

## INTRODUCTION (PARICHAY)

Shalini did not want to attend Mrs Verma's party. She had a racking headache, and household chores had piled up. She could apologise, but she had heard that Charu and Vishwanath were coming; Dinesh had spoken so much about Charu that she just had to meet her.

The housemaid had not shown up for three days, and she didn't know where to begin. She couldn't abandon cooking because as per Dinesh a man lives to eat ... but the same paraphernalia everyday from morning till evening ... she seemed to have become synonymous with the kitchen, and often got asphyxiated! She didn't know whether others felt the same way too! Had it been a matter of simply cooking, it would not have been so bad... But where Manto relishes only *urd daal*, Guddo can't bear the sight of it and wants to have *arhar daal* everyday. Besides, at the table, children begin by asking, "What vegetable have you prepared? oh no! Why didn't you make potatoes?" Now, if she cooked potatoes everyday, she feared Dinesh would get diabetes because it was in his genes. Green vegetables that were good for him, were tantamount to weeds and grass for Manto and Guddo! Everybody in the house has a different temperament and choice, catering to which becomes really irksome. Morning starts with frenzy for tea and breakfast. While one wants an omlette, another wants a boiled egg with a proviso that it should not be overdone. Then, after every fifteen minutes Dinesh makes an appearance in the kitchen asking if there is some tea; she cannot refuse saying that she has other things to attend to; she can't understand how he manages to empty a whole big tea pot of the beverage; no wonder he gets late, and never reaches class before 10:00 am. Moreover, as long as he is in the house, everything has to revolve around him, and the real household chores begin only after he leaves.

She has managed to cope, but then the children too have imbibed the same traits. Manto's room is always in a mess... Only he has the unique art of dumping soiled clothes, wet towels and books together amidst which peeps a glass of caked milk or a leaking pen! Guddo used to once keep her room neat and tidy, but now she is following in the footsteps of her older brother. It's a matter of equality perhaps, so why should she be left behind? It's really tiring for Shalini, but Dinesh hardly cares. Once she had teased him, "What would you have done had you married Charulata? I've heard that Vishwanath ji manages the entire house in her absence. It is little wonder then that she left everything and went off to Europe!" He had fumed. Men may say nasty things about others, but when it comes to themselves, they can't take a joke.

Jasoda too had to fall ill today! These housemaids are so irregular. But she knows the secret behind her indisposition. Fed-up with her absence, Shalini had threatened to deduct her salary, that's when the illness set in.

The headache was becoming agonizing, and with every spasm Haria's visage popped up in front of her. He had left this world only to create problems for

her. Dinesh was right when he said that it was not healthy to over-react. Haria had been their neighbour, and just this morning the Police Inspector came around making inquiries. This was a wonderful opportunity to teach Singh Saheb a lesson, but Dinesh would never be carried away by emotions and indulge in such foolishness. Why did Haria have to leave the village and come here with Singh Saheb? A playful lad of about ten to eleven years, he had aspirations to study in the city. Stupid fellow! And, still more stupid are his parents! They had the nerve to send their son to stay with Singh Saheb when they themselves worked in his fields as labourers... to stay in a household where no servant lasts more than three to four months. Haria had come from home wearing two pieces of apparel. Three days ago Singh Saheb's son had left him in the village breathing his last in those same clothes. He crossed the threshold of his house in remote village only to land in a big city amidst teeming millions, hustle-bustle, unique things. He was wonderstruck. But gradually, after slogging night and day like an ox, the luster left his eyes. He barely had anything to cover his nakedness, and a mat and thick bed-sheet in the name of bedding. Shalini often looked at him and guessed that he was starving. She quietly called him in and gave him left-over *rotis* with some vegetable or pickle which he hurriedly gobbled down and ran off. Her heart sank looking at the child slowly wasting away. However, she was helpless because it was a matter concerning the neighbourhood, else she would have bought him a ticket, given him some money, and asked him to run back home.

