pathik* seeks your vote and support." Of course, it's beside, the point that the contrast was striking the fearful tiger on one side, and the gentle, obsequious Pathik on the other. However, in spite of this, the two became synonymous.

Deshbandhu was thrilled at his success. He and his family felt that should Tatu ji win, the credit would go to him. A person may be actively involved in public service, running around for people, making sacrifices, standing on one leg, spinning like a top, but unless he blows his own trumpet and literally pushes a finger into the beholder's eye forcing him to notice, his contributions will go unacknowledged. This time the right strategy was being used, and while Ramprasad Pathik was gaining recognition, Deshbandhu too had risen in esteem. Another brilliant idea struck the young graduate, but more preparations were needed before it could be executed.

Pathik was holding meetings and contacting people, but a monster rally had yet to be organized. Last time the ruling party had got involved because the Chief Minister was on an election tour and the state machinery, including workers from all districts, flocked round. No doubt, there had been a few disgruntled leaders who had not got party tickets, but Pathik had won most of them over by cajoling them with promises. It all culminated in a very impressive and successful public meeting. Now he had to achieve the same results all on his own.

Deshbandhu was planning to take out a procession comprising relatives-turned workers and Tau ji's supporters that would take the form of a rally by the time it reached Gandhi Park. There had been intense publicity for two days. He had invited a troupe from the neighbouring hamlet that would put up a musical performance at the site an hour prior to the meeting. It could cater to requests from all classes of people, popular film songs for youth, *aarti* devoted to the goddess for old women, *ghazals* and *rasiyas* for modern members of the audience; even singing a *bhajan* to the tune of some hit song if required.

It was an opportune moment for him to execute his novel plan of having a mascot, for which he could think of no one more reliable than the elder son of his housemaid, Satto. Radhey was about eleven to twelve years of age. He was happy working for a *halwai* at Rs 1100/-per month till a cauldron of simmering ghee had spilled over, scalding his legs. The shop owner had sent him home after applying a poultice of flour by way of first aid, but by the next day he became immobile because first, the leg became badly swollen, then, the wound got infected and started festering. He had to go the hospital for treatment before he improved, but by then the *halwai* had engaged another boy. Deshbandhu had told Radhey's mother that at the moment it was just a day's work for which he would be paid Rs 200/- he wouldn't have to do anything except sit around quietly dressed like a tiger. He took the help of a *nautanki* company in getting the garb of a tiger with a long tail and a mask that the boy would don. The rally at Gandhi Park was scheduled for 4:00 p m, and it would take two hours for the procession to reach

there. Leading the procession, in an open jeep, would be the mascot, a life-like tiger acting as a crowd-puller because people would definitely stop on seeing it.

Radhey had barely got up when Deshbandhu sent for him. He rushed out without eating anything. Ramprasad Babu had already left and Deshbandhu was having his breakfast. He gave Radhey two slices of bread with a glass of tea. The jeep had been decorated with bunting, and donning the yellow-black-striped clothing of the tiger, Radhey was asked to stand in it on all fours. It all seemed very simple, and could hardly be called work. He had thought that as was the practice during elections, he would have to carry a banner and go around shouting slogans the whole day, "Long live the revolution Vote for Babuji...." But this was fun, and he was happy to be doing the role of a tiger!

Women of the family, be they granny, bari Amma, Bauwa..., all had a good laugh at the sight of him. Children began teasing him, pulling his tail, touching his mask and running off. He too was enjoying himself and tried to make noises to scare them. They were interrupted by Bhayyaji who reprimanded them, asking Radhey to go out. It was 9:00 am, and already late. Amidst a lot of hustle bustle, Radhey was made to take his position in the waiting jeep which had a banner on the bonnet proclaiming Ramprasad Pathik's candidature. Deshbandhu's idea of having a life-like tiger was indeed laudable!

It hardly took time before people collected round, particularly children who thought that some sort of pantomime had been arranged. Every passerby stopped to gaze and smile, "Pathik's campaign has real momentum this time what a tiger he has introduced..." Deshbandhu had achieved his objective.

Soon the mike and loudspeaker were installed in the jeep, and the announcer began speaking: "Representing your town ... your companion of years ... the very popular Pathik ... your very own Pathik ... vote and support Pathik ... choose the symbol Tiger ... Tiger ... Tiger" The crowd kept swelling as did the noise.

"Wonderful! Things have worked out just as I had anticipated." Deshbandhu was getting ready to go home when he noticed that his mascot was fidgeting, and children were laughing and clapping at his clumsiness; some bolder ones even dared to approach the jeep and knock him on the head; others tried to get at his tail so that they could drag him out.

He shouted, "Hey you, what's going on? Move, move away from the jeep! Keep a distance! Don't any of you dare to touch the tiger!"

He then approached Radhey and chided him, "what is it, boy? what nonsense are you up to? You better mind your tail. If someone tries pulling it, it will come off."

