

LINE OF CONTROL

(Translation of LINE OF CONTROL)

Uncle Mahesh had strange fixation, which led to the belief that he was addicted to hemp. On emerging from that, he would invariably see L O C, a film based on the kargil War. Everyone is now aware that this war between India and Pakistan was the result of a power struggle rather than differences over the line of control, but Uncle insisted on reiterating, “Oh, why look at the line of control on land ... search for it inside ... draw it within yourself.”

People called him crazy, but we had got used to his eccentricities. His prop phrase became a standing joke in our family, earning him the nickname ‘Mahesh control’, and, it was used in different contexts to tease one another: for example during meals, “No! I don’t want any more *rotis*. I’ve reached my line of control!” My paternal uncle’s daughter was very health conscious, and fasted ever so often to maintain her figure; should we insist on her having a particular delicacy, she would retort, “I’m aware of my line of control.” At home, if children said indiscreet things, we were rebuked, “Enough! You speak without thinking. Be mindful of your line of control.” Thus, this idiom not only become an integral part of our vocabulary in trivial or serious matters, it also ‘controlled’ distant members of our extended family.

However, something has happened to change things. He, who, forty to fifty years ago, was called ‘Line of Control’ is now referred to simply as L O C. Who has the time for such long phrases! Moreover, in that space of time, any number of words can be spoken, and sent across the seven seas as well. In days of yore, conversation was considered an art, used art, used to influence people and their thinking. These are times of short cuts... in speech, thinking, and relationship. Frontiers are continually becoming less defined.

While clicking away at the computer, my daughter asks me, “Mummy, any message for *Bhaiyya*? I’m sending him an e-mail ...” My aged parent sits with her grand-daughter, and observes, with fascination, the alphabets appear and disappear on the screen. “See what strides the world has made! In my days ...” and, taking a deep sigh, she recalls the past. Now, how can one go on listening to her reminiscences! When she begins narrating stories of her time, my daughter just picks up her things, and leaves. I too keep nodding and replying in monosyllables for a while, before I get involved in my own work. Besides, I remember all those incidents pertaining to my childhood, and now we’ve all learned them by rote. But, it doesn’t bother her whether we are listening or not; she just opens her treasure box and goes on. I sometimes wonder what destiny holds in store for me; my voice may not go beyond the four walls of the room. By the time I reach my mother’s age, will there be anyone to hear a word of what I’m saying? “A log of wood only burns backwards ...” This prop phrase of mother makes me apprehensive.

She has been quite a revolutionary. It must have been an uphill task to make the family adapt to her ways, but she did succeed, and prepared the way for

others. She always regretted the fact that she could not study beyond Junior High School even though she passed in Ist division. She would tell us, "Complete your education and become self-reliant, before anything else, otherwise your entire life will be centred round the kitchen like mine. As for marriage, you get married as well ..." No doubt, she had to struggle a lot, on both sides of the battle line.

Some strange customs, traditions, and taboos are prevalent in our high caste societies, and I'm afraid, women have to bear the brunt of all. As it is, three days a month heralded misery for mother, then I too faced the same situation. One fine morning we would discover that she was in a *kothri* at the rear of the house, sitting on a blanket spread over sackcloth. The chamber was used to dump things, and there was just space for her to squat. This was a difficult time for us because our paternal aunt would crib, and get us ready for school in a slipshod manner. Grandma, father, and aunt would have to cope with the chores, including giving us breakfast and packing us off to school, as best as they could. Father would sometimes arrange our school-bags. Aunt was always in a hurry because she too had to go to college. Occasionally, our lunch boxes could not be packed, so father would give us an *atthanni* to buy something from the fruit-seller. We were banned from visiting mother, and it was considered a sin to even touch her. It was terrible! If anyone came and enquired after her, she was informed that she was in seclusion.

When we asked Mother the reason for her segregation, she calmly replied, "Oh, a crow perched on my head so I decided to stay away from everyone. I'll be all right after three days."

Once I got annoyed and asked, "How did a crow manage to enter your room at night?"

She answered gravely, "If a crow or lizard touches your head, you have to go into quarantine. Last night a lizard fell on my head."