In these times it is just as well that where a person has four friends, he has eight enemies as well. Someone jealous soul lodged a complaint with the Police that Singh Saheb had murdered his servant and secretly disposed off his body. Shalini was happy that someone had the guts to do something, albeit in an anonymous way; at least this fellow will be exposed. The Inspector spoke to Dinesh. Had he spoken to her, she would have revealed everything. No, then too it would not have been all that simple. As for Dinesh ... he gave a twist to the entire episode saying that he was not aware of anything unusual ... the boy was all right ... he had gone home ... beside this he could say no more because he was always engrossed in academics...! Dinesh is a very practical and judicious person. He is right in saying that we don't have any connection with the boy ... we have no idea about him or his antecedents, so why should we spoil relations with our neighbours. There was no point in arguing with him. He had his reasons. He was a not an aggressive person and minded his business. She understood his quiet nature, and they got on well, without any conflict or palaver. Besides, neighbours could not be trusted, and it was risky talking to any of them.

She had to attend the evening party because she wanted to meet Charulata. Dinesh referred to her in such a manner that if Shalini didn't get positive vibes, she didn't get negative ones either. Rather, she was proud of the fact that a highly educated, cultured, refined, and well-known person like Dinesh had preferred her to Charulata. She smiled at the thought that he must have seen something special in her. While dusting the room, she unconsciously wiped her face with the end of

her sari, and involuntarily looked into the mirror ... a carelessly done bun, a tightly wrapped sari, a face drenched in perspiration... her fair complexion shining through... she kept admiring herself in silence.

Twelve women of the Professors' Colony had got together and formed a Ladies Club. Every month one of the members hosted a party by rotation, and this time it was Mrs Verma's turn. Though they had decided not to limit the affair to merely feasting and chit-chat, but to discussing significant social issues, they had not succeeded so far. The interaction continued to revolve round the clothes they were wearing, shopping sprees, fashion jewellery, activities of their spouses and offspring. Last time Mrs Bhalla began discussing her daughter's in-laws. A couple of months ago she had gone to Delhi to get her daughter married into a wealthy household that owned two factories and had a third project in the pipeline. Putting on a worried expression, she disclosed that recently FERA had raided the father-in-law: "When they are so rich and have a third factory coming up for which machines are being imported from abroad... they will naturally have to stash money in foreign countries. FERA arrested him, and with great difficulty they managed to resolve the issue." She succeeded in convincing almost everyone that the 'raid' itself was proof of the man's affluence.

With regard to refreshments, it was recently agreed that instead of lavish dinners, there should be tea and snacks so that the time wasted on cooking could be spent in discussing relevant issues. Soon after, Mrs Nayyar hosted a party that surpassed evening tea and dinner combined... snacks, sweets, salted delicacies... a remarkable supper... ice cream and fruit cream. To top it all was her humility, "I couldn't do more because you all had asked me to desist from paraphernalia." Now, how does one respond to such naivety!

Besides, it's an opportunity for showing off and snobbery that nobody wants to miss. Last month, a week prior to the party, Mrs. Rao bought a new carpet and chandelier for the drawing room. It was the first chandelier in the Professors' Colony so the lady stole the show. However, Mrs. Sharma felt rebuffed because she used to say, "Oh, you don't know that these people are misers! If you visit them, they keep offering tea, but don't make a move to get up and make it. Every item in their house is outdated ...." The gorgeous chandelier had made up for everything! She had insisted on arranging a dinner instead of tea because the scintillating effect of light could only be appreciated at night. On the way home, Mrs Sharma whispered, "You are not aware that Rao Saheb has a business as well. He deals in the sale and purchase of land. Otherwise, just tell me, does one earn so much in teaching!"

Mrs. Sharma was not prepared to forgive Mrs. Rao at any cost which made Shalini laugh. But she was offended and persisted, "You don't believe me, do you? Just wait, I'll give you solid proof. I know everyone here who is doing business clandestinely. Someone runs an agency in the name of his wife, another uses his son as a proxy for purchase-supply. Now, look at Dr Bhardwaj ... he is a Professor at the Medical College and his wife is teaching at the Science College ... but he is

doing private practice on the sly! If you don't believe me, ring him up around five, and you will be told that he has gone to the *mandir*. Which temple does he visit from five to eight everyday? He can be found at Dr. Pramanik's clinic during that period. You can go and see for yourself. He is simply minting money in the guise of praying at the *mandir*!"

Mrs. Sharma's lecture would have continued had we not arrived at her house. "Come in, Mrs Lal, let's sit and have coffee," she offered.

"No thank you, another time, if you please. As it is, I'm full after today's sumptuous meal." Shalini couldn't bear to hear more of her neighbour's diatribe.