Radhey did an about-turn, facing the rear of the jeep, making sure that the tail was not exposed, and stood quietly on fours like an animal should. "That's it! Keep that position till I'm back," said Deshbandhu.

Radhey was actually facing a lot of discomfort. His leg had not healed and began troubling him; the posture of a quadruped affected his back. He was restless

because he constantly tried to shift his weight from the hands to the whole leg. Besides, the mask was creating problems; he couldn't see much through the two peep-holes; it was rubbing and irritating his neck; he was getting suffocated. He felt like using expletives, throwing everything aside, and running away home: "To hell with your tiger and your two hundred rupees!" However, it was easier said than done, because his contact with *Bhayya* was not limited to this assignment only.

With great difficulty he managed to scratch his neck with the claws, thereby adjusting the mask to give him some relief. The announcer's voice dominated that of the children which had aggravated him. If they persisted in screaming and shouting, he tried to frighten them by imitating the tiger and roaring in a menacing manner. Thus everybody started having a good time again.

The sun reached its zenith, and it became sweltering hot. Most people moved away.

Radhey was in bad shape; his legs and back seemed to give way. He just couldn't stand in that position any longer so straightened himself and sat down on the vacant seat, telling himself, 'Whatever will be, will be.' Passersby were still drawn to him, gazing in wonderment.

"The tiger is sitting ... the tiger has sat down Great! *Netaji* is no longer standing!" To hell with them ... they can say what they want ... sitting down made him feel better. But now he felt the call of nature and was in a fix how to go about it in that gear He dozed off, and was jolted to reality with Bhayyaji roaring at him, "*Abey*, get up! Have you been engaged to sleep? Wake up! Stand up! Take your position!"

He lifted the mask and said, "Bhayyaji, my leg is aching. I've been standing for so long!"

"What do you mean! *Abey*, that's what we are paying you for! You are not standing for free! Come on, it's time for the procession. You better fix your mask properly"

"*Bhayyaji*, how can I get out of this dress? I want to relieve myself."

"That also you have to do now," mumbled Bhayyaji. Then unzipping the dress, he said. "Run! But make sure to be back soon."

He crossed the road.... But, he suddenly realized that he was feeling hungry and thirsty as well. He asked someone to operate the hand-pump, and while he held his cumbersome clothing with one hand, he drank with the other. He would have bought some peanuts if he had had some money "... Just then he heard Bhayyaji calling him, and he raced back.

Ramprasad Pathik, in a white kurta-pajama with a garland of marigolds, and Deshbandhu with another party worker were leading a procession of about thirty people. The tiger, something rare, seen only during *Ramlila* processions, proved to be the main attraction and crowd-puller, otherwise there was nothing new or rare in any election campaign. But the problems of the tiger himself were being aggravated. He seemed to have been standing for an interminable period,

and his leg was smarting again. As he tried to shift his weight onto the other side, the driver negotiated a bend, and he lost his balance.... He tumbled down and his entire body began throbbing with pain.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! The tiger has tumbled down! The tiger has fallen!"

The laughter and clapping drew Deshbandhu's attention to the mascot, holding his leg and making an effort to get up. Radhey explained inaudibly, "Bhayyaji, I was jolted."

Anger was futile, so Deshbandhu just helped Radhey to his feet. "All right! It doesn't matter!! Just get up quickly!"

This time Radhey tried to shift most of his weight onto the unaffected leg, but in doing so his tail popped up into a ridiculous position. Deshbandhu ignored it knowing that it would all be over soon, and got involved in sloganeering, "Who should lead us Someone as compassionate as Pathik In times of adversity.... Pathik is beside us"

Meanwhile the mascot's agony was increasing, and he felt that he could no longer pose as a quadruped or even biped. He stood up on one leg! But for how long could he keep that yogic posture? He was desperate and didn't know what to do. He just wanted to pull off the tiger's clothing including the mask, and cry ... weep so loudly that it would drown the pangs of agony emanating from him. The procession was passing through the market, and he was conscious of the immense crowd around him ... people staring... cheering... clapping and whistling.... Just then his eyes alighted on a little boy dancing merrily in front of him.

He got a brain-wave, lifted his wounded leg as a *Tandav* performer would do, and began dancing on one legThe tiger was dancing on one leg! He lightly jumped, bent carefully this way and that.... Just then he sensed that the leg he had been holding up was bleeding... But he continued to do the Hip-Hop and dance!

"Look, the tiger is dancing! The Dancing Tiger!"

Deshbandhu was distracted by the exclamations. He angrily turned around, and was about to chide his mascot when he noticed the red paw and bleeding leg"If he wants to dance, let him do so How does it matter!"

The maimed tiger went on with the show muttering, "Oh God, when will we reach Gandhi Park?" But, the tormented sounds of affliction were also interpreted as part of the act.

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