

## KING'S SQUARE ( RAJA KA CHOWK )

Have you noticed how. *Raja Chowk*, has changed! who can say that five-six years ago this used to be a slough? In the middle of the square there was an enclosure of clay and loose bricks called *Raja Ahata* a Compound comprising twenty-five to thirty houses belonging mostly to weavers and water-carriers; there were three to four belonging to sweepers as well. Pigs could be seen loitering around amidst naked children playing in the mud. Some families had managed to procure a buffalo each that grazed in the pasture on the other side of the pond. Indeed, many families had goats, and children took them cropping around with sticks. Each family; owned one to one and a half bigha of land on the other side of the maidan where they grew vegetables and sold them in the city.

Initially *Raja Ckawk* lay on the outskirts of the city, totally apart. But once the town started expanding, it came to form part of the boundary. It is believed that when the old Raja Saheb of Hameerpur had a child, he was so elated that he donated some land outside the village to his servants. At the time there were two *pokhars* on either side of Hameerpur, one marking its bourns, and the other-the beginning of the town. The land between them, one to one and a half miles, had been grabbed by eight to ten families. Gradually, on the basis of marriage and other alliances, more families joined them. It thus grew and became a little village. The third generation had obviously forgotten Raja Hameerpur, but the area adjoining the town, and the town pond continued to glorify his name. Meanwhile, the second pond had dried up and been covered; Jeetu *kumhar* had set up his *chaak* potter's wheel there.

Chota Bachchu and Bara Bachchu had both grown up wallowing in the mud of this Square. It was a mere coincidence that they came to have the same names; Fazlu, the Son of a water carrier, was six months younger than Kalua's son, so came to be called *Chota* while the latter was called *Bara*. *Chote* still remembered that seeing them together, children of the Square would begin chanting:

Bachchua Bachchua begin to scuffle

And the pot falls down to break.

Both felt miffed and often went along with those that teased, chasing them around. Both of them were great friends, and spent time at the pond fishing and talking. They made life hell for passersby, pelting them with stones. For some unaccountable reason they were very possessive about that pond; the couple of buffaloes wallowing around also depended on their sweet will though people hurled abuses at them.

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The village suddenly began bustling with activity when a *Maulvi Saheb* arrived and camped there. He was a sort of curio donning a long grey cloak, salt and pepper beard, spectacles. Besides, it was not only inspiring but something new.

He was first seen at the pond by *Chote* and *Bare* Bachchu who left their fishing equipment and ran towards him.

"Abe Chote! Look who's here! A bearded man."

Chote immediately picked up a stone as was his wont.

*Maulvi Saheb* became apprehensive on seeing the children with stones. He asked,

"Sons, what are your names?"

"Why, what's the matter? Why do you want to know our names?" Chote became suspicious.

"*Abe*, he just wants to know our names. Tell him."

"Bachchu."

"And yours?"

"Bachchu."

"It's not a joke, son. I've come from the town for *tabligh*. I'll tell you good things about God."

"What has he come for? *Tabdik*?" Chote didn't follow so nudged Bare to enquire.

"*Are*, our names are Bachchu he is Chota Bachchu and I am Bara Bachchu."

Bare seemed to enjoy talking with the *Maulvi*.

"So Bachchu, what follows Bachchu?"

"A horse and an elephant before and after. Abe, I've already said, Bachchu, what more do you want?"

"All right. What's your father's name?"

"*Chotka* 's father is Fazlu, and mine is Kalua."

"Fazlu. That's all right. Fazal Khan must be the full name. Then son, you should be Bachchu Khan... Bachchu Khan. May God protect you."

*Barka* stared at *Maulvi Saheb* for a moment before saying, "*Abe*, bash up the saala! if he's turning you into Bachchu Khan then what am I going to become?"

*Barka* gave him a kick, and they ran towards the maidan.

*Maulvi Saheb* was a steadfast follower of God, and succeeded in identifying eight to ten families for his work. He was a guest of the Square so no one objected. Let the poor fellow stay. He's a man of God and will teach us a few good things.

*Maulvi Saheb* was a generous man and often helped people with money. After a few days, he arranged for a place to stay; enclosing land at the rear of with a thatch roof.

A year lapsed before he talked about a permanent structure for himself. Why should anyone mind?

"Brother, You have the money You are free to construct. You are a man of God. He will provide the money and you will spend it. You can build a *pakka* room or a palace .."

And thus there came up a room enclosed by a small boundary wall made of bricks and mortar.