Thank God, Mrs Verma hadn't planned any such exhibition. No doubt, there were two peons from the Department, but these days Dr Verma was the Head so that was the least that could be expected. One of them was a good cook, and often worked for parties on a professional basis. It was but natural that he should be found in Mrs Verma's kitchen because she just had to get wind of what someone could do for her. Mrs Raizada said that when Prof. Verma became Head of the Dept., she went to congratulate them. While conversing, Mrs Verma's tongue slipped, and she blurted out that she would get her daughter, Pramila, married during Prof. Verma's tenure as Head. Mrs Raizada reported the conversation to Mrs Sharma who had earned the sobriquet 'Wireless' because once some information reached her, you could rest assured that it would be disseminated in all four directions with haste. Mrs Raizada is aware of the fact that her husband can never head his department though, having stayed in Saudi Arabia for five years, he has earned a lot of money. In spite of his wife's insistence Dr Verma decided not to travel abroad. She becomes envious when Mrs Raizada slowly starts revealing her assets, so Verma ji's position as Head is the only weapon she can wield that is beyond the reach of Mrs Raizada. It's beside the point to state that the two husbands are oblivious to this cold war going on in their backyards. They don't have the time or inclination for such kitchen politics. They keep a part of themselves and their identity isolated and so very private that nobody, not even their wives and children, dare trespass without their permission. The women are well-aware of this, that's why they have got together and formed the Ladies Club, where they can indulge in all sorts of trivialities.

Mrs Verma had especially invited Charu to the party. Both, husband and wife had studied at the University here, and later K. Vishwanath had become an English lecturer at his alma mater. Vishwanath and Verma ji were not only neighbours but good friends because they shared a common interest, Literature. Besides, Verma ji was a very affectionate person and looked upon Vishwanath as a younger brother. Mrs Verma also became attached to her *Laxman*-like brother-in-law. Though he was a South Indian, he had learned to relish *makke ki roti* with *chane ka saag* and *urad daal* with *baajre ki roti* dripping with pure ghee made by his '*Verma Babi*' as much as rice with *rasam*. When she had unexpected guests, he would be seen rushing out on his scooter to buy sweets and other refreshments. While proceeding on vacations, he would leave the keys of his room with her so

that in case of emergency her summer-guests could be accommodated there.

It was the Verma's who helped to promote the relationship between Charu and Vishwanath though she should have been closer to Dinesh because they were distantly related, Moreover, Dinesh's mother had informed him that there was a proposal from Charu's side and he should go and see her in the English Dept. where she was doing an M. A. So that matters could be finalized. The very next day he approached Vishwanath whom he knew. They went to the Seminar Library where Charu was making posters with two other boys. Most students had gone home for the winter holidays so there was ample space in the seminar for the paraphernalia of painting.

Vishwanath was a newly appointed lecturer so they were on familiar terms. "Hello Sir" she greeted.

"Hello Charu! What's going on?"

She replied enthusiastically, "What do you think about these posters? Sir, once the University reopens we'll stage a massive dharna outside the V C's house!"

"Charulata, meet Dr Dinesh Lal. He teaches Physics at the University Science College."

"*Namaste Sir!*" She greeted Dinesh very courteously.

Dinesh curiously looked at the posters and smiled to himself: "Down with black rule!"

"*Kala Kanoon Vapas Lo!*" "Why This Discrimination Against Students?"

"What's all this about, Vishwanath?"

"She knows better so you should ask her", teased Vishwanath.

"Yes Charulata ji. Please explain? We are so busy with teaching and research that we hardly get to know what is happening," said Dinesh as if he was proud of his ignorance in such matters.

She had her head down and was busy rolling the posters. "Sir, you mean to say that you really don't know! The Academic Council has ruled that in order to prevent eve-teasing, girls will not be allowed to stay in the Library or Lab after 5:00 p m. Just tell me, is this any solution to the problem?" She spoke gently, and handing over the posters to her colleagues, she said, "Mehta, now that this work is over, you should keep them."

"Okay-Charu Didi! We helped you, now how about our tea?"

"Oh dear! Sir, these guys, are addicted to tea," she said in mock anger. "All right, you go to the canteen. I'll soon follow." She began laughing, then realized something and turned to Dinesh, "Sir, you were saying something?"

Dinesh said to himself, "what a strange girl! She got so carried away that she forgot all about me." Then he turned to her and said, "I was saying that I don't see any harm in the new ruling. Girls usually leave by four or five. In my Dept. too you'll find no female research scholar after five."