What a nuisance! If it's not a crow, then it's a lizard!

One day a crow flew overhead, touching my uncle's head. He had come into the courtyard holding a *samosa* in his hand and the crow dived and snatched it away. I laughed and clapped my hands saying, "A crow over *Chacha's* head! A crow over *Chacha's* head! Now *Chacha* will have to go into seclusion. *Chacha* will have to sit in the *kothri* ..."

He rubbed his hands and looked up. The crow was sitting on the parapet, pecking at the *samosa* and enjoying it. He thought for a while then somberly said, "Dear, where is your line of control? You must not speak without thinking. Its only women that have to be secluded, understand?"

Here was another mystery! It was not men but only women that had to be isolated. Oh no, then would I too ... I will die! No, I will be careful, and stay away from crows and lizards. How can Mother be so careless! No wonder she has to face such misery. During winters she would get up early, and wake me while it was still dark. One day I said, "Its midnight, why are you waking me?"

She laughed saying, "Silly girl, its past four. Get up quickly."

Now, whether it was past four or five, if there are stars in the sky, the

watchman is on his rounds alerting people, and street dogs are following him back and forth ... the implication is that it is midnight. Anyway, I had to get up and boil water on the stove. Once or twice when I tried lifting the huge vessel, Mother looked to see if all was clear, then said, "Leave it. You may get scalded. Just move aside, I'll carry it." Quickly she would turn the hot water into a bucket, and replace the container. I made tea while she had a head bath and washed her clothes and the blanket. Then we both sipped the beverage. No doubt, getting up so early and being involved in such palaver was irksome, but to be helping mother and having tea with her in the dark made me feel that I had grown up ... become responsible ... was her confidante!

Growing up was not free of hazards. I sometimes imagined myself sitting in that junk house ... on that very same blanket ... alone the whole day. I would read books. I had just learned embroidery, and would make handkerchiefs with flowers. But at night ... to sleep by myself! Gool gracious! I would be scared to death ... Mother set aside my apprehensions and fears by telling me that these things would not come to pass until I got married. It implied that neither did a crow ever sit on an unmarried girl's head, nor did a lizard fall on her. These crows and lizards were so understanding! But how did they come to know who was married and who was not? Innumerable questions came to mind, and there were no suitable answers.

I don't know how mother managed to solve the entire issue. One day, I returned from school to find battle lines drawn: Aunt and Grandma on one side, and Mother on the other. She asked me to go inside. She had declared, "I want you to know that in future I too will not isolate myself. After all, what is the difference between your daughter and me? Now, if someone doesn't get married, will she remain a little girl all her life? I have small children, and I know how you look after them in my absence ...!"

I stood the staring at everyone. Mother took me by the hand and sent me into the room. I knew that she had a temper, but I had never seen her vent it. I got very frightened, and wanted to move out, but she shouted, "Where are you going?"

"To *Dadi Amma*."

"Why, don't you have to change? Keep your school bag, change, and have lunch."

Anyway, after that fight, I didn't ever have to get up in the middle of the night to take water to the bathroom!

In the evening when I went to Grandma, she was calm, but Aunt was sulking, and on seeing me became worse, saying, "Go to your room! There's no need to come here."

Grandma immediately chided her, "Why are you shouting at the child unnecessarily? Come *Beti*, come to me ..." and I went and sat her knees.

I got on fine with her. Though she had passed only Class IV, she was very fond of reading, and would always be seen with a book in her free time. She had a storehouse of stories, so that at the first opportunity, I sneaked into her room with the request, "Tell me a story, *Dadi*", and she would begin. After all, she also

wanted a good listener. My grandfather was the manager of a renowned press called *Navalkishore*. Grandma received copies of books published on various subjects ranging from the anthologies and novels of Sharat Chandra and Prem Chand to the horrendous tales of Partition. Once, she had just completed a book, and was very agitated. Before I could even utter a word, she blurted out, “The atrocities that they committed!”

“Who, *Amma*?”

“Oh, these *Musalman*s! They severed the breasts of Hindu women ...”

