

आधा फन्को

(यात्रा डायरी)

-दिनेश पौडेल

१. आमा ! आकाश किन त्यति पर सरेको ?

उत्तरमा कुम्भकर्ण र जलजले, दक्षिणमा लालीपातल, पूर्वमा माने र पञ्चमीको डाँडो अनि पश्चिममा साँघुको डाँडाले छेकेको नीलो आकाशको घपनीभित्रको ठोट्ने ताप्लेजुड जिल्लाका अरू अनेक गाउँभैँ हरियोभरिलो र अत्यन्त सुन्दर छ । सेतो सफा कुम्भकर्ण हिमाल हेर्दा सेतै फुलेका हजुरबा कुर्सीमा आरामसँग बसेर सेतो खास्टो ओढेर हामीतिर हेर्दै मुसुमुसु हाँसेजस्तो लाग्छ । माइमाई, हुमेखोला आदि साना खोलाखोल्साले रसिलो पारेको सेपिलो पाटाको सानो गाउँ हो मेरो जन्मथलो ठोट्ने ।

गाउँको पूर्वपट्टिको हुमेखोलो अलि तल गएर पश्चिमपट्टिको माइमाईमा मिसिन्छ । माइमाई मेरो गाउँको जीवनदायिनी नदी हो । माइमाईको छडछडसँग त्यस गाउँका खेतीपाती, चाडबाड, बिहेबटुलो, खुसी र आँसु मिसिन्छन् । मेरो माइमाई तल बग्दैबग्दै गएर नीलो मैवाखोलामा मिसिन्छ । मैवाखोलो नेपालका ठूलै नदीहरूमध्येमा पर्छ तर मैवाको किनारमा हुर्कनेहरूले यसको प्रेममा कुनै गीत नरचेकाले होला यसको चर्चा कम हुनेगर्छ । यदाकदा मानिस बगायो भने वा बर्खामा ठूलो बाढीपहिरो गयो भने मात्र मैवाखोलाको नाम लिइन्छ ।

त्यसबेला म पाँच-छ वर्षको थिएँ हुँला, आमाका पछि लागेर म पनि दौरा हल्लाउँदै मानेडाँडामा लाग्ने पञ्चमीहाट गएँ । सानै हुँदाको कुरा पत्थो, मिति बिर्सिएँ, तर पच्चीसछब्बिस सालतिरको कुरो हुनुपर्छ यो । मानेडाँडाको अन्तिम उकालो चढिसकेपछि सानो खुल्ला ठाउँ आयो । त्यहाँबाट परपरसम्म देखिँदो रहेछ । त्यस दिन मेरो मनमा रहेको एउटा विश्वासमा अत्यन्त नराम्रो धक्का लाग्यो : मैले ठान्ने गरेको आकाशको घपनी मानेडाँडामा उक्लँदा त अचानक कता हो कता परको कुनै डाँडातिर पो सय्यो । बादल नाच्ने, बिजुली चम्कने र चट्याड बस्ने आकाश नामको हाम्रो नीलो ढकनी निकै फराकिलो छ कि क्या हो भन्ने मलाई लाग्यो ।

आमालाई सोधेँ- 'आमा ! आकाश किन त्यति पर सरेको ?'

उहाँले छक्क पर्दै मतिर हेरेर भन्नुभयो- 'साने, आकाश त जति पर गयो तेति पर पो सँछ त !'

मलाई आफ्नो आकाश सारै मिलेको घपनी लाग्थ्यो । त्यो घपनी जथाभावी सर्ने रहेछ । यो खुसीको कुरा हुन सक्तैनथ्यो । तर जति पर जाँदा पनि हामीलाई त्यस घपनीले छोपेर सुरक्षित गरिरहने रहेछ भन्ने जान्ने । मेरो बालमनोविज्ञानमा विशालताको नमुना र त्रासको पर्याय बनेको मैवाखोलो निकै नजिकै देखियो । बर्खामा डरलाग्दो गरी उर्लँदै र एकोहोरो गर्जँदै भर्ने मैवाखोलो सुसाएको यहाँबाट प्रस्ट सुनियो । मैले आमालाई सोधेँ-

'हुमेखोलो माइमाईमा मिसिन्छ र माइमाई मैवाखोलामा मिसिन्छ । मैवाखोलोचैँ कुन खोलामा मिसिन्छ त आमा ?'

मानिसहरू यताउता गरिरहेका थिए । त्यस गाउँले हटियामा आइमाईहरू चुरा, टीका, गोलो ऐना आदिमा भुम्मिएका थिए भने मेरो ध्यान एउटा सानो भुइँपसलका गोलीमिठाईमा थियो । आमा नुन, चिनी, मट्टितेल, सलाई आदि किन्न आउनुभएको रहेछ ।

'मैवाखोलो तल बग्दै गएर दोभानमा पुगेपछि तम्मरमा मिसिन्छ । तम्मरमा हुमेखोलाजस्ता सयौँ खोला मिसिन्छन् । तेसमा माइमाई, मेवा र मैवाखोलाजस्ता खोला पनि निकैबटा आएर मिसिन्छन् । काबेली भन्ने एउटी ठूली नदी उता पूर्वबाट आएर तम्मरमै मिल्छिन् । सबैलाई आफूमा मिलाएर तम्मर शान्त भएर बहन्छिन् ।' आमाले मेरा प्रश्नको उत्तर एउटी शिक्षिकाका भैंँ दिन थाल्नुभयो ।

नदीहरूका नाम लिँदा उहाँ आदरार्थी शब्द प्रयोग गर्नुहुन्थ्यो । यसले ममा भने ती नदीप्रति भय पैदा हुन्थ्यो ।

‘आबुई ! तम्मरखोलो त कति ठूलो होला हगि ? राजा पनि तर्न सक्तैनन् होला । अनि तम्मर पनि अर्को खोलामा मिसिन्छ त ?’

‘तम्मर तलतल गएर बारछेत्रनेर पुगेर सप्तकोसीमा मिसिन्छन् ।’

‘अनि सप्तकोसी नि ?’

‘सप्तकोसी बारछेत्रभन्दा अझ तल गएर मधेसमा भर्छिन् । मधेसमा ती अत्यन्त फराक भएर फैलिन्छिन् ।’

‘एकदम फराक छ ? त्यो खोलो तर्न कति ठूलो साँगु चाहिन्छ होला हगि ?’

‘एकदम फराक छिन् कोसी । तर्न नाउ हुन्छन् । एउटा लामो न लामो पक्काको साँगु पनि छ अरे । मधेसमा साँगुलाई पुल भन्छन् ।’

‘पक्काको साँगु भनेको क्या हो आमा ?’

‘पक्काको साँगु भनेको सिमन्टीले बना’को पुल हो । सिमन्टीले बना’को पुल ढुङ्गेजतिकै बलियो हुन्छ ।’

‘अनि सप्तकोसी काँ’ जान्छ त ?’

‘सप्तकोसी तलतल गएर भारतमा पस्छिन् । भारतमा गङ्गाजी भन्ने ठूली नदी छन् । कोसी तिनै गङ्गामाईमा मिसिन्छिन् ।’

भारतमा पस्छ भनेपछि मलाई भारत भनेको कुनै ओडार वा त्यस्तै प्वालभित्रको विचित्रको संसार हुनुपर्छ भन्ने लाग्यो । मैले ठानें त्यस ओडारभित्रको भयङ्कर संसारमा बर्खामा बाढी आउँदा त्यो ठूलो गङ्गानदी माडमाईका भन्दा अझ सातो लिने गरी संसार थर्काउँदै पहराबाट खस्तो होला ।

‘अनि गङ्गा नि ? गङ्गामा संसारका सधैं नदी आएर मिसिन्छन् कि क्या हो ?’

‘गङ्गाजी त सागरै हुन् नि ! तर संसारमा गङ्गाजीमा नमिसिईकन सोभै मा’सागरमा पस्ने अरू पनि नदी छन् । सिन्धु, कावेरी। गङ्गाजी पनि बग्दैबग्दै गएर मा’सागरमा मिल्छिन् ।’ आमाले स्नान गर्दा भन्ने गर्नुभएको मन्त्र सम्झँदै गङ्गा, यमुना, गोदावरी, सरस्वती, नर्वदा, सिन्धु र कावेरी आदि नदीका नाम आदरपूर्वक लिनुभयो ।

‘अनि मा’सागर नि ?’

हाटबजारमा मानिसको घुइँचो र होहल्ला बढ्दै थियो । आमाले भनिरहनुभएका सबै राम्ररी सुन्न सकिन्नथ्यो ।

‘महासागर त पानी नै पानी हो, संसारमा एउटै मात्र मा’सागर छ । यस संसारमा भूमिभन्दा मा’सागर ठूलो छ । पृथ्वी त मा’सागरका बीचै’ अडिएको छ ।’ आमाले आफ्नो ज्ञानले भेटेसम्मको जानकारी दिनुभयो । म धात्रीलाई लिएर डरलाग्दा पहरा र ढुङ्गा पार गर्दै माडमाईको किनारैकिनार मैवाखोला, मैवाखोलाको किनारैकिनार तमोर, तमोरको किनारैकिनार सप्तकोसी र त्यसको किनारैकिनार गङ्गा अनि गङ्गाको किनारैकिनार महासागरसम्म पुग्न पाएको कल्पना गर्न थालें । धात्री मेरा माहिला काकाकी छोरी धनमाया, मेरी समवयी बहिनी । पुर्गिंदो हो नि हिँड्दै गए एक दिन महासागरसम्म !