"That's because they themselves don't want to stay! But how can the University promulgate such a rule?" She was bent upon convincing him.

"Miss Lata, in my opinion girls shouldn't be out till late... the times are

bad." Dinesh said very seriously.

She was either in a hurry to leave or the discussion was getting on her nerves. She retaliated somewhat loudly, "To hell with the times, Dr Lal! The University cannot discriminate against girls like this!" Then addressing Vishwanath, she said, "Sir, the Vice-Chancellor will have to revoke this order. It's an insult to the girls. Anyway, let's leave it at that....Would you both like to accompany me to the canteen for tea?" Obviously, she didn't want to prolong the discussion.

"Oh no! Thanks." He had brought Dinesh to introduce him to Charulata and here they had unnecessarily got involved in an argument.

"Okay, then please excuse me. *Namaste*" She walked off hurriedly.

Dinesh had been humiliated and was seething with anger. My goodness, what audacity and insolence! She could never adjust with his family. On the one hand was his household, dominated solely by his mother, on the other was this girl who participated in *dharnas* and indulged in poster campaigns... to top it all, she was so conceited and rude. His poor sister-in-law, modestly covering her head, was busy with household chores from morning till evening. This one would have time for nothing except *netagiri*. Not that he is old fashioned... women can move out and work...but that doesn't mean negating family life, leaving the husband and children to mourn their fate.

Dinesh had shared all this with Shalini. He was a quiet man and wanted an ambience of peace that Shalini succeeded in providing. She never gave her mother-in-law any cause to complain as long as she lived. When she was expecting Manto, she had terrible acidity, and the doctor asked her to take small meals at regular intervals. *Karvachauth* happened to fall around that time, and her mother-in-law insisted that she should fast without even taking a drop of water. The result was that she suffered from dehydration and was almost on the verge of dying. She had told Dinesh that she could not manage such a fast, but she didn't say anything to his mother. He just shrugged off the matter saying that it was between the women and they should sort it out themselves. However, he appreciated her patience and tolerance and genuinely felt that she was right for his family ... he has also not hesitated to say as much innumerable times.

Shalini took Disprin tablets after which she felt slightly better. Normally she used light make-up but today she wanted to steal the show. She wore her lipstick and smiled into the mirror. Her enamel set of teeth had lost the sheen of college days. Those were carefree days when she had a permanent smile on her lips, and found the least excuse to go into split of laughter. Now, when occasions to smile were far between, where was the question of hearty laughter? She was afraid lest her indiscretion disrupt the harmony of their home. However, she was pleased to see the reflection of her lovely smile after so many days.

She reached the Club on time. Members began teasing her: "You are looking glamorous! "People will be electrified to see you!" "Dinesh Saheb must have swooned at the sight of his glamorous wife! But all this had no effect on Shalini because she was distracted, and suddenly started feeling stifled inside. She

went to the verandah in the house where Mrs Sharma and Mrs Gupta were engaged in a conversation. They welcomed her, and as she took a vacant chair, Mrs Sharma furtively looked round and whispered, "Did you notice Mrs Bhalla's diamond set?"

When Shalini expressed ignorance, Mrs Sharma continued, "That's strange! You must see it. I can bet that it is imitation ... worth Rs 550/-only!"

Shalini was in no mood to gossip so gave a non-committal reply, and pulled her chair back because she couldn't bear Mrs Gupta's strong perfume.

She had just put her head back against the chair when she sensed that someone had entered the room. A tired but enthusiastic voice asked, "Bhabhi, where are you?"

"Charu! So, you made it!"

"Yes *Namaste*. Good evening, everybody. I came straight here. I haven't even been home."

"But it seems you got delayed."

"Yes, but how can I explain! The car broke down twice. Now, you'll definitely say that being a second-hand car, it's sure to let me down . . . Bhabhi, let me just freshen up."

Charulata crossed the verandah and went into the bathroom. Shalini thought that she looked like a college girl ... slim ... wheatish complexion ... sharp features ... casually dressed in jeans, a loose kurta, and slippers ... carelessly done, loose bun ... a small black bindi. Shalini looked at her white Kanjivaram sari with gold motifs and said to herself, "So, this is the Charulata that Dinesh talks about! She's so bohemian! Couldn't she have come in a proper sari etc?"

The party had started by the time Charu had freshened up. "Come Charu, let me introduce you... This is Charulata. She is a journalist and writes for newspapers. After traveling round the nation and many foreign countries, she has returned to her base ...."