*Maulvi Saheb* tried his best to round up children of the Square and teach them to read and write, but he was not very successful. Children had enough on their hands. Though they minded pigs, buffaloes, and goats, but the fun they had in

roaming around was unmatched.

Just then an incident occurred' It was an extremely cold winter morning; the sky was overcast; every now and then it seemed as if the sun wanted to pierce the clouds and come out, but all his efforts were in vain.

"Why is this sun not coming out?"

"I don't know."

And eight to ten children sat on Maulvi Saheb's boundary wall dangling their legs, chanting:

Naamji, Naamji, bring out the sun

Let your old woman perish in the cold

"Abe, not like that. I'll tell you," said Bara Bachchua hitting Shareef on the head.

He then broke a stick from the Neem tree and held it up as if it were a flag and he was leading a procession. "Now repeat after me:

Ramji, Ramji, bring out the sun

Let your old woman perish in the cold."

Seeing him with a flag, the children got highly motivated, and began shouting in unison; it became a proper sport for them.

Disturbed by the noise, *Maulvi Saheb* reprimanded them a couple of times for the nonsense they were chanting. When they didn't heed him, he asked them to leave his parapet, trying to push them off with both his hands. Shareef who had been sitting with one leg up and the other dangling down, fell down and broke two front teeth; his whole face was covered in blood.

His father was about to leave for the city where he had a job. He had to go early as he had to open the shop and clean it. He was enraged when he saw Shareef's face. People of the compound collected together.

"Throw the *haraamzada* out of the Square! We gave him a place to stay, and provided him with every comfort, and now he's going to hit our very own children."

"What did he do to hurt you?"

"Nothing, Kalua Kaka, we were singing to bring out the sun and he pushed us."

"Will children now be restricted from singing and playing also.... Go, get out ...."

And they didn't rest till they all actually pushed him out of Raja's Square, chased him beyond the pond.

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But this happened long ago. *Barka* Bachchu was growing into a man. His father, Kalua, tried his best to get him a job in the Municipality but the head *Jamadaar* demanded Rs 5000/-, regardless of the fact that he himself worked as a sweeper there. Now how could Kalua suddenly arrange that amount? He was heavily indebted to Sardar ji in the city and had recently borrowed Rs 10000/-for the marriage of Bachchua's sister. Now their people have also become very demanding, and expect nothing less than meat, *roti* and wine at the reception; two whole pigs had been consumed at the wedding.

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Then came Bachchua's marriage. He had to shell out Rs. 1000/ to the girl's father. When he didn't succeed in getting Bachchua fixed at the municipality the father-in-law told Bachchua point blank, "You have to make your own arrangements. You must earn your own living before the *gauna*."

Hence Bachchua went to the city and began pulling a *rickshaw*, but his mind was diverted to gambling. One day, having left his rickshaw at the station, he was engrossed with his friends in shuffling cards, when the Police rounded up all of them. He returned after about ten days, and his father arranged the *gauna*; he brought home his bride.

The very next morning *Chota* Bachchua came and directly entered the room, "Bhabhi Bhabhi".

The new bride immediately pulled her *palla* over her face.

"Bhabhi, I've come to say that if your Bachchua is *Barka*, I'm *Chota* Bachchua. Hence you musn't differentiate between us".

The bride looked up and, smiled spontaneously. A good physique, fair complexion, vermilion mark on the forehead.... *Chota* penetrated her very being.

"Abe get going, you son of a *haraami*!" *Bare* slapped his back, "Be off with you. Why are you teasing your Bhabhi!"

Holding his hand, he literally dragged him out. "Here, have a biri and be gone." He then went into the house.

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But how this place had changed! The road connecting Hameerpur to the town via Raja chowk was cemented, and proved a blessing for the Square. Buses and trucks plied that route; soon three to four *khokas* selling tea, *paan* and cigarettes came up; children established themselves with *tokris*, containing roasted gram and rice for sale. It became bustling with activity.

One day a well-clad man with dark glasses came from the town. He surveyed the place because a colony was being planned between the town and Raja Chowk, He returned after a month or two accompanied by a senior citizen. They assembled people of the compound.

"This place now belongs to the government. We have paid Rs 50,0000/- for the land. You will be given adequate compensation."

"How can that happen, *Saab*? Our ancestors lived here. We are not new to the place."

"This is not government property, *Babu Saheb*. It was donated to our parents and grand-parents. There will be bloodshed if we are forced out of here."

"You must ask some government official how land of Raja Chowk was sold to us. However, if it belongs to you, you must be having papers to prove it."

"We don't know anything about papers etc. In former times people went by not papers. The spoken word carried more weight than ten papers...."