“How? How did they do that, *Amma*?”

“With swords of course, what else! Every detail is narrated in this book.”

I was confused because I couldn't visualize the severing of breasts. Swords are used to stab, then how did they chop off? When I articulated my thoughts, she glared at me saying, “You won't understand! A lot of Hindus were slaughtered.”

“Did the Hindus not kill anyone?”

She pondered, then zealously replied, “They may have ... why shouldn't they ... they definitely should.” Was she trying to reassure herself or me?

I was a bit encouraged. “In that case, Hindus too must have severed the breasts of *Musalman* women, isn't it?”

I don't know why she became silent and meditative, then suddenly said, “Go to your room! Go and study for your exams,” and she began making her bed.

One day, when I met her, she was carrying a thick book entitled **Garlic King**. “Oh, garlic is a wonderful thing. It can cure a number of maladies,” she said, and began enumerating the properties she had read in the book.

“But we don't eat onion and garlic,” I reminded her.

She glared at me from over the rim of her spectacles and said, “So what? There's no harm in knowing.”

I made up my mind not to abstain from garlic when I grew up. After all, I must obey my Grandma!

Her main preoccupation was to prepare the morning meal. It was difficult for her considering the fact that she had a perpetual cough. She kept chewing *mulahthi* or tablets administered by the *Vaid*. Once I decided to have a piece of liquorice; it had a strange sweet flavour. Could sweetness also spoil the taste?

“Oh *Amma*, it's simply horrid! How can you suck it?”

She laughed. “You know I have to cook in the morning, and it protects me from the cold.”

The problem was that Grandpa and Grandma wouldn't eat food cooked by others, not even mother, who went to the kitchen fully dressed; that was why in the evening they only had milk and fruits. Actually, cooking is obligatory on women in our families, a sort of penalty, so to say. Besides, the diet of Brahmins, and that too Brahmins of the hills, is not easy to prepare or consume; the line of control is mandatory. I remember Grandma sitting on a low stool against the wall. On one side was a fire-place where logs were used, on the other was a brazier in which coal was burnt. A charcoal line, which Uncle called the ‘line of control’,

divided the kitchen into two parts, the inner sphere reserved for Grandma, and the outer for the rest of the family. My frail, short, fair Grandma, wrapped in a *dhoti*, would sometimes blow at the firewood to make it blaze, and sometimes attend to the brazier. The *dal* took almost an hour to cook so would be put on the fire early in the morning. Father had to leave at ten, we used to have our meals before going to school, Uncle and Aunt too had to go to college.

I used to think that Grandma was shameless because while cooking she didn't wear a blouse or petticoat, Sometimes when she over the fire, and the *anchal* slipped from her underarms, exposing her body, I felt rather embarrassed. One day, I asked her why she cooked in this state of undress. She said, "Petticoats and blouses are polluted, my girl."

"How?"

"Because they are stitched clothes."

"So what?"

"Now, who can guess whether the tailor was a *Musalman* or *Christian*, that is why they are polluted."

"But *Bua* stitches your petticoats and blouses, not the tailor."

She was silent for a while before saying, "That's the tradition! What can one do? My life is over, now ..."

"But *Amma*, my *ma* doesn't remove her clothes. She doesn't cook dinner like you, so?"

"So what? That's why we don't eat the food cooked by her."

Now I understood why Grandpa and Grandma ate soaked raisins and drank milk at night; sometimes they had fruits or sweets made of *khoya*.

I asked mother, "Why do *Amma* and *Dada ji* not eat at night?"

She was piqued. "If people have got used to eating fruits and nuts everyday how can they relish *roti* and vegetables!"

I was vexed at the reply. Did Mother really not know!

However, she brought about another revolution in her time. As a daughter-in-law, she rejected the tradition followed by Grandma of removing her clothes and eating in a single *dhoti*. I remember her eating like a normal person; though she sat on the other side of the charcoal demarcation, she never wore that particular uniform. She used to tell us that right at the beginning she had said that she couldn't come out before everyone in a single *dhoti*; she wouldn't be able to swallow a morsel in that seminude state. She was surprised at the fact that Grandma didn't turn it into a bone of contention. No doubt, there had been opposition initially, but Grandma soon gave in, saying, "Do as you wish. Times have changed so things will be different."