२. लेखिहेर्नुप्यो भनेर

मैले स्कूले उमेरमै रमेश विकलको ‘सात सूर्य एक फन्को’ भन्ने चर्चित भ्रमणवृत्त पढ्ने अवसर पाएको थिएँ । काठमाडौँबाट गोसाईँकुण्ड जाँदाको सातदिने त्यो यात्रावर्णन मेरा लागि एक आदर्श यात्राकृति हो । भर्खरै उनै लेखकको ‘नीलगिरिको छाया’मा’ पढें । त्यो कृति पनि चन्द्रमा जाँदाको यात्रावर्णन होइन, हाम्रै वरिपरिका ठाउँको यात्रावर्णन पनि ढङ्ग पुऱ्याएर लेख्न सकियो भने सबैका लागि कामलाग्दो हुने रहेछ भन्ने कुराको प्रमाण हो । ‘बेलायततिर बरालिँदा’, ‘पातालप्रवास’, ‘नीलो पानी र नीला भावनाहरू’ र ‘अनाम पहाडमा फन्कनी’ जस्ता चर्चित यात्राकृति र कम चर्चामा रहेका त्यस्ता किताब अनि छोटामसिना यात्रालेखन निकै सङ्ख्यामा पढेको छु मैले । मलाई यस्ता लेखनले कति हो कति झक्झकाउँछन् ।

कतै गएर घुमी आउनेले यात्रावृत्त लेखिदिउन् भन्ने मलाई लाग्छ । अरूले गरेको यात्रावर्णन पढ्दा आफूले पनि लेख्न सके हुने थियो भन्ने पनि लागिरहन्छ । लेख्ने नै हो भने सर्वप्रथम मैले मिक्लाजोड-यात्रावर्णन लेख्नु बेस हुन्छ, किनभने मिक्लाजोड भन्ने डाँडाको यात्रा निकै कम मानिसले गरेका छन् । मोरङ, पाँचथर, इलाम र धनकुटा जिल्लालाई जोड्ने यो तीन हजार दुई सय मिटरजति अग्लो डाँडो मेरो घर इटहराबाट नजिकै पर्छ । सन्ताउन्न सालमा दाजु जीवन र भतिजा दीपकसँग गरेको चारदिने पैदलयात्रा हो त्यो, अब त सबै विवरण ठीकसँग सम्झन्न होला लेख्नु भने । तर मिक्लाजोडयात्रामाथि लेखिएको पुस्तक पढ्न मैले पाएको छैन ।

पूर्वपश्चिम राजमार्गमा विराटनगर-धरानबाट गाईघाट र कटारीतिर जाने गाडीहरूले मलाई एउटा सूचना र हाँक दिइरहन्थे । तीमध्ये केही गाडीका पानीपेट वा पीठपट्टि राम्रा र ठूला अक्षरमा 'हलेसी-दर्शन' लेखिएको हुन्थ्यो । केही छिमेकी र साथी खोटाङबाटै आएका भए पनि हलेसी भन्ने तीर्थस्थल मेरा लागि एकादेशको थियो । मध्यदिनमा तारा देख्न पाइने त्यस अलौकिक भूमिले बसका पीठ र पेटका अक्षरका भाषामा नै मलाई तान्न खोज्थ्यो । म मेरा हजुरबाका कुराहरू सम्झन पुगें । हजुरबा सातसालतिर ताप्लेजुङबाट पहाडैपहाड उकालो, ओरालो, भीरपाखा, जङ्गल, गाउँबेंसी हुँदै काठमाडौँ जाने क्रममा आफू हलेश्वर महादेवको दर्शन गर्न पाएको कहानी गर्नुहुन्थ्यो । दन्त्यकथा भन्ने शैलीमा हजुरबा आफू पापद्वार, धर्मद्वार र गर्भद्वारबाट सहजै छिर्न सकेको पुरुषार्थ सुनाउनुहुन्थ्यो ।

आमाले अन्ठाउन्न सालमा पूर्वका पशुपति भनिने ती हलेश्वर महादेवको दर्शन गर्न जाऔँ भन्नुभयो । गयौँ । आमाका प्रेरणाले मैले पनि हजुरबाले छिरेका पापद्वार र धर्मद्वार छिर्न पाएँ ! दसदिने त्यो यात्रा आमा-छोरा दुईजना मात्र एकसाथ हुनपाएको सबैभन्दा लामो सहयात्रा पनि थियो । गाईघाटबाट डाँडैडाँडा पहाड, पहाडी जनजीवन र टाढा देखिने हिमालको रमिता हेर्दै अनि बाटामा दहीदूध, रसिला सुन्तला, उसिनेका इस्कुस-फर्सी, ठिकीमा कुटेको धान र जाँतोमा पिसेको मकैको मीठो भात खाँदै, पहाडी मूलको चिसो-चोखो पानी पिउँदै र पहाडी ग्रामवासीहरूको सुकिलो माया बटुल्दै कति हतार नगरी हामी आमा-छोराले दस दिन लगाएर गरेको उकालीओरालीको त्यो यात्राप्रसङ्ग लेख्नलायक छ ।

यात्रावर्णन वा यात्राकथा-लेखनको उद्देश्यका बारे म अनभिज्ञ छु । अरूले लेख्छन्, त्यसैले मैले पनि लेख्ने जमर्को गरेको हुँ । मानिस यात्रा गरिरहेको बेला खालि भौगोलिक मात्र यात्रा गर्दैन्, ऊ आफ्नो मनभित्रको संसारमा पनि विचरण गरिरहेको हुन्छ । ऊ आफ्नो आत्मा, विचार वा कल्पनाको यात्रालाई बेलाबेला बाहिरी दुनियाँसँग जम्काभेट गराउँछ । मेरो बुझाइमा यी दुईबाट उत्पन्न हुने नयाँ अनुभूतिको अभिव्यक्ति नै नियात्रा हो । सँगै उही यात्रामा हिँडेका दुई साथीले यात्राडायरी बनाए भने पनि ती दुई यात्राडायरी अत्यन्त भिन्नै हुनेछन् । यात्रासँगै मनमा उत्पन्न हुने प्रत्येक तरङ्ग, भय, सङ्कोच, आशा, निराशा, सन्तुष्टि आदि भावहरूलाई सञ्चय तथा साटासाट गर्न पाइने हुनाले यस्ता यात्राविवरण लेख्नु र पढ्नु दुवैमा मजा देख्छु म ।

तर बेलाबेला आफूले बाँचेको जिन्दगी र आफूले देखेको संसारमा नौलोपन केही छैन, के लेखिरहनु जस्तो पनि लाग्ने गर्छ !

३. गफयात्री

मैले पढाउने गरेको विद्यालयका शिक्षकमित्रहरू कहिले छोटो त कहिले लामो भ्रमणमा निस्कौँ भनेर कुराकानी गर्नुहुन्छ । भ्रमणमा निस्कने विषयमा चर्चा गरेर मन बहलाउनमा हामी सिपालु भइसकेका छौँ । कहिले दक्षिण भारतको बीस-बाइसदिने यात्राको कल्पना गर्छौँ त कहिले हामी पानीजहाज चढेर अन्डमान र निकोबार टापु निस्कन्छौँ । कलकत्ता, मद्रास, बम्बई र अजमेर त हामी कल्पनाको रेल चढेर कतिपल्ट पुगिसक्यौँ । एकदुईपल्ट त बङ्गलादेश, पाकिस्तान वा मरिससको गफयात्रामा दसबाह्रजना सपरिवार निस्केका छौँ ।

हामीमध्ये कोही न कोहीले ती स्थानका बारेमा निकै जानेको हुन्छ । चित्र, पुस्तक अनि विश्वज्ञानकोष पल्टाएर ती ठाउँका बारेमा मनगो जानकारी बोकेर हामी कल्पनायात्रा गर्ने गर्छौँ । हामीमध्ये कोही आसाम घुमेको हुन्छ, कोही मसुरी वा नैनीताल वा कलकत्ता पुगेको हुन्छ, ऊ हामीलाई अरूथोक केही गर्न नभ्याए पनि आफूले घुमेको त्यो सहर नघुमी नमर्न सल्लाह दिन्छ ।

२०६२ असोजको सुरुतिरको प्रसङ्ग, केही सहकर्मी साथीहरू मिलेर सँगै कलकत्ता घुम्न जाने भनेर छलफल गर्नु । टीकाजी, कुमुदजी, मनुजी, मनोजजी, श्रीधरजी, गौतमसर र अरू केही साथीहरू मिलेर दसैँको छुट्टीमा कलकत्ता हेर्न

जाने कुरो उठ्यो । मेरो कुरै नगरौं, मलाई त हिँड्न पाए पुग्यो । मदर् टेरेसाको कलकत्ता पुग्न पाइने देखेर म निकै उत्साहित र उत्तेजित थिएँ । निकै दिनसम्म हाम्रा बीच गफको विषय नै 'कलकत्ता' भएको थियो ।

जाने भनिएको तिथि नजिकिँदै आयो । टीकाजीलाई सोधेँ- 'तयारी कस्तो चल्यो छ ?'