"Anyway, I am prepared to give you adequate money even if you don't have the papers. Now its between you and the government ...."

And those two gentlemen sped away on their scooter.

That night no one slept at the Square; it was like a vigil. It was decided that a few people should go to the town and at least meet their elected representative who would definitely do something. He was President of the Dalit Community, and had contacts with the top brass.

*Netaji* ran around, even came to Hameerpur village with three to four people. It was discovered that Kunwar Virendra Narayan, who had donated the land to his workers, had a son, Kunwar Satyendra Narayan. The latter now lived in the town, leaving his property at the mercy of servants. He had two sons, the older one was a doctor and had settled in England; the younger one had setup a factory in the town. Ten to twelve people again went to meet Kunwar Satyendra Narayan, *Netaji* introduced himself. Octogenarian Kunwar Satendra Narayan had just returned from his morning walk. He was wearing a spotless white dhoti and muslin kurta. His white hair and big moustaches to match, brightened his fair complexion. In spite of his age, his good build and thick-set visage exerted an over-bearing influence.

*Netaji!* Which *Netaji*?" He swirled his golden-headed walking stick and frowned .

"Why have you come to me?"

"I am Netaji, Sir –Rajveer Singh – President of the Delhi Community here."

"All right. What can I do for you?"

"Sir, these are Your subjects. You are their Master, Sir, Your respected father had given them some land where they could live and earn their livelihood . Now some people from the town are telling them that the government has acquired their land and ....."

"Master, they had come to the Square in order to take measurements etc. Since time immemorial we have served you all, Master....." Ghafoora, having lost his patience, tried to settle his *anghaucha*, and interrupted.

"Sir, they were talking about documents. What do we know about papers etc. These are things that you people know...."

"Kalua, let me complete what I'm saying," *Netaji* tried to stop him from interrupting.

"Kunwar Saheb, you know these people. They have been living at the Square for ages. There's no law that can dislodge them. How can somebody just grab their land, *Hajoor*? They need your help. After all, it was your father that gave them the place.

Kunwar ji saw the scam. This *Netaji* is also very shrewd. The Rajua of yester years has become Rajveer Singh and has the cheek to argue! He must have taken hundred or two hundred from these inhabitants of the Square as well to plead their case. He reflected for a while.

"My younger son, Ashok, looks after matters relating to property. I'll ask him find out all the details. Then only can I say something"

"Master, when can we come again?"

"Come tomorrow or the day after, and there is no need for so many people. You what is your name, *Netaji*, you alone may come. You know the law better and can

explain it to them.”

On the third day when Netaji went to the kothi, the servants informed him that every one had gone out for a week. Meanwhile ten to twelve people from Raja Chowk had begun a sort of dharna at Netaji's house. Finally after ten days Netaji succeeded and had a talk with Kunwar Saheb. When he returned Kalua, Ghafoor, Chota and Bara Bachchua were waiting for him with some other people.

"You've come. Did You talk to him?"

"Yes. "

"What did you decide?"

"It was a good discussion. He offered me a cup of tea before commencing the conversation."

"O brother, if he's not going to give you tea, do you think he's going to offer it to us!"

"You have contested an election for MLA, after all! what if you lost! We know that you can make things difficult.

"You are right. That's why he spoke in a straight-forward manner. The truth is that no one heeds his father. He said that the older son being in England is not interested in anything. The younger one, Ashok, who set up a factory to make motor parts wants to expand because he is manufacturing bigger machines now. It is he that needs money. His friend, the son of Seth Durgasaran are the same one whose house is referred to as 'Sherwali Kothi' - advised him to sell his land around Raja Chowk, and invest the money in his factory. Brothers, let's face the reality that he has filed a case against you saying that you have acquired his land by force. It is Babu Durgasaran who has bought the land, and it is he who is financing the litigation."

They were all stunned, and no one could utter a word. A strange silence pervaded the place from one end to the other.

Bachchua. Barka Bachchua, broke it, "And now?"

"Now, what? In two to four days a notice will be served. Go and prepare for the case."

"How can that be possible, Netaji? There is a government ruling that land belongs to whomsoever has been ploughing it for generations, whether he has the papers or not."

"That's what the case is all about. Go and prove it in court that the land has been with you since the time of your forefathers."

The inhabitants of Raja Chowk could think about nothing else except the case. They felt strangely helpless though they were all physically fit and performed the daily chores as usual. Kalua, Fazal. Ghafoor and others felt that while they collected money and prepared for the case, they should once again approach the Masters and plead with them. The notice had been served. Youth of the Square strongly felt that trespassers should be dealt with firmly and not allowed anywhere near the precincts.

