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2013-03-23

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HAROONUZZAMAN

The Daily Star

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The Daily Star SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2013 | 10:35

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A day in the life of Bhushon

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ TRANSLATION: HAROONUZZAMAN

(Hasan Azizul Huq, born in 1939 in West Bengal, India, has presented various realities of life in his stories during the three decades ranging from the 1970s to the 1990s. He has an uncanny insight into human nature which has enabled him to create characters of great variety. He has succeeded in forging an exceptionally vibrant, resonant and dynamic style which has helped to portray the characters in their vividness. The tales and images of different episodes in the War of Liberation have found adequate expression in his stories as well.)

It was in April. Stepping out of the house, Bhushon was looking at the sky. The sun was blazing down – the tall trees at the western bank of the canal were yet to cast their shadows on the water.

But Bhushon couldn't wait any longer. Off he went with a raft. With a little turn of the raft, the sunlight was hitting straight his face, making the unshaven part of it glow. That was the moment when one could see how ugly a person's face could be. Bhushon was gritting his teeth in fury and trading verbal abuse. Certainly, they were aimed at the cruel midday glistening sunlight; also, the abusive language was directed at everything that came his way. But he would look so naïve whenever he would keep his mouth shut. He was squinting. Coolly he said: "My name is Bhushon Das. But we are not the same Das, better known as Rishi." Demurely, he tried to make people understand that in the traditional sense, he didn't belong to the shoe-repairing business of his caste.

Bhushon is a born peasant. He hasn't had any other kind of vocation excepting working as a peasant over the past forty years of his life. The sinewy muscles of his hands bear the truth — anyone can ascertain this fact by looking at his body. Most of the muscles have become inflexible; the knee cap is like an iron ball, and a thick wiry artery rising from the heel has gone even beyond the knee. These features amply suggest that Bhushon has been a peasant throughout his life. They also imply that he hasn't worked anywhere else, except in the field. He has sown seeds, planted seedlings, done weeding, harvested crops and then carried the crops to the godown for storage.

Also, it is a fact that barring his homestead and the nearby ten katha land, Bhushon doesn't have any other property. About it, his comments are: "My father and grandfather were rich. I mean they were zemindars." With a twitching in his eyes, he would look beyond the noticeable boundary while saying this. The way he would cast his look, it seemed his vision was extended up to the horizon, and then he would intently survey his land.

The bones of his hands have become thick; the clasps of his hands are big, and the palms of his hands have become flattened and depressed because of his life-long vocation of tilling and using the digging hoe. Carrying loads day in and day out, his head has also reclined into his neck. His famous head is like a big square bowl; his white-black hair is tough like brawny wires, remaining unkempt always. The tuft of his uncut hair is right on the roof of his head, giving others an impression that he is

wearing a wig. It is as if the steel-like strong skull of his head will emerge if the tuft of his uncut hair is pulled.

Bhushon was rowing the raft slowly along the canal flowing through the middle of the swampy plain. The water in the deep canal was touching its lowest depth. The marshland had dried up; the plain was barren and open, seemingly endless up to the horizon.

Without raising his neck, Bhushon couldn't see the bog from his raft. The banks of the canal were steep and high, with lots of jackfruit trees and bushes on both sides. The strong smell of some of the flowers hit Bhushon's nostrils. Those could be April flowers, might be any sort of grass flowers, or star-like jasmines, hiding in the bushes. However, they just couldn't take the edge off his rage, and he continued his slanderous remarks. With his neck raised, he looked intermittently at the marsh through the trees and bushes and launched into bitching: "You bastard, you're coming home only to eat; you, son of a bitch, who's going to change the decree of your fate? You're fated to be doomed."
Bhushon has an atypical mannerism: while he is at work; unnecessarily, he, raising his neck, becomes listless gazing at the vast expanse of the horizon. At times, with his mouth open, he keeps wondering, staring at the sky. Spending some moments like these, then again he gets back to his work, lowering his head. This is one of his old habits; old habits die hard. Gazing at those faraway places, only he knows what he thinks of.

He has definite reasons to be choleric: still there is a bundle of paddy stacked up in the swamp; the birds are revelling, pecking at the grains, while he doesn't have any foodgrains at home. During the last rainy season, he had to pay back the loan to the owner by giving up his entire share of the crop. He doesn't even have a bunch of paddy straw to feed the two cows. It seems they are gasping for breath. "Neither is my son, the scoundrel, at home to walk the bulls around the vast expanse of living verdure", he muttered contritely.