'खै, म त जान पाउँछु जस्तो छैन । निकै वर्ष थुनिएको दसैं बल्ल यसपालि खुल्ला जस्तो छ ।' टीकाजीले आफ्नो परिवार ठूलो भएकाले कि त जन्म कि त मरण भइदिएर दसैं थुनिइरहने पीडा व्यक्त गर्नुभयो । धेरै भाइ हजुरबाहरू र अनगिन्ती काका-बाबुहरू हुनेका लागि दसैं छेकिइरहन्छ, अनि आएको दसैं ठूलो भएर आउँछ । उहाँले भन्नुभयो- 'दसैंको तयारी गर्नु छ ।'

कुमुदजीलाई सोधेँ- 'के छ त खबर ?' कुमुदजी बङ्गाली बोलचाल गर्न मजासँग सक्ने भएकाले कलकत्ता जाँदा उहाँको साथ लागेर जान पाए सजिलो पर्ने हुन्थ्यो । तर कुमुदजीका एकजना बडाबा खस्नुभएछ । मनै खस्कियो । उहाँ पनि जान नपाउने हुनुभयो ।

दामोदरजी आफ्नो मूल घर आसाम जाने भएँ भन्न थाल्नुभयो । कट्टेलजी आफ्नी आमाको स्वास्थ्यपरीक्षण गराउन काठमाडौँ जाने हुनुभएछ । मनुजीसँग सम्पर्क गरेँ । उहाँले पनि असमर्थता जनाउनुभयो । शर्माजी र नेपालजी 'यी कोही कतै जाँदैनन्' भन्दै सम्पर्क नै नगरी भापा अर्थात् आफ्ना घरतिर लागिस्क्नुभएछ । मनोजजीलाई सोधेको त यसो भन्नुभयो- 'कुमुदजी नजाने भए कलकत्ता जानुको के मजा ?' उहाँ पनि तयार देखिनुभएन । उस्तै जबाफ आउला भनेर गौतमसरलाई सोधिरहन मनै लागेन । जाने भनिएको समय आउन लाग्दा कोही पनि तयार हुने देखिएन । हामीले त्यत्रो दिन लगाएर बनाएका योजना खालि फुर्सत कटाउने गफमै सीमित भएका थिए ।

४. अन्त नगए पनि राँचीचाहिँ जाऔँ

हामी दुवैको दसैंविदा सुरु भयो । केही दिनअघिदेखि कलकत्ता जाने भनेर विश्वज्ञानकोष र अन्य पुस्तकहरूबाट कलकत्ताको भूगोल, इतिहास, सामान्य ज्ञान, कलकत्ता र उपनगरीय क्षेत्रका महत्त्वपूर्ण ठाउँका बारेमा अतिरिक्त जानकारी लिन निकै रात कम्प्युटरमा बसेँ । कलकत्ताका बारेमा आफ्ना लागि काम लाग्ने ठानेका निकै सूचना सङ्कलन गरिसकेको थिएँ ।

२०६२ साल असोज सत्र गते सोमवार । दुइटा फिल्म रोल र ब्याटरी किनेँ, फोटो खिच्नका लागि । छोरीहरू र श्रीमतीका लागि नक्कली टप किनेँ । यात्रामा सुन बोकेर चोरसँग किन माछामाछा भ्यागुता खेल्नु र ! अरू सामान भारततिरै किन्ने भएँ ।

मैले सीतालाई भनेँ- 'यात्रामा गह्रौँ सामान र लुगाफाटा बोक्नु ठीक हुँदैन । भरसक आइरन लगाइरहन नपर्ने खालका, पातला र सजिलै सुक्ने लुगा ठीक हुन्छन् ।'

कतै हिँड्न लाग्दा आधा घेरै बोकेर हिँड्न खोज्ने मेरी श्रीमती यसपल्ट भने निकै बुझ्झकी भएर देखा परिन् ।

हामी दुईले मौसमअनुसारका र भरसक पातला र धुन-सुकाउन सजिला कपडा छान्यौँ । सीता त फोटा खिच्दा नराम्रा कपडा देखिन्छन्, अलिक धेरै कपडा लैजाऔँ भन्न खोज्दै थिइन्, मैले त्यसो होइन भनेँ । क्यामरा, बुरुस, हलुका चप्पल, पातलो तौलिया, सकिन लागेको टुथपेस्ट, साना साबुन, केही प्याकेट सेम्पु, दारी काट्ने सामान र शृङ्गारका हलुका सामान ठीक पायौँ । हिँड्दा बोकेरै लग्न सकिने दुइटा भोला तयार भए । केही दिनदेखि पानी परिरहे पनि एउटा पुरानो छाता मात्र बोक्ने निर्णय गर्‍यो, पानी थामिएपछि छाता घाँडो हुने भएर ।

छोरीहरूको फुर्तीफाँती हेर्नलायक थियो । कतै हिँड्ने भनेपछि ठूली छोरी पूजा अचम्मै चम्कन्छे, सानी अनुजाचाहिँ उस्तो उफ्रन् ।

यात्राको विषयमा आम-आइमाईभन्दा सीता अलि भिन्न छिन् । यात्रा भनेपछि उनलाई प्यारालाइसिस हुन्छ । यसपल्टको भ्रमणप्रति त भन्नु उनको एकजात रुचि थिएन । यात्राको प्रसङ्गमा साँच्चै भन्ने हो भने मेरी पत्नी रूखजस्तै हुन्, खुट्टाबाट जरा पलाएर भुइँमा गाडिन्छन् । उनलाई माइत जान पनि अल्छी लाग्छ, माइत पुगेपछि इटहरी फर्किनुपर्दा

वाक्क लाग्छ । मेरी आमा इटहराको घरमा बस्नुहुन्छ, खेतीपाती छ, आफन्त, र काका-दाजुभाइहरू हुनुहुन्छ, चाडबाड र अरू बेला पनि गइरहुनुपर्छ । घर भनेको घर हो, तर सीतालाई घर जान भनेपछि कति हो कति हैरान लाग्छ, घरबाट इटहरी डेरा फर्कन फेरि उस्तै नरमाइलो लाग्छ । हजार कामकुरामा फुर्तिली मेरी सीता कतै जान भनेपछि अचम्मकी लोसे छिन् ।

त्यसैले यसपल्ट भारत जाने भन्दा उनलाई दिक्दार लाग्नु सामान्य कुरो थियो । तर अन्त्यमा उनलाई घुम्ने कुरामा सहमत गराउन हामी अर्थात् पूजा र म सफल भयौं । अब यात्राका लागि सबभन्दा आवश्यक कुरो जुटाउनु बाँकी थियो । क्लोथ हाउसमा टेलिफोन गरें-

‘राठीजी ! अलिकति भा.रु. चाहिया थ्यो.....!’

‘कतिजति चाहिने होला सर.....?’

मैले आफूलाई चाहिने जति भनें ।

‘अहिले त अलिक पुग्दैन सर, भरे पाँच बजेतिर भए हुँदैन ?’

किन हुँदैनथ्यो ! आफूलाई त भोलिपल्ट बिहानसम्ममा भए पनि भइहाल्थ्यो नि !

भारतीय पैसाको पनि सजिलै बन्दोबस्त भयो ।

बेलुका खानपिनपछि भोलिपल्ट सुरु हुने यात्राको विषयमा पारिवारिक बैठक बस्यो । पूजा र म भारतको नक्सा अगाडि राखेर ठूलो स्वरमा चर्कीचर्की बहस गर्न थाल्यौं । कुरैकुरामा कहिले अजमेर, जैसलमेर, बम्बई, गोआ, मद्रास, हैदराबाद, बङ्गलोर, पुरी, भोपाल, दिल्ली, जयपुर, लखनऊ, आगरा, राँची र पटना पुग्थ्यौं । नक्सामा सडक र रेलमार्ग देखाउने काला-राता धर्का हेर्दै हामी यताबाट यता जाने, यति किलोमिटरजति र यति रुपियाँ लाग्नसक्ने भनेर बहस गर्थ्यौं । यीयी सहर यतियति दिन घुम्ने, यीयी सहरमा बास बस्ने र यीयी कुरा हेर्ने भनेर नक्सामा औंला घुमाउँथ्यौं । सानी छोरी अनुजा पर्यवेक्षक र श्रीमती सीता टिप्पणीकर्ता ।

हामीले यात्राका लागि यस्तो बाटो तय गर्थ्यौं : भोलि बिहान इटहरीबाट काठमाडौँको दिवा बसमा चढेर नारायणगढसम्म जाने, त्यसपछि धनगढी जाने बस चढेर धनगढी अनि महेन्द्रनगर पुग्ने । महेन्द्रनगरबाट भारतको मिरुत हुँदै दिल्ली जाने । दिल्ली दुई दिन घुमेर सिमला, बिकानेर र त्यसपछि जैसलमेर पुग्ने । जैसलमेरबाट उदयपुर, मन्दसौर, भोपाल, जबलपुर, भरतपुर, रिवा, बनारस हुँदै पटना आउने । पटनाबाट जनकपुर निस्केर इटहरी फर्कने । समयको हिसाब गर्थ्यौं- यति बाटो त ट्रेन र मोटरमा दौडिन पनि कम्तीमा पन्ध्र दिन लाग्ने देखियो । योजना काँचो ठहरियो । कलकत्ता यस यात्रामार्गमा थिएन, किनभने कलकत्ताचाहिँ यस वर्ष नभए पनि सहकर्मी साथीहरूसँगै कुनै समय-सालमा सपरिवार जाने भनेर छुट्याइएको थियो ।

कुनै मार्ग तय भएन । सीता हाम्रा कुरा सुनेर हाँसिन् । उनले भनिन्- ‘अन्त नगए पनि राँचीचाहिँ जाऔं, तिमीहरू दुवैको उपचार नगरी नहोला जस्तो छ !’