They fought the legal battle, but the *Tehsildar* categorically told them that though

some people of the Square had been crop-sharing the land, it was registered in the name of Kunwar Satyendra Narayan. They also engaged a lawyer who tried to plead their case... but for some unknown reason they lost.

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A couple of months later, three people came from the town and again began measuring the land. No sooner had they been descried than people pounced upon them and stoned them till they bled. Though *Chota* Bachchu, Kareem, Ztbair, Ghasi and all had taken the day off, it was *Bara* Bachchu who led the violence. They had avenged the lost case, and later were doubled with laughter. For days stories went round of how the trespassers had run for their lives, leaving behind not only their ropes and tapes but slippers as well.

When Durgasaran heard all this he fell into deep thought. He was well-known and respected. He was a wholesale dealer of iron and cement, and had a flourishing business. He had heard that according to the master plan to be launched soon, the town would be extended in the direction of Hameerpur; a government and private colony were under discussion. Raja Chowk would be an ideal location for a hotel and cinema hall. He had a lot of black money which could thus be profitably used, thereby enhancing his business as well. In order to acquire this land, he had taken great pains to convince Ashok and his father, Satyendra Narayan; he had run around government offices, meeting people; he had gone to court; the *Tehsildar*, the *Naib Tehsildar*, *Patwari*, all stood with open mouths, which he had stuffed. He had not expected this kind of opposition from these menial people. But touching them could make matters take a political turn, ruining all that had so far been achieved. Anyway, he'd see....

However, his efforts bore fruit, and the Square began changing. But such changes don't take place in a day; there's no wand that can be waved so that *Sudama's* palace can suddenly materialize in the wilderness.

Kalua used to return home with half a bottle of liquor. Once when he was drunk, a bomb suddenly exploded outside the compound. He ran out shouting, "It's impossible to live here. People are after your life. *Abe haraamzadon...* what have we to do with riots in the town ... are we going to be affected by conditions prevailing in there ... are we are just three to four families ... will you not allow us to survive... are you bent upon bloodshed...." His voice echoed through the Square. On the third day he left for the city with his family and possessions packed in bundles, tins and canisters. That precipitated the change.

Everyone was left wondering about the blast, the aftermath of which was debris lying here and there. And the riots ... what had Kalua said about that? Such things had never been uttered by inhabitants of the Square.

Then one day Chotka brought the news that Barkar Bachchua was working for the same person in the town who was constructing a hotel in the Square. He was a security guard at the gate, and lived there. He had arranged a small room for Kalua nearby.

Once *Barka* Bachchua came to the Square to meet people. On his way back, he

met *Chotka* and asked, "So *Chotka*, how are you".

"I am *Bachchu Khan*, not *Chotka*. You better address me with respect"

"Since when has this transformation taken place? *Abe Chotua*, have you quarreled with your factory owners today?" *Barka* teased'

"You can go to the town and become so important as to get the sons of *Ghasi* and *Jeetu* employed; *Mohan* who followed you was appointed a *Jamadaaar* in the Municipality. Can't I stay here and become *bachchu Khan* even?" He shrugged him off and moved on.

"*Saala Kameen....* He's gone crazy," and *Bara Bachchu* returned to the town.

Surprisingly, after a few days again people came, began measuring around and work on the hotel commenced. This time, however, people moved away quietly, and squatted on the other side of the field with their rags and things. On one side, houses in the square were being bulldozed; on the other, new huts were cropping up. People were happy because they were getting good wages. At least they had work.... The future would take care of itself.

*Chota Bachchu* had suddenly become very quiet. He would return late in the evening from the factory, and instead of going towards the *maidan*, he would sit for hours under the neem, just staring at the building being constructed in the square. It was a three-storey hotel with spacious lawns, dotted with colourful benches, and a pool surrounded by gardens and shrubs; there were marble statues of semi-nude women in every corner. A palace now stood where once pigs had wallowed in mire and desolation. But the transformation that took place in King's Square was beyond imagination, and not limited to infrastructure.

On his way home, as *Chotka* crossed the building, the pond, the *maidan*, and entered his hut, it seemed as though he had descended from heaven, and timorously crawled into his burrow. Not that his house in the Square had been any different, but then he had never felt like this before. Seeing well dressed people in cars, trucks and scooters, he now became conscious of the rags that clad his body. As he turned towards his house in the *maidan*, a filthy odour seemed to asphyxiate him. His hands, feet, heart, mind, eyes, nose nothing was the same. He himself was surprised at the way he had changed.