There was banter in Mrs Verma's tone when she uttered the last clause.

"Absolutely correct! No doubt, my 'base' lies wherever you are Bhabhi!"

That was enough for Mrs Verma's acceptance and approval . Charu took her plate and sat beside Shalini.

"Mrs Lal , you are not eating anything. Have a *dahibara*," Mrs Verma offered.

Charu did not indulge in formalities, and said, "Bhabhi, could you please give me another *dahibara*. It's my favourite dish."

"Mrs Verma, you make them so well." Shalini was also opening up in the company of Charu.

"Oh Charu, meet Mrs Lal, Shalini Lal. You are familiar with Dr Dinesh Lal, aren't you?"

"Who? The gentleman at Science College?"

"Right, that's him! He's a Reader in Physics. She's his wife."

"Hello! How do you do?"

"Fine, thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you." Shalini responded formally.

"What's the matter, you seem under the weather!"

Shalini was caught unawares, and tried to put up an appearance. "Oh, nothing really! I just have a slight headache."

"Just hold on, I'll give you a tablet." Charu put down her plate and began rummaging her purse.

"Don't worry, I've already taken some medicine. And yes, where are you coming from?"

"I had gone to Delhi in connection with a court case where I had to testify."

"A court case! My goodness, what about? And, you went all alone?"

"Who could accompany me? Vishwanath had a meeting in the Dept. today. Besides, the two children couldn't be left alone .. .. There was no alternative as I had to go."

"What kind of testimony did you have to give?" Shalini was curious. She was sure that Charu was in some sort of imbroglio. She considered herself to be very smart! Dinesh had rightly estimated her.

Charu explained casually. "A daughter-in-law had been set alight in my neighbourhood in Delhi. As soon as I heard of it, I informed the Police, got some neighbours together, and forced the door open.... Though she was badly burnt they managed to save her life. We had her in-laws imprisoned. Now the case is going on in court."

"My goodness, that's a real problem for you!"

"No doubt, my coming back at this time is inconvenient. But, at least the girl is brave, and is fighting her case."

"But, Charu ji, these affairs pertaining to courts etc can be terrible! If the policemen are bribed, they can turn against you. God save us from the Police! What if they had become hostile?"

"How could they turn hostile? I would have exposed them in the papers. 500 members of the Mahila Samiti had gheraoed the house of the culprits. They were left with little or no option, the murderers!" Charu got so worked up that she picked up a glass of water and gulped it down. Then, looking at Shalini, she giggled, "I'm sorry. It was black pepper that got to me!"

She got up and took a large helping of cholas, "Please don't mind, I'm really famished."

She spotted Pramila and said, "Please ring up your Uncle and inform him. He must be waiting for me while I turned up here. Ask him to come over with Surbhi and Sumit. Bhabhi has cooked so much, they can all eat here because the cook has taken off .. .." She was relaxed and had no pretensions.

Shalini suddenly began feeling hot. She wanted to remove her heavy gold-embroidered sari and get into something light and casual. Charu is such a strange person! What have her husband and children to do with this Ladies Club that she is inviting them here?

"Mrs Lal, would you mind if I called you Shalini? Shalini is such a



beautiful name!" And she again began laughing.

"Not at all! Rather, I'd like it. Do call me Shalini."

"What I'm trying to suggest is that we should get together and do something here as well. What do you think? Does this Ladies Club organise anything except parties ... things like Social Work, I mean?"

Shalini felt a bit embarrassed when she said, "No, nothing of the kind has been done so far. I did try, but couldn't get much success."

"Come on, then let's try. This is quite some Club ... that's why I'm here today ... I thought I'd get in touch with many women. Would you like to work with me?" Charu was looking intently at her.

Shalini was confused .... So much confidence .. .. Such trust . ... She had not expected this.

She again started getting emotional, and feared lest her tears over-flowed . . ., That was her weakness. She tried to say something in vain so just smiled and shook her head, placing her hand on Charu's arm. She realized that she didn't know anything about Charulata ... Dinesh had told her nothing much ... and she was being introduced to her for the very first time!

Charu was saying something, maybe making some enquiry, but she was lost in another world. Just then that damned Haria again appeared from some unseen depth and began haunting her. She felt that she just couldn't obliterate his memory or forget him .... One day she would tell Charulata all about him.

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