As children we were terrified of the line of control because we had specific instructions never to touch the charcoal stripe or try to cross it. While dining in the kitchen we took special care that we sat on the outer side, and our *thalis* and *katoris* didn't touch the black margin.

Once, my friend and I were playing in the courtyard in front of the kitchen.

Mother checked us, but we said that we would be careful. Suddenly the ball bounced into the kitchen and crossing the line of control, reached Grandma, creating an unwarranted situation. Mother gave me a slap, and sent my friend home. The worst thing was that Grandma had to forgo lunch. The kitchen had been defiled and contaminated by a foreign object that had crossed the line of control. Now how could she eat in a kitchen that had been polluted! It was a blessing that Grandpa had finished his food otherwise the state of affairs would have become explosive. There were just two options: either the entire kitchen be thoroughly washed and purified, and Grandma cook something for herself, or she go without eating; she opted for the latter which obviously was the simpler choice. It's easier for women to go hungry because they have got used to staying without eating!

Grandma faced the greatest problem when she had to leave the kitchen to attend the call of nature. She must have tried to control herself, but that was not possible because she used to be in the kitchen from morning till afternoon; Grandpa would not eat before twelve or one. Going to the toilet implied her coming out; changing the kitchen attire; going to the bathroom; returning; washing her hands, feet, and face; donning the kitchen *dhoti*; crossing the line; and again taking her place on the other side. This business of unsociability and pollution was indeed very irksome for the women of the household!

I think that Grandma had got used to controlling her bladder as well so that she did not have to go to the toilet time and again. That is why she didn't drink much water. Was it easy to cross the L O C and change her uniform repeatedly? Maybe she paid for it later because her last days were spent in agony. Her kidneys became weak and she developed urinary tract infection. When a catheter was used, she screamed in pain, and those sounds resound in my ears to this day. She passed away in that condition. Mother served her with love and patience.

The journey of my grandma, my mother, and my daughter had been through rugged, hilly terrain; they have had to overcome innumerable ruts, ravines, and landslides. There were instances when Mother stood by us like a citadel of strength. She was as fond of dance and music as we were, or even more. When we were learning these art forms, opportunities came to perform on stage, and there was tremendous opposition at home and in the family, but that did not bother her. She even pacified Father. She was the one who handled the storm surrounding my marriage: "She is an educated, self-reliant girl. She knows what's best for her."

Perhaps, the inspiration for this had come from Grandma who exhibited remarkable catholicity in accepting new ways of life. She had a friend, Revti *Amma*, who also happened to be her cousin and neighbour. After completing her chores, Grandma would take time off from her reading, and drop in at her place for chit chat and relaxation. One day, she returned within fifteen minutes, fretting and fuming. After drinking a glass of water, she sat on the *takht*. Her face was all flushed. When mother enquired if all was well, and why she had come back so

soon, she exploded, “Can you believe it! Revti wonders how I can sleep at night! I’ve always had a sound sleep. And why shouldn’t I? Have I committed a crime? Have my daughters indulged in misdemeanor?”

To cut a long story short, my aunt had completed her studies and got a government job in the Dept. Of Social Welfare. It was a transferable assignment. She was twenty six to twenty-seven, and had not got married yet. Revti *Amma* commented, “How can you sleep at night when your daughter remains unmarried?”

That was why Grandma was furious. She was right in saying, “She is an educated girl ... how can we just pack her off with anybody! When the time comes, she’ll get married.”

I put my arms around her and exclaimed, “Cheers *Amma!* How wonderful! You are great!”

Grandma quickly regained composure. She brought out Sharat Chandra’s *Path ke Davedaar* that she was reading, put on her glasses, and got engrossed in the book. She never went to Revti *Amma*,s house again.

My daughter has got a scholarship, and will be going abroad soon. In my heart of gears, I salute my Mother, and fondly cherish my Grandmother.

The line of control does not necessarily indicate topographic borders and frontiers.

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