In search of work, Bhushon went out in the morning with a sickle in his hand. However, he got a job at Mollick's house: to fix a straw fence. While he was absorbed in work, three boys came up to him. Bhushon, surprised, saw they had guns in their hands like policemen. Bhushon could recognize two of the boys who were bare-bodied. The two, who would study at a school, were from the neighboring village. They knew Bhushon was involved in tilling these days. Bhushon couldn't identify the one wearing a shirt.
"What are you doing, Bhushon?"
Bhushon couldn't say a single word, but instead gaped at him.
"You have to come with us. Do you understand?" One of the known boys said.
"You have to hold this gun; you have to fight like this." Another said, giving a demo.
One of the bare-bodied boys pointed his gun at the sky, clanging it hard. In utter surprise Bhushon abandoned his work and dropped the sickle from his hand.
"My heart is shaking; what a sound! Oh, my God!" Bhushon said in a tremulous voice.
Clad in a shirt, the other tawny-eyed boy, who had his nose contracted on both sides and who had his eyesight like an eagle, said: "Make the country your own; liberate it. It's no longer possible to keep Pakistan united." He sounded pretty straightforward in his resolve.
Bhushon has heard about disturbances and conflicts; outbreak of unrest and turmoil, including killings and fighting, had been reported from Dhaka. Even Khulna was strife-torn.
Barely a day passes in this country without any incident. Therefore, Bhushon thought the news that came in to be an ordinary affair, part and parcel of life in the country. Having had a look at the weapon followed by the deafening noise, he got frightened.
"You people have to come with us. Won't you be able to hold a rifle? What do you say?"
Coming closer to Bhushon, the boy said: "Uncle, listen. If you people are scared, then no achievement is possible. You'll have to pick up arms. You are seven crore people in the country. People like you, peasants. Our country is being sucked dry by the West Pakistanis. They are killing our people in

Dhaka, Khulna and everywhere with modern weapons. They will come here, too. So learn how to operate the weapon. Do you think you can survive if you hide?"
Thereafter, all the three boys left the spot.

Bhushon couldn't realize what actually they had meant. How come police guns were in their hands? This particular thing seemed to have a serious significance for him.
Bhushon got one and a half taka as his wage for the work.
The shimmering sun was beating down. Walking back home in such heat, he was irked by some incidents: the two cows remained tied to the bamboo pole; lunch was not ready, though some rice cooked in the morning was left soaked in water. Bhushon's wife, however, offered him the rice. His two kids were sleeping naked in the compound under the Pitoli tree. Bhushon's house is open on all sides; the pitoli tree is the only thing that is giving some shade; otherwise, the ground of the dwelling-house would burn.
Chagrined, Bhushon asked: "Where's Haridas?"
In reply, his wife said that he had gone missing since the morning.
Bhushon's brownish little eyes lit up in fierce fury: "Bloody swine, I'll just bury him under the ground. Let haramzada come back today."
Nothing could be arranged for the two cows; seeing Bhushon, their big black eyes widened, hoping for something. Turning mellower, Bhushon told his wife: "If you can, give them some food."
"But from where?" she queried.
"Don't talk back. Whatever I have said, do it if possible."
Leaving the place soon after, Bhushon got on the raft. The canal's murky water became hotter because of April's burning heat; also, the wind was blowing hot like fire. Even Bhushon could hear the sound of the burning of grass in the field. Stretching his neck, he was looking listlessly at the glare of heat, shining along the horizon. The villages beyond the white vagueness appeared silhouetted against a deep green undulating line.
But Bhushon just could not understand what was happening in the country: young boys were wandering with guns in their hands!
Fifty years ago this village had been crisscrossed by narrow canals in a diagonal direction. With some mango and jackfruit tress, the thatched huts had bushes and shrubs around. Some countable fishing and farming families had been living there. Life has changed a lot since Bhushon was born fifty years ago in this uninteresting and lifeless village. Although he could hear a lot about such changes, his mind did not register anything significant.
Bhushon recollected his childhood days. There was a big mango tree on the eastern side of the compound. He could still visualize the picture of his lying naked under the shelter of the tree during the lazy summer midday. His father had a black and white moustache, slanted on both sides of the mouth. He could clearly see his father.
To see his father even more clearly, Bhushon, stretching his neck, extended his vision up to the oblivion, lost in haze far beyond the canal. As the scorching midday sun was sliding towards a milder and soother afternoon, a gentle breeze started blowing across the lake from the big trees standing tall on the banks of the canal. The trees were getting new leaves. While passing under the blackberry tree, Bhushon could hear some sort of a heavy sound from the wind. Some branches of the tree appeared bent over the canal water.
"I don't see anything happening in the country." Bhushon reached an avowal after some thoughts. "What has happened to the country? This canal is the same as it was. Only God knows who the owner of this canal is. I am doing what my father would do. This blackberry tree remains the same as it was before." Bhushon kept pondering over these views.
He moved his typical huge head with a sense of authority.
"Haramzada Haridas…" Soliloquized Bhushon, shaking his head, and it forced the thick hair of his head to lie symmetrically strewn all over his face. Glumly, he continued rowing the raft. He was rowing along the bank of the canal, and all of a sudden, some unruly hair came over his eyes. Unmindfully, he attempted to pluck out a tall blade of grass, and to his utter shock, he found the leaf turning into a

serpent that kept its hood extended, with a hiss ready to bite. It was an angry reddish poisonous cobra, dangling in front of him under the soft glow of the afternoon sun, and it happened beside the big Jamrul tree bearing some white-greenish juicy fruits. The sun's rays fell on the snake's small two eyes, making them glitter like two minute spots. His father died from snake-bite in two hours, Bhushon remembered. Clutching the oar in the tiger-like palm of his hand, he launched into action: one single hit of the oar smashed the reptile's waist, while it was still making the hissing sound.

Bhushon's raft nearly reached the middle of the canal at a gallop. In delight and fury, his quadrangular mouth got sealed like the iron gate of the prison; the muscle beside the jawbones started quivering. The April sun began sparkling in his eyes, and he brought the raft back to the bank and crushed the serpent.

Approaching the village market, Bhushon looked back to see the canal which appeared like a silver bar meandering through the swamp towards the south. Farther down,

(To be continued)

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