कहाँ र कसरी जाने भन्ने कुनै योजना थिएन, दस दिनको यात्रा गर्ने भन्ने मात्र लगभग अठोट थियो । दस दिनभन्दा बढी समय घुमे यता दसैँ भ्याइन्थ्यो ।

५. अनिश्चित क्षितिजतिर

सीतालाई मैले भनें- ‘दसैँको मुख हो, काठमाडौँबाट पूर्व आउने मानिसको चापाचाप छ । पूर्व आउने बसहरू जति भीड भए पनि पश्चिम जाने बस खाली हुनुपर्ने हो । यहाँबाट नारायणगढ जाऔं । नारायणगढबाट धनगढीका लागि गाडी पक्रन प्रयास गरौं । दसैँको भीडले धनगढी जान गाडी पाइएन भने भैरहवा पसौं । छोरीहरूलाई लुम्बिनी घुमाऔं ।’

लुम्बिनीको नाम सुनेपछि पूजा खुसीले उफ्रन थाली- ‘हो, हो । लुम्बिनी जाने !’

‘धनगढी पुग्न पाइयो भने ?’ सीताले सोधिन् ।

‘चर्चित टनकपुर बाँध हेरौला, त्यतैबाट दिल्ली लागौला । दिल्ली पुगेपछि कता लाग्ने भन्ने उहीँबाट योजना बनाऔँला ।’

‘टनकपुर न सनकपुर, लुम्बिनी जाने । पछि साथीहरूलाई बुद्ध जन्मेको लुम्बिनी घुमेको सुनाउँदा कति रमाइलो हुन्छ ?’ पूजाले आफ्नो तर्क तेर्स्यो ।

‘तपाईं उरन्ठेउला केटाका भैं हिँड्न खोज्नुहुन्छ, सिङ्गै घरपरिवार लिएर यसरी पनि कोही हिँड्छ ? न कहाँ जाने भन्ने योजना छ, न कहिले र कति दिन घुम्न निस्कने भन्ने आफैँलाई थाहा छ, यस्तो पनि कसैले गर्छ ?’

‘हामी भनेका त संसारका महाराजा-महारानी पो त ! जहाँ गए पनि लाखौँ मानिस स्वागत र सुरक्षाका लागि तयार भइहाल्छन्, के छ र !’ मैले टेढो जवाफ दिएँ ।

२०६२ साल असोज अठार गते मङ्गलवार । चारै बजे उठेर हतारहतार तयारी गरे पनि डेराबाट भोला बोकेर सडकमा निस्कँदा सात बजिहाल्यो । काठमाडौँबाट आउने रात्रिवस र जाने दिवा बसहरू गइरहेका थिए । काठमाडौँबाट आउने मात्र होइन उता जाने गाडीहरू पनि उत्तिकै खचाखच देखिए । म निराश भएँ । समयमै टिकट काटेको भए त्यस्ता खचाखच गाडीमा उभिएर जानुपर्ने थिएन ।

लामो बाटो हिँड्न एउटा परिवार पोकापुन्तुरा लिएर सडकमा आइपुगेको देखेर एउटा रिक्सा हामीनिर आयो । मैले सबैलाई त्यसमा चढ्न भनेँ । सीता छक्क परिन्- ‘पश्चिम जानेले किन रिक्सा चढ्नुपर्छ ? बसपार्कसम्म त हिँडेरै पुगिहाल्छथ्यो नि !’

रिक्सा बसपार्कतिर नलगेर मैले इटहरीचोकतिर लगें । दक्षिणपट्टि माइक्रोबस कुद्न ठीक परेको थियो । हामीलाई देखेर होला, खलासी भन् जोडजोडले कराउन थाल्यो- ‘विराटनगर ! विराटनगर !’

मैले सीतालाई भनेँ - ‘अब जोगबनी जाने । जोगबनीबाट कटिहार अनि त्यहाँबाट पटना जाने । आज पटना पुगिन्छ होला ।’

सीता केही बोलिनन् । असोजको अठार गते, यस समयमा झलमल्ल घाम लागेको हुनुपर्ने, तर दुईतीन दिनदेखि झमझम पानी परिरहेको छ । मानिसहरू यस वर्षको दसैं हिलेदसैं हुनेभो भनेर चिन्तित देखिन थालेका छन् । सीताको अनुहारमा मौसमभैँ अध्यारोपन छाइरहेको थियो ।

६. लु अब फिरौँ

हामी माइक्रो-बस चढेर विराटनगर पुग्यौँ । अनि मिनीबस चढेर जोगबनीतिर लाग्यौँ । विराटनगर-जोगबनीका थोत्रा मिनीबस चढ्नु भनेको जीवनभरिका अनौठा अनुभवमध्ये एक हो । साँगुरा मिनिबसमा खाँदाखाँद गर्दै चढ्नुपर्छ, बसको कुनै भागमा लुगाले छोयो कि त्यो च्यातियो । थोत्रे टिनले टालटुल र बेरबार पारेको त्यस सवारीसाधनको नाम पनि बस नै हो । त्यसले तपाईंको लुगा च्यातेन भने तपाईंको होसियारीलाई मान्नेपर्छ । म्युजियममा राख्नका लागि पनि थोत्रा लाग्ने बस चढ्ने मन भए विराटनगर-जोगबनी गर्नुपर्छ ।

जोगबनी नेपाल-भारत सीमामा अवस्थित अव्यवस्थित सानो व्यापारिक बजार हो । त्यहाँ नेपाली ग्राहकहरूलाई लक्षित गरी भारतीय सामानले भरिभराउ सयौँ पसलहरू छन् । त्यहाँका पसलमा नेपाली रुपियाँ यताको जस्तै गरी चल्छ । तपाईंले कुनै सामानको दाम सोध्नुभयो भने पसलेले नेपाली मुद्रामै भन्नेछ । त्यताका व्यापारीले नेपाली भाषा जानेनन् भने तिनको व्यापार नै चल्दैन । ती आफ्ना ठूला नेपाली ग्राहकलाई व्यक्तिगत रूपमै राम्ररी चिन्छन् र उधारोमा समेत सामान दिन्छन् । उनीहरूका चिनारु, आफन्त र हिस्सेदारहरूका पसल विराटनगर, इटहरी, धरान, उर्लावारी आदि सहरहरूमा पनि छन् । नेपाली ग्राहक नजाने हो भने जोगबनीका सबै पसल बन्द गरे हुन्छ ।

पानी अलि थामिएजस्तो त भयो तर आकाश नराम्ररी धुम्मिएकै थियो । छोरीहरू भारत हेर्न पाएकामा प्रसन्न थिए । जोगबनीबाट कटिहार जाने बस निकै अबेरपछि मात्र छुट्ने रहेछन्, त्यसैले हामी स्थानीय जीपमा चढेर फारबिसगन्जसम्म पुग्यौँ । त्यहाँबाट कटिहारका लागि सरकारी बस पक्रियो । यात्रामा पानी साथै हुनुपर्छ भनेर म एक बोतल मिनरल वाटर किन्न लगें । बसको हिँड्ने बेला भएछ । भारतीय बस हामीकहाँ जस्तो घ्यारंघ्यार पारेर आधा घण्टा बस्तेनन् । समय हुनासाथ हाम्रो बस कुदिहालेछ, जिन्दगीमा भारत नपसेकी बिचरी सीताको सातोपुत्लो उड्ने नै

भयो । यताउति सबै अनौठा अनुहारका र नचिनेका मात्रै छन्, कर्कश स्वरमा अनि हिन्दी मात्र बोल्छन्, उनलाई हिन्दी बोल्न नआउने, नयाँ ठाउँ, आफ्नो लोग्नेलाई छाडेर गाडी त हुईकिइहाल्यो । सीता कराउन थालिछन्-

‘रुकिजिए न भाइजी, रुकिजिए, ठेरिए... हामरा मान्छे छुट गिया.....!’

