

# The Satirist's Peg

Mudrarakshas

The Hindi original is on pages 59–63 of *Mathurādās kī ḍāyārī*.  
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Mathuradas is very upset. He had been told that Hari Shankar Parsai had begun rubbing sandalwood. Later, however, he found out that Parsai was just rubbing writers, especially Upendranath Ashk, from whom rubbing would bring forth neither a pleasant fragrance nor a jinn. Only “griḃī” comes out, which belongs just to Ashk and Parsai.

Once, when Mahadevi Varma received a prize of Rs. 150,000, she said that she would consider herself fortunate if she could wipe away the tears of just one writer. Upendranath Ashk embodies the tears of all of us. If she were to wipe him away, she would do us a great favour. I'm quite certain, however, that ... no, better not.

I was worried that when Parsai made his revelation, it would concern only fiction writers and poets. On the radio there's only one Chiranjit. He writes short radio plays. When he gets angry, he always swears at the clerk, not the Administrator, and he would never swear at the Minister, not even by mistake. Sometimes, though, except for Sudhakar Pande, he thinks everyone is a clerk. Parsai has become the Chiranjit of literature. Prizes for humour are divided equally between the two and with equal enthusiasm. For that very reason Parsai went looking for his clerk the writer. Every writer is corrupt. On the one hand he dissembles his hope for fame and glory, and on the other he makes the rounds of the Ministers in order to sell his books and in the hope of improving his chances for a prize. What colossal corruption! Parsai had to expose it.

When a Minister travels from Madhya Pradesh to Nepal and comes back with opium or hashish, no harm is done. When Bombay's smugglers and black marketeers themselves give out prizes, what harm is there. Why should anyone worry when industrialists and government administrators get together and consume a hundred or so million rupees. When

industrialists pay the appropriate “fees” and then meet with the Minister to arrange for selling the cooking oil in which they’ve mixed Mobil Oil, and when girls are given to big crocodiles, it’s a minor sin. A major sin is labouring to write a book. Then, when the publisher doesn’t give the author his royalties, Parsai lets his shoes fly. And the worst sin of all is for the author himself to meet with a Minister just to get a couple hundred copies of his book sold. That swine will end up in the lowest level of hell. It is perfectly acceptable for a businessman who makes old furniture new or who laces life-saving medicine with cow manure to meet with a Minister in order to sell his products. An author, however, who meets with a Minister to have five hundred or a thousand copies of his book sold deserves to live in hell. Such is the amazing leela of this kaliyug that Mathuradas has observed.

So I, Mathuradas, decided to be a regular satirist. Now I, too, will consider every author, except myself, a toy of wretchedness. That is, as long as he is not a Government Administrator, Editor, Department Head, Chief Minister or publisher’s advisor.

Besides, there’s an increase in the sales of satirists. Their price is rising. The demand is high but the supply low. Satirical writing is a very difficult occupation because it has to be filled with secret and mystical knowledge that only a few people have the ability to acquire. Everyday new newspapers are being started, and each of them wants a haunted clay pot to stick on the front of its building. Clay pots have become expensive, though, not to mention their makers. Because of an increase in the demand for sandalwood, maybe I should rub a stone instead, or even better, instead of rubbing a stone and putting a tilak on your forehead, perhaps I should just smack your forehead. As the workload increases, I might fall sick. Then, along with my usual pay I could get a prize, too. And if I could manage to nurse along a very successful illness, then I could also give tests to determine whether or not one was an admirer of the Chief Minister’s poetry.

Let me tell you, Dear Reader, that writing satire is a very complicated affair. The most important thing about it is that satire should appear to be satire. If a reader should have any doubt about that, then you’ll have to put more work into it. Another very important thing is that writing satire is like dancing on the sharp edge of a knife. Even more so, it’s like knocking together a fence in such a way that you can ride it with one leg on each side. That’s how a satirist gets his reputation for impartiality.

Nevertheless, one must be aware that if someone is beneficial, then he should be given conditional support, that is, put both legs on his side of the fence, but if someone is of no use, then one can take potshots at him just for fun. That, after all, is his fate.

There was a time when satire was written in a very crude manner. Even the people who were being made fun of enjoyed reading it. It was as if in a film the heroine slapped the hero, who then immediately broke into song. If it's going to be satire, then it should be a good, strong slap so that after reading it the slapee would immediately have to get ready for his roasting.

Crass satirists did dash off satires, but one never knew where they stood. They didn't even seem to notice when the situation had changed. Today, we have to be well organized. I'll be on Arjun Singh's side and consider everyone on the other side to be Duryodhan Singh.

Yet another condition is even more important for the sophisticated satirist, namely, changing the system. The sophisticated satirist chooses a side, of which there are not a few! Let the others try to effect a change in society. We'll observe them closely. If necessary, we'll even threaten them, and if one of them were to become a traitor and accept a prize, we'll surround him until he gives in.

I hardly want to carry on the classical tradition of satire. In fact, the word satire (*vyangya*) is a Sanskrit word that means "what is not directly understood, what is implied". A slap is direct, and the smack heard when there is contact between the hand and the cheek is satire. How can there be satire if there is no slap and the face isn't a little out of kilter?

The writer is a strange beast. When he sees someone else being beaten up he swoons in ecstasy, and only a slap in the face brings him out of his reverie. When it's happening to someone else, he'll say, "Just look at what a miserable and poverty-stricken life Muktibodh led." But when it happens to him he'll say, "Why is it necessary for a writer to endure hardship and deprivation?"

Satire exposes ugliness and absurdity. The successful satirist is very careful about the ugliness and absurdity he chooses to expose. He attacks only those monstrosities with which he is unable to fit in, and as soon as he does fit in, that monstrosity, that ugliness, that absurdity experiences a total transformation.

People put a lot of emphasis on changing the system, but they are unable to do anything about it. The reason is that they do not understand

what change is. Change occurs when one is able to make a fit, and it occurs even more so when one is able to make one's own joints fit while preventing others from joining theirs. To the extent that one can do that, the absurdities of the system recede further and further in the distance as they become closer and closer to others and become more and more magnified. If you want to transform society, learn how to make your joints fit.

Fitting joints itself is quite an artform. Some people spend their whole lives beating and banging and they still end up with a cot that's too short. And if you try again all over from the beginning, neither Arjun Singh nor a prize will ever come to your door. You'll be like a file that's become stuck in one of the offices of the City Administration.

Neither by gouging into the foot nor by planing down the sideboard will a cot's joint ever fit right. To get a correct fit you need to hammer home some thin wooden pegs on your side. That is the secret of the satirist. Whenever the joint doesn't fit, hammer in your pegs. Then either the joint will be secure or the foot will start splitting. Either way, you win.

That is the technique for satire, for successful satire, and Mathuradas is getting his pegs ready.

The peg is a very useful thing. Let me explain. A despicable man lived in a village, which was not in Jabalpur. As long as he lived, he tormented the people unmercifully. He never let anyone by without torturing him first. Then, his final hour arrived. When he knew he was about to die, he summoned all the villagers, and, crying, and placing his hands together in supplication, he said something like this: "Brothers, as long as I lived, I oppressed you harshly. Now I am about to die, and I want to atone for my sins. I urgently beseech you that after I have died, you take this peg I have made and drive it through my chest. Only then will I have suffered punishment and my soul will be able to be at peace."

Then that despicable one handed his peg over to the villagers and died. Since he was already dead, the villagers drove the peg through his chest in fulfillment of his wishes. The police, however, seeing the peg in his chest, arrested all the villagers for murder. So a satirist, by keeping his pegs ready, can successfully afflict people even posthumously.