The hotel was beautifully decorated, and would be inaugurated in a few days. He was having his food when his wife informed him, "The tape will be cut within a couple of days. I've heard that some Minister will be coming. They say that sweets will be distributed to all".

His taste changed. "*Haramjadi*, you can only think of sweets! That's why the vegetable tastes bitter.....", Saying that, he gave her two hard thuds on the back.

She winced, and was stunned at this sudden, brutal battering, and began screaming. However, not heeding her, he simply walked out.

Next day he returned from the factory with something in his bag. *Fazal* who was sitting outside smoking a *biri*, asked him what he had brought. He said, "Nothing '... Just tools." He hid the bag behind a shelf where no one could see it.

That day there was unusual activity at King's Square. Innumerable vehicles had



come, and police presence could also be seen. The road connecting the Square to the town had already been completed, and electricity poles too had been installed; a number of tea and *paan* kiosks had come-up. The entire place had a clean and festive look. The old Square with its heaps of rubbish was relegated towards the *maidan*. Everyone knew that tomorrow the Minister would be arriving for the inauguration and sweets were going to be distributed.

With the close of evening, the hustle bustle died down and the Square became quiet. Its old and new facade, all were enveloped in darkness and silence.

Chota Bachchu kept sitting beside the pond. His bag lay beside him. After some time, he got up, picked up the bag, and flinging a pebble into the water with a loud splash, he moved towards the rear end where the pool was located and towards which the windows opened. He had just put his hand into his bag, when somebody held it.

"What are you doing here, be?.,

And suddenly the tone changed.

"You, *Chotka*! What are you doing here?"

*Chotka* looked up to find *Barka* Bachchu standing there like *sahib* in khaki pants and shirts with a baton under his arm.

*Chotka* blurted impulsively, "Not *Chotka*! call me Bachchu Khan!.,

*Barka* laughed and released him.

"Come on, today you must tell me since when have you become Bachchu Khan, otherwise I will not let you go.,,

*Chotka* grimaced.

"Should I tell you when *Chotka* Bachchu turned into Bachchu Khan? From the time you forsook the Square for the hotelier's job! From the day Rasool was killed outside Seth Gulabchand's factory! You want to know more? From the day Seth Nazir Ahmad gave me supplies of food and water for survival, and a job in his factory. Now do you understand?.,

"Yes I do! But tell me what are you doing here so late at night?., His tone was serious in spite of the smile on his face.

"Why do you ask? How does it concern you?.,

"I'm on duty here. I'm the Head Chowkidar at the hotel.,, His tone was stiff, and he surveyed *Chotka* from top to toe.

"I see," said *Chotka* after some hesitation.

"I intend to burn down this hotel! It has been thrust upon our very breasts! We have been cheated. People have betrayed us.,,

He had suddenly become agitated. "*Barka*, I'm going to burn it down....", And, taking out a bomb from his bag, he hurled it into the compound of the building. It struck a pole and exploded, sending shrapnel in all directions. The sound was deafening.

Before *Barka* could realize what was happening, he saw another bomb in *Chotka's* hand.

He did not wait to think, and just began raining blows on *Chotka's* head with his

baton.

Chotka did not respond for some time. Then he let the bomb drop where he was standing, and drew out a dagger.

Barka was not prepared for this. He struck his baton on the dagger, and it flew out of Chotka's hand. Before the latter could reach it, Barka ran and picked it up. On an impulse, Chotka took the bomb and detonated it on Barka who had already thrown the dagger at him. Two simultaneous screams rent the air and echoed through the Square.

The explosions jolted sleepers in their beds; guests in the hotel for the next day's function and people from the old Square all rushed out.

Both Bachchus were covered in blood which was flowing in different directions. But there was no mistaking their identities.

"Barka is dead."

"Chotka is still breathing..."

Durgasaran had also arrived on the scene. He observed, "This was my man, Bachchu Lal. But who is the other fellow?"

"He is also Bachchu. Chotka Bachchu."

"Saheb, his name is Bachchu Khan."

"Is that so? He was a Musalman, wasn't he? The *badmash* had come well prepared with a dagger and bombs. *Hey Bhagwan*, He would have blown up the entire hotel."

Durgasaran went in to contact the police. He informed them that a communal riot had broken out at the Square. Inhabitants of the locality had attacked the hotel, and his watchman, Bachchu Lal, had been killed.

The officials reassured him and promised to send force to curb the situation.

Seth Durgasaran heaved a sigh of relief. However, the criminals will have to be pushed out of the maidan as well. It's good that Bachchu Lal had cleared the way. Things would be easy from now on.

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