‘यहाँ भएको भए खलासी, कन्डक्टर र ड्राइभरहरूले यात्रुलाई दुःख दिने नियत नभए पनि अत्याएर रमाइलो मनाउने थिए, तर त्यताका बिहारीसमेत हामीकहाँ जस्ता हुँदैनन् । कन्डक्टरले भनेछ-

‘बहनजी, घबराइये मत । हम आपके आदमी को लेकर ही जाएंगे ।’ स्टेन्डबाट बस समयमा हिँड्ने पने नियम भएकाले तिनले अलिक तल लगेर रोकेछन् । मिनरल वाटर खोज्न दोकान-दोकान चाहार्नुपरेकाले म ढिलो हुन पुगेँछु । बिचरा खलासी खोज्दैखोज्दै म भएठाउँ आइपुग्यो । दौडिदैदौडिदै गएर बसमा चढेँ । छोरीहरू आफ्नी आमाको हिन्दी भाषा सुनेर भरे मरीमरी हाँस्ते थिए ।

बस अररिया हुँदै पुर्णियाँ पुग्यो । पुर्णियाँ पुग्दा फेरि पानी दक्कै सबैतिर जलमग्न भएको देखियो । भूरीका कारण नै होला, मोटरमा यात्रुहरू अत्यन्त कम थिए । कन्डक्टर अब गाडी त्यसभन्दा अगाडि जाँदैन भन्न थाल्यो । हामीलाई अर्को गाडीमा चढ्न भनियो । अलिक पर पुगेपछि नयाँ गाडीको कन्डक्टरले साना छोरीहरूको भाडा लाग्छ भन्न थाल्यो । हामी किन अगिको गाडीको कन्डक्टरसँग यस विषयमा उतिखेरै नभनेको भनेर विवाद गर्न थाल्यौं । हामीलाई लिएर पुर्णियाँसम्म आउने गाडीका यात्रु स्वीकार गर्ने बेलैमा हाम्रो टिकट देखेपछि यस्तो कुरा गर्नुपर्थ्यो भनेर मैले प्रतिवाद गरें । अन्त्यमा उसले मेरो कुरा मान्यो । बसबाहिर मध्यसाउनका जस्तै घनघोर वर्षा भइरहेको थियो, सीता गनगन गर्न थालिन्-

‘यो महाभूरीमा केको यात्रा गर्नुपरेको यस मानिसलाई, घरैमा आनन्दले सुत्नु नि सिरक ओडेर दिनभरि !’

म बोलिनँ । बोलै अष्टचारो पारिरहेको थियो मौसमले । साँच्चै यस्तै भूरी परिरहने हो भने त के गति हुन्छ हाम्रो यात्राको ? बाह्र वर्षमा लोग्ने घर आ'को मै अलच्छिनीलाई जरो आ'को भनेभै हुन्छ कि क्या हो भन्ने भइरह्यो ।

‘यहीँ बस्न आएका हैनौं क्यारे, पश्चिमतिर जाने पो त ! अहिले पानी परे पनि भोलिपर्सिसम्म त कसो परिरहला र !’ आफ्नै भनाइमाथि विश्वास नभईनभई सान्त्वनाका लागि भनँ ।

कटिहार पुगियो । दिनको डेढ बजेको थियो । पानी त बिर्बिर मात्र पर्दै थियो तर धुम्मिएर दिनै कालो भएको थियो । ससारको भद्रगोल देश भारत, भारतको सबैभन्दा भद्रगोल राज्य बिहार, बिहारको सबैभन्दा गाएगुज्जेको सहर कटिहार र कटिहारको सबैभन्दा गाएगुज्जेको गल्ली रेलवे जङ्गल जाने बाटो । फोहोरको कुरै नगरौं । हिलो पनि अचम्मको कालोमैलो । रिक्सा, टेम्पो, कुल्ली र होटलेपसलेको चिच्याहट पनि कति कर्कशलाग्दो, खै के भन्ने ! यसै त बिहारीहरू कर्कश स्वरमा चिच्याएर मात्र कुरा गर्छन्, त्यसमाथि कटिहारकाहरूको त कहानी नगर्दै पनि काफी छ । दिउँसोको भीड छ, भोला बोकेका नेपाली देखेपछि होटलवालाहरू तानुंला जस्तै गर्छन्-

‘इधर आइए भाईजी ! आइए बहनजी ! चावल तैयार है ! रोटी तैयार है !’

बिहान खाना त खाइएकै हो, तर हिँड्ने काउकुतीले कति पो खान सकिएको थियो र ! छोरीहरू भोकाइसकेका थिए । छेउको होटलमा पसेर तात्तातो भातको अर्डर दियो । एउटा निकै मैलो लुगा लगाएको बिहारीले मोटा न मोटा चामलको भात ल्याएर दियो । दाल, तरकारी, अचार आदि त थियो तर सबैथोकमा खानै नसकिने गरी नुन । तरकारीमा अरूथोकभन्दा खोर्सानी धेरै थियो, दालमा खोर्सानीका बियाँ र रहरका दाना बराबर भने हुने । यति भनिसकेपछि अचारको विषयमा केही भनिरहनुपर्दैन ।

सीतालाई उच्च रक्तचापको समस्या छ, त्यसैले हाम्रो परिवारको खानामा नुन, मसला र तेल निकै कम हुन्छ । कसैकसैकहाँ खाना खाने गरी पाहुना लाग्न जानुपर्दा खानामा हालिने मसला र नुन सम्भेर हामीलाई जाँगर मरेर आउँछ । बिहारीहरू नुन-खोर्सानी अत्यन्त कडा खान्छन् । अबका केही दिन यस्तै खानुपर्ने भयो भनेर सीता निराश भइन् । खाना खाइसकेपछि उनले भनिन्-

‘लु अब फिरौं घर.. । यति घुमिहालियो । घुम्नका लागि छुट्याएको खर्चले जोगबनीमा राम्राराम्रा कपडा र साडी किनौं । हामीले आफ्ना दिदीबहिनीलाई कहिल्यै यसो कामलाग्ने कपडा दिन सकेका छैनौं, यसपालिको यात्राखर्च जोगाएर त्यो काम गरौं । दसैं आइसकेको छ, घर पुग्दा आमा कति खुसी हुनुहोला हगि !’

होटलबाहिर अहिले भ्रमभ्रम पानी परिरहेको थियो । दिन धुम्मिएर दुई नबजी साँझजस्तो लाग्थ्यो । बाटो कचकच हिलाले कतै गईसक्नु थिएन । म सडकतिर हेरेर एकोहोरिएँ । यही बिहार हो सारा विश्वलाई ज्ञान र चेतना बाँड्ने,

कहिले महावीर त कहिले बुद्धको शान्ति बनेर, कहिले चाणक्य त कहिले अशोक बनेर । बिहारको संस्कृति, सभ्यता, विकास, सम्पन्नता र सुख विश्वमा नमुना थियो कुनै दिन । भारतीय सभ्यताको केन्द्र मेरो छिमेकी बिहार आज कचकच हिलामा छ । कटिहारको त्यस टहरे होटलको ओसिलो बेन्चमा बसेर मैले सिङ्गे भारतवर्षको इतिहास सम्भें । सुसंस्कृत भारतीय आर्यसभ्यता र त्यसको गौरवको एक हिस्सा म पनि हुँ । मेरो मन भएर पुराण, रामायण, महाभारत, रघुवंश आए, भवभूति, कालिदास, भारवि, चाणक्य, राम, कृष्ण आए, गौतम बुद्ध आए, अशोक आए । म एक हिन्दू, हिन्दूहरूको मात्र होइन बौद्धहरूको महातीर्थ हो बिहार । बिहार बिहारीहरूको मात्र होइन, भारतीयहरूको मात्र होइन, सिङ्गे एसियाली र विश्वकै अनन्य तपोभूमि हो ।

हामी सभ्य, सुसंस्कृत हिन्दूहरूलाई आततायी मुगलहरू आएर तह लगाए । अङ्ग्रेज आए, चुस्नुसम्म चुसे अनि अन्त्यमा छाडेर गए । के हो त हाम्रो सभ्यता आज यसरी डडडडती गनाउनुको कारण ? आज हाम्रो छिमेकी बिहार डकैती, चोरी, लुटपाट, अन्याय, हत्या, बलात्कार, घुसखोरी, भ्रष्टाचार, गुन्डागर्दी, धाँधलीजस्ता सबै सामाजिक अपराध र दुर्गुणहरूको घर भएको छ । यो गरिबी, अशिक्षा, भोकमरी, अभाव, कुपोषण, रोग, अन्धकार, बेरोजगारी र अवनतिको पर्याय भएको छ । बिहार एक घिनलाग्दो र असुरक्षित ठाउँ भएको छ । पचाससाठी वर्षको प्रजातन्त्रसमेत कुहेर बिहार त्यसैमा डुबेको छ ।

त्यस गल्लीको फोहोर र हिलाले भारत भन्ने देशको अव्यवस्था, दुर्गति र कुरूपता बडो स्पष्टसँग दर्साइरहेको थियो । अब हामीसँग गरिबी, अभाव, भ्रष्टाचार र चोरवृत्तिबाहेक केही बाँकी छैन भन्ने बुझ्न यो हिलो सबैभन्दा ठूलो सूचनापाटी भएको थियो । हामीबाट हुने छाडापन, भ्रष्ट मनोवृत्ति र अकर्मण्यताको निर्लज्ज प्रस्तुति हेर्न कतै गइरहनुपर्दैन, हामी जहाँ छौं त्यहीं प्रदर्शन गर्न थालिहाल्छौं । गरिबी र अभावप्रति हामीमा गर्व छ ।

अब त्यहाँ बसिरहन समय थिएन । मैले श्रीमतीलाई भनें- 'डुल्ल जाँदै छौं भनेर साथीहरूसँग र छरछिमेकमा हामीले त्यत्रो हल्ला गरेका छौं, कटिहारबाट फर्कौं भने हामीलाई सबैले के भन्लान् ?'

'तपाईं जहिल्यै गर्नुभन्दा पहिले यो गर्छु र त्यो गर्छु भन्दै हल्ला गर्नुहुन्छ, अनि समस्यामा परिँदैन त ?'

पूजा ढिपी कस्न थाली- 'फर्कनुहुँदैन, घुम्न जाने! जाने.....! नफर्कने..... !'

श्रीमती नफर्कने कुरामा सहमत भइन् । एकातिर मौसम यस्तो कुरूप छ, अर्कातिर सीताभित्र भारतभूमिमा पस्ता हुने असुरक्षाको भय छ । एकलो श्रीमान्कै भरमा डुल्ल उनको मन डराएको थियो । वरिपरि घुमिरहेका यी डरलाग्दा बिहारीले आफ्नो लोग्नेलाई केही गरिहाले भने ? विरामी परियो भने ? साथी कोही छैन, हारगुहार कोही छैन, घरदेखि यति टाढाको ठाउँ, भाषा, रङरूप चालामाला नमिल्ने यस पराई भूमिमा एकलो लोग्नेका भरमा यात्रा गर्न उनको भित्री मन डराइरहेको थियो । लोग्नेका अगाडि साँचो मन खोलुन् भने उसले भन्ला- 'मलाई तिमीले के सम्झेको ? त्यति पनि आँट छैन ममा ? यति पनि भर छैन ममाथि ? बिचरी सीते, तिमी कति दुःखी नि ! यति पनि भरोसा गर्न नसकिने मानिससँग सिङ्गे जीवन कसरी बिताउँछ्यौ त ? कुन बाध्यताले मसँग जीवनको यस महायात्रामा निस्केकी त ?'

रेलवे प्लेटफार्ममा पुग्यौं । मैले टिकट काउन्टरमा गएर सोधें- 'पटना जाने गाडी कतिखेर आउला ?' भारतीय रेलगाडी सूचनापाटीमा दिइएको समयअनुसार हतपत आउँदैन भने हुन्छ ।

'चार बजे ।' उत्तर सायद यस्तै थियो, राम्ररी बुझिन्न ।

'कति बजे पटना पुग्ला ?'

'रातको दुई बजे ।'

रातको दुई बजे पटनाजस्तो असुरक्षित सहरमा ट्रेनबाट ओर्लेर के गर्ने अनि कता जाने ? मलाई पटना जान जाँगर चलेन । बरु भागलपुर अलिक नजिकको सहर हो, त्यतै जानु ठीक होला भनेर भागलपुरका लागि कतिखेर ट्रेन जाने हो भनेर सोधें । कटिहारबाट भागलपुर जाने त रेलगाडी नै रहेनछ !

'आटो' पक्कर भागलपुर जाने बसपार्क गयौं । पानी परिरहेकै थियो । बसपार्क हेर्दा काम नलागेर छाडेको ठाउँजस्तो लाग्ने खालको । त्यहाँ धेरै बस पनि थिएनन् ।

बस तीन बजे छुट्ने रहेछ । टिकट-काउन्टर हेर्दै अत्यन्त अव्यवस्थित । टिकट-काउन्टर नै कहाँ हो भनेर सात ठाउँ सोध्नुपर्ने, कहींकतै सूचनापाटी छैन । टिकटघरमै पुगेर म टिकट काट्ने कहाँ हो भनेर सोध्न पुगेँछु !

'भागलपुर कतिखेर पुगिन्छ होला ?' मैले सोधें ।

‘सात-साढे सात बजे ।’ काउन्टरको मानिसले भन्यो । त्यतै जानु ठीक होला जस्तो लाग्यो । त्यस गाडीबाट भागलपुर जाने टिकट काट्नेमा म पहिलो व्यक्ति भएँ । तीन बजिसक्ता पनि कुनै यात्रुले टिकट काटेनन् । तर समय भएपछि बस हिँडिहाल्यो, सरकारी बस भएकाले ढिलाइचाहिँ गर्दा रहेनछन् ।

७. नेपालमा राजा भएकै राम्रो

यात्रु त्यति थिएनन् । बस सानो र थोत्रो । जहाँ पायो त्यहीँ रोक्ने । गाडीमा क्रमशः यात्रु भरिँदै आए । कटिहार सहर छोड्दा बसका लगभग सबै सिट भरिइसकेका थिए । अबको बाटो सोभो तर खाल्डाखुल्डीले गर्दा कुरूप थियो । भरी भ्रमभ्रम परिरहेकाले हो वा किन हो मलाई त्यो ठाउँ अँध्यारो लागिरह्यो । गाडी एकनासले कुदिरह्यो । बसका यात्रुहरूलाई नियालें- धेरैजसो फोहोर, दुब्लापातला, कुपोषित, थोत्रा कपडामा बेरिएका र घिनलाग्दा, अभाव र गरिबीका प्रतिरूप । कोही एक घरी केरा बोकेका, कोही थोत्रो बोरामा अलिकति छेस्काछेस्की बोकेका, कोही प्लास्टिकको अलिक ठूलो बोरामा केराका सुकेका पात बोकेका, कोही त्यस्तै हाम्रो दृष्टिले केही कामनलाग्ने थोत्रा सामान बोकेका त कोही अलिकति धान, गहुँको पीठो, चामल, सनपाट, डोरी वा सिरुको कुचो बोकेका आइमाई र लोग्नेमान्छे । तिनका शरीरमा कहिल्यै साबुन दलिएको थिएन । तरुनी आइमाईका कपालमा भने तोरीको काँचो तेल लगाइएको परैसम्म ह्वास्स गनाउने । यिनको कपाल हेर्दा त्यसमा सेम्पु कहिल्यै परेको जस्तो नदेखिने । बूढी आइमाईहरूको छाला भैंसीको छालाजस्तो । यिनका टाउकामा तेल उहिल्यै बँसमा वा सुत्केरी हुँदादेखि यता परेको थिएन । यी कुरूपताका नमुना थिए । यिनका लोग्नेहरू पनि त्यस्तै हुँदा हुन् । हुन त सुन्दरताका लागि यिनीहरूसँग न पैसा छ, न फुर्सत, न रहर । गरिबहरूको जीवनमा बँस भन्ने चीज कहिल्यै आउन्न, उन्नाइस वर्षसम्म केटाकेटी रहन्छन्, एक्काइस वर्षमा बूढाबूढी भइहाल्छन् ।

बस एकोहोरो पश्चिमतर्फ दौडिरहेको थियो । सडकको दुवैतर्फ ठूलाठूला केराघारी थिए । केराका विशाल बगैँचा कतिकतिबेला त मोटर चारपाँच मिनेट दौडिँदा पनि पार हुँदैनथे । मनमनै भनँ- ‘यत्रो केरा कसले खाइसक्तो हो !’

फेरि एकछिन खुल्ला ठाउँ आउँथ्यो अनि फेरि होचो जातका त्यस्तै केराघारी देखा पर्थे । होचो जमिन जलमग्न छ, त्यहाँ सखरखण्डे लहरो वा त्यस्तै खालका सिमसारमा हुने भारमात्र थिए । अलिक अग्लो जमिनमा केराका अनन्त बगैँचा, हाम्रातिरका भैं धानखेती त कतैकतै मात्र ।

बेलाबेला देखिएसम्मको ठाउँ जलमग्न छ । यस्तो ठाउँमा कुन अन्न फल्दो हो, मलाई जान्न खसखस लाग्यो । छेउछाउका यात्रुहरू हेर्दै, कोही मसँग बोल्नान् जस्तो लागेन । हुन पनि मेरा अर्थ न बर्थका कुरामा कसलाई चासो ? तैपनि हिम्मत गरेर मेरै छेउको मैलोघैलो बूढालाई सोधिहेर्दै-

‘बाबूजी ! यतातिर त खोइ कतै खेतबारी देखिँदैन त ? यहाँका मानिसले के खाने ?’

‘पहिलोपल्ट आउनुभएको हो ?’

‘हो त हजुर ! यता त पहिलै पल्ट आएको हुँ ।’

‘आप यहाँ जो जलमग्न जमिने देख रहे हैं यहाँ अब के कुछ दिनों मे पानी हट जाता है और जमिन सूख जाता है । किसान अपनेअपने खेतों पर निकलते हैं, यह घासफूस जमा करके घर ले जाते हैं । जमिन खाली करके कुछ दिन बाद जमिन ठीक से सूख जाते ही ट्रैक्टर से सारा जमिन जोतवाते हैं । ठन्डी में यह सारी जमिन गेहूँ से हरेभरे होते हैं । यहाँ गेहूँ का फसल बहुत अच्छा होता है । आप दिख रहे हैं न वह..’ त्यस बिहारी बूढाले एउटा मुड्कोजस्तो केही वस्तु भारैभारको तलाउजस्तो खेतको बीचमा देखाउँदै भन्यो- ‘वह पम्प सेटका पाइप है । गेहूँके खेत में सिँचाई के लिये....!’

यो जलमग्न तलाउ कार्तिकको अन्त्यतिर सुक्न थाल्छ अनि मङ्सिरको सुरुमा गाउँलेहरू त्यो भारजङ्गल सफा गर्छन् अरे । भारजङ्गल हटाएपछि ट्र्याक्टरले जोत्दा राम्रो पनि हुने अनि त्यो भारजङ्गल सुकाएर हिउँदभरि भातरोटी पकाउने र आगो ताप्ने गर्दा रहेछन् । अहिलेको त्यो जलमग्न तलाउमा पछि गहुँको खेतमा पानी पटाउन पम्पसेटको व्यवस्था गर्नुपर्दो रहेछ । सारा खेत रातभरि पम्पसेटको आवाजले गुन्जायमान हुन्छ अरे । त्यहाँ उत्पादन हुने गहुँ उच्च गुणस्तरको हुनाले विदेशसमेत निर्यात हुन्छ अरे ।

मेरो साथी हुन पुगेको बूढो हेर्दा त्यस्तो देखिए तापनि पढेलेखेको रहेछ र भारतको राजनीति र अर्थशास्त्रको विषयमा राम्रो जानकारी राख्दो रहेछ । उसको बोलाइमा औपचारिकता, सभ्यता तथा सुन्दरता छुत्ताछुल्ल थियो । धन्न उसलाई सुरुमै मैले आदरपूर्वक बाबूजी भनँछु । बूढालाई फेरि राम्ररी हेर्ने- खपटे गाला, चाउरिएको अनुहार, फुलेका र हप्ता दिनभन्दा अगाडि काटिएका पातला र नमिलेका दारीजुंगा, चाया परेको अनुहार, आधाभन्दा बढी खुइलिएको टाउको, मैलो कमेज र धोती, पुराना चप्पल र चिराचिरा परेका खुट्टा । यो मानिस गाउँघरको चल्तापुर्जा र समाजसेवी हुनुपर्छ भन्ने मलाई लाग्यो ।

अब बूढो मसँग खुलेर कुरा गर्न थाल्यो । ऊ नेपालको राजनीतिमा पनि जानकारी राख्दो रहेछ । नेपालका नयाँ राजा कठोर, साहसी र दूरदर्शी छन् भन्ने उसलाई लाग्दो रहेछ ।

उसले भन्यो- 'भारत त खेर गयो । मुसलमान र क्रिस्तानले मुलुक सर्लक्कै निलिसके । हाम्रा नेताहरू खै के गर्छन् के ! किन यिनीहरूलाई सेकुलर हुनुपर्छ होला ? मुसलमानका त्यत्रा देश छन्, यता सवा अरब जनसङ्ख्या भएर पनि हामी हिन्दूहरू आफ्नै देशमा परदेशी हुन लागिस्क्यौं ! नेपाल विश्वको एकमात्र हिन्दू राष्ट्र हो । हामी हिन्दूहरूका लागि यो सारै गर्वको विषय हो । नेपालका महाराज विष्णुका साक्षात् अवतार हुनुहुन्छ । यसकारण उहाँ हामी समस्त भारतवासीका समेत महाराज हुनुहुन्छ, विश्वका समस्त हिन्दूहरूका महाराज हुनुहुन्छ । तपाईंहरू भाग्यमानी ।'

मैले हिन्दीमै भनँ- 'तपाईं बाहिरको मानिस । बाहिर बसेकाले भित्रका कुरा अनुमानमात्र लगाउन सक्छन् । सत्य के हो भने विश्वका राष्ट्रप्रमुखहरूमध्ये हाम्रा राजा कति हो कति बढी तलबभत्ता खान्छन् । नेपालका राजा अमेरिकी राष्ट्रप्रमुखको तलबभन्दा दसगुना ज्यादा अनि चिनियाँ राष्ट्रप्रमुखको तलबभन्दा तीन सय पचास गुनाभन्दा ज्यादा मासिक तलब पड्काउँछन् । त्यसबाहेक आफन्त, भाइभतिजा र आफ्ना विश्वासपात्रबाट पाउने नजरानाको कुनै हरहिसाब छैन । राजाको नजिककाहरूले भ्रष्टाचार गरेर अकुत सम्पत्ति कमाउँछन् । त्यसको केही हिस्सा दरबार जान्छ ।'

बूढो तीनछक्क पत्थो । म भन्दै गएँ- 'नेपालका राजा हत्यारा, भ्रष्ट र विश्वका एक खतरनाक तस्कर हुन् भन्ने नेपालीहरूलाई लाग्छ । नेपालका बहुमूल्य मूर्तिहरू तस्करी गराएर देशलाई बर्बाद गरेर उनी आफू मालामाल भएका हुन् भनिन्छ । ज्ञानेन्द्र गरिव देशका धनी राजा हुन् । ज्ञानेन्द्रका छोराको नाम पारस हो । पारसलाई लागुपदार्थको तस्करी र दुर्व्यसनको आरोप छ । नेपालमा लागुऔषधको तस्करी भन्नुभन्नु फस्टाउनुमा पारसको संरक्षण प्राप्त छ भनिन्छ । ती खतरनाक गुन्डा पनि हुन् । उनले कति जनालाई गोली ठोकेर र कति जनालाई गाडीले हिकारै मारिदिए, तर उनलाई कुनै कानुनले छुन सक्तैन । युवराज पारसले नै राजदरबार हत्याकाण्ड मच्चाएर राजा वीरेन्द्रको वंशनाश गरेका हुन् भन्ने धेरैजसो नेपालीको आरोप छ । बाबुलाई राजसिंहासन दिलाउनका लागि नै उनले त्यत्रो प्रलयङ्कारी रक्तपात मच्चाएका हुन् भन्ने हामीलाई लाग्छ ।'

बूढो मेरो यो भनाइ मान्न तयार देखिएन तर उसमा भएको सभ्यताले मेरा कुरा काट्न पनि दिएन । उसले भन्यो-

'नेपाल तपाईंहरूको । आफ्नो राजा के-कस्ता छन् भन्ने तथ्य तपाईंहरू नै जान्नुहुन्छ । यो त हो, तथापि हामी भारतीयहरूका लागि चाहिँ नेपालमा राजा भएकै राम्रो । नेपालमा शान्ति भए हामीलाई पनि हुक्क । भारतवर्षका समस्त हिन्दूहरूका परम्परामा राजाका लागि विशेष स्थान छ । नेपालमा राजा रहिरहने हो भने हाम्रो पनि त्यो खाँचो टर्छ । राजाबेगरको हिन्दू संस्कृति अपूरो र अपर्याप्त हुन्छ । भारत बिग्रेकै राजा नभएर त हो !'

ऊ राजपरिवार हत्याकाण्डका नायक दीपेन्द्र नै हुन् भन्ठान्दो रहेछ ।

'देशका समस्याको उपयुक्त निकास निकाल्न नै तपाईंहरूका महाराजले सम्पूर्ण शक्ति हातमा लिनुभएको हो । अब उहाँले माओवादीहरूलाई निमित्तचात्र पार्नुहुनेछ । बल्ल नेपालमा सुखशान्ति र आर्थिक विकासको बाटो खुल्ने देखियो । देश र प्रजातन्त्र जोगाउन महाराजले यति कठोर र अप्रिय कदम नचालेको भए देश अहिलेसम्ममा भन्नु सखाप हुने थियो । राजनीतिक दलहरू अत्यन्त खराब र अलोकप्रिय छन् । नेपाली जनता महाराजको कदमबाट अत्यन्त खुसी र उत्साहित छन् । नेपालको निर्माणमा मात्र होइन इतिहासका हरेक मोडमा नेपाली राजवंशले जनतालाई कुशलतापूर्वक नेतृत्व दिएको छ । राजाको नेतृत्वमा नेपालीहरूको भलाइ छ । राजा सक्रिय रहनुपर्छ । देशलाई सङ्कट पर्दा राजा भएपछि जस्तोसुकै कदम चाल्न पनि पाउनुपर्छ देश जोगाउन । निष्क्रिय राजतन्त्रको के काम ?'

त्यो बूढो नेपालका राजावादीभन्दा राजावादी रहेछ । मलाई बूढाका तर्क मजाका लागे । राजाले जनताका दलहरूलाई पाखा लगाएर सम्पूर्ण कार्यकारी अधिकार आफैले लिएको, पुराना पञ्च अनि सडेरलेका दुईचार व्यक्तिका आडमा मनपरीतन्त्र चलाइरहेको नेपालको वर्तमान उसको दृष्टिमा सही थियो ।

मैले भनँ- 'नेपालीहरू अब राजा आवश्यक देख्दैनन् । माओवादीभन्दा राजा नै आजको नेपालका मुख्य अवरोध र समस्या हुन् । राजा सेतो हात्तीमात्र होइन, एक विषालु सर्प पनि हुन् । तपाईं भारतीयहरूलाई राजा चाहिन्छ, भने

सजिलै छ नि, कुनै पुराना राजवंशका एक योग्य व्यक्तिलाई राजा स्थापना गर्नुहोस् । तपाईंहरूलाई हाम्रा राजा विष्णुकै अवतार हुन् भन्ने विश्वास लाग्छ भने तपाईंहरूका लागि सित्तैमा दिउँला न । के भो र, आफ्ना असल छिमेकीलाई एक थान गतिला राजा दिन पाउँदा हामी पनि खुसी....!’

संस्कृति, भाषा, साहित्य, यातायात, मौसम, खेती आदि अनेक विषयमा खुलेर गफ चल्थो । अन्त्यमा बढो त पाकिस्तानी आपराधिक समूहहरू नेपालमा आश्रय लिएर भारतविरुद्ध गतिविधि गरिरहेका छन् भन्न थाल्यो । मैले ठाडै प्रतिवाद गरें-

‘भारतका शत्रुहरूलाई हामीले किन पालनपोषण गर्ने ? आपराधिक मानिसले नेपालमा ओत पाए भने त्यसको मार नेपाललाई नै भन्नु ज्यादा पर्दैन र ?’

उसले भन्यो- ‘त्यो त हो!’

जलमग्न संसारका बीचबाट अग्लो बाँधजस्तो सडक एकनासले पश्चिमतिर लमतन्न पसारिरहेको थियो । भारतको उत्तरप्रदेश र बिहारका नेपालनजिकका सडक बाँधभैँ लाग्छन् । सडकलाई जमिनबाट निकै अग्लो नपारे बर्खायाममा भेलबाढीले यातायातमा अवरोध सिर्जना गरिरहन्छ । नेपाल-भारत सीमानजिक यस्ता ‘सडक’ निर्माण गरेर भारतले नेपालका धेरै कृषियोग्य जलमग्न गराइदिने गरेको छ । पानीको नियमित बहावलाई बाधा पर्ने गरी गरिने कुनै पनि भौतिक संरचना निर्माण गर्नुअघि छिमेकी देशको स्वीकृति-सहमति लिनुपर्ने अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय कानूनलाई भारतले कहिल्यै आदर गरेन । बडो दुष्ट छिमेकी हो भारत । चीनसँग लड्दालड्दा भारतीय फौज ‘बहादुरी के साथ पिछे हट रहे है’ को हालतमा पुग्यो, श्रीलङ्कामा आगो लगाउन गएका राजीव गान्धी त्यसै आगोले भस्म भए, पाकिस्तान उसको जन्मजात शत्रु, भुटानको ऊ स्वामी हुन खोज्छ, बर्मासँग पनि यो मिल्दैन, बङ्गलादेशसँग त बेलाबखत गोली हानाहानसमेत चल्छ, उत्तरपट्टिको हाम्रो सानो, कमजोर र गरिब देश नेपाललाई असमान सन्धिसम्झौता गराएर, दलहरूलाई फुटाएर र फटाएर अनि कहिले कालापानी त कहिले सुस्ता र महेशपुरमा साँधसीमा मिचेर हैरान पार्छ । त्यतिले नपुगेर नदीनालामा आँखा लगाउने अनि कहिले महलीसागर बाँध बाँधेर नेपाली भूभाग डुबानमा पार्ने गरिरहन्छ ।

सडकका दुवैतिर रङ्ग न ढङ्गका रूखबिरुवा र भाडी बढेका थिए । बेलाबेला भुपडीघरका बाक्ला न बाक्ला तर साना गाउँहरू हुईकिएर आउँथे अनि कटिहाल्थे । कतैकतै सानातिना पानदोकान, चियापसल वा किराना पसलहरू भएका गाउँ पनि आउँथे र गड्हाल्थे । जहाँ पनि उस्तै घर, उस्तै गाउँ र उस्तै मान्छे । कुसैला भन्ने एउटा सानो बजार आइपुग्यो । मुसलधारे पानी परिरहेको थियो । बस केहीबेरका लागि अडियो । पानी पर्न कम भएपछि धेरैबेर बसमा बसेका यात्रुहरू सार्वजनिक चर्पी प्रयोग गर्न तँछाड्मछाड् गर्न थाले । कुसैला पुगेपछि त के थियो र, अब एकै छिनमा नवगछिया, अनि त भागलपुर पुगिहालिन्छ, भन्ने मलाई लाग्यो ।

बस हिँड्ने समय भएपछि यात्रुहरू भित्र पसे । अगि मेरा छेउमा बसेको बूढो त कतिखेर यहीँ उत्रिएछ । कस्तो अचम्मको हाम्रो संस्कार ! सँगै बसुन्जेल आफन्तजस्तै भएर बोलचाल गर्थ्यो, छुट्नुपर्दा कुनै भाव छैन, न ‘आएँ है’ न ‘गएँ है’ ।

हाम्रो सप्तकोशीलाई भारतमा कोसी नै नामले चिनिन्छ, तर यस ठाउँमा भने स्थानीय भाषामा कुसैला भनेर भनिन्छ । कुसैलाले बगाएर ल्याएको लेदोले बनेको विशाल बालुवाविहीन बगर, सिमसार र पानी यहाँ धेरै किलोमिटरसम्म फैलिएको छ । अनि केहीबेरमा अलिअलि बालुवा र काँसघारीको अनन्त फैलावटबाट हाम्रो बाटो छिर्छ । अनि माछापुखरी जस्ता लाग्ने खेतका बडाबडा गरा आउँछन् अनि फेरि खेत । वर्षात्को मौसम, जता हेरे पनि समुद्र लाग्ने गरी कुसैलाको पानी फैलिएको देखिन्छ । कुसैला नदी यही हो भनेर भन्न समेत गाह्रो पर्ला भनेजस्तो, तर केहीबेरपछि एक महानदीको विशाल फैलावट देखिन थाल्यो । मेरो पवित्र कोसीलाई त्यति राम्रो नाम छँदाछँदै अर्को नाम दिइरहनुको कारण म बुझिदैन ।

८. जय गङ्गामाता !

बेलुकाको सात बजेतिर बल्ल नवगछिया देखियो । नवगछिया मैले देखेको समयदेखि यता कता हो कता विकसित भएछ । उसबेलाको त्यो सानो बसस्टप आज एउटा व्यस्त चोक भएछ, सडकका दुवैतर्फ अग्ला घरहरू उभिएर स-सानो सहरै बनाएका रहेछन् । पश्चिम जाने बाटो छाडी अब दक्षिणतर्फ लाग्नु थियो । पश्चिम जानु भनेको सायद

पटनातिर लाग्नु हो । नवगछिया आइपुगेपछि मैले बसको कन्डक्टरलाई आफूहरू भागलपुरमा कहाँ बस्नु ठीक हुन्छ भनेर सोधें । उसले भन्यो-

‘ठहरना तो देवीबाबू धर्मशाला में ठीक होगा भाईजी । सस्ता भी, अच्छा भी । बस से उतरकर जाना भी आसानी होगा आपको । वहाँ के लिये रिक्सा लेना आवश्यक नहीं, एकदम करीब है ।’ उसले एकदुई यात्रुको समेत सल्लाह लिएर यसो भनेको थियो ।

उसले हामी घुम्न आएका भन्ने बुझ्यो । कन्डक्टर रमाइलो मानिस रहेछ, उसले भन्यो-

‘चलिये हमारा मुङ्गेर । वहाँ आपलोग के लिये खान पीन व रहने के लिये कोई भी दिक्कत नहीं होगा । कल सबेरे ही आप पटना के लिये रवाना हो सकते हैं ।’

साँझ निकै बितिसकेको थियो । हामीमा समयसँगै बेचैनीसमेत बढिरहेको थियो, त्यसैले बस मुङ्गेर जाने भए पनि भागलपुरमै वास बसी भोलिपल्ट हिँड्ने सोचाइ बनायौं ।

अघिल्लो पल्ट आउँदा यहाँबाट गङ्गा तर्न मलाई जहाज चढनुपरेको थियो । सानासाना डुङ्गादेखि लिएर तीनचारतले मोटरजडित पानीजहाज पनि थिए उसबेला । पछि यहाँ नयाँ पुल बनेको छ भन्ने कुरा सुनेको मात्र थिएँ, आज त्यो विशाल पुल देख्न पाउने अनि सीतालाई विश्वको एक महान्, पवित्र र चर्चित मेरो गङ्गा नदी देखाउन पाइने खुसीले म आह्लादित भएको थिएँ । उसबेला म सानो पानीजहाज चढेर पारि भागलपुरपट्टि पुगेपछि नदीकिनारमा आनन्दसँग नुहाइधुवाइ गरेर सहर पसेको थिएँ । आज ती जहाज र डुङ्गाहरू कहाँ छन् भन्ने सोध्नेसम्म ममा चासो बाँकी छैन, इतिहासलाई सम्मान गर्न नजान्ने हाम्रो जात.... ।

उसबेला आउँदा मैले गङ्गाकिनारमा एकजोर हातले टिपेको एउटा सिङ्गै खरबुजो एकलै खाएको थिएँ । खरबुजा बेच्ने ती जादुगरी हातहरूको तस्विर मनको उज्यालो कुनामा कुनै चखिलो स्वादको सम्झनाभैँ ज्यूँदो छ ! आफ्नो धारिलो हँसियाले त्यो खरबुजो चिराचिरा पारेर ती किसानबालाका हातले मलाई दिए । मैले गङ्गाकिनारको त्यसै बलौटे बगरमा टुकुक्क बसेर खाएको थिएँ । पाकेर रातो र रसिलो त्यो परपरसम्म वास्ना छाड्छ कि जस्तो भइसकेको खरबुजाको मूल्य एक रुपियाँमात्र लिन चाही उसले !

युवतीले लहराबाट खरबुजो टिप्ता आफ्ना नरम हात यस्तरी प्रयोग गर्थी कि त्यस बोटले आफ्नो फल चुँडाएको कहिल्यै थाहा पाउँदैनथ्यो होला ! उसका आँखामा कसैलाई घायल बनाउने कटाक्षबाण थिएनन् बरु ती आँखामा संसारलाई डुबाउन सक्ने रूपसमुद्र छचल्किइरहेका थिए । मानिस त्यस समुद्रमा पसेपछि न निस्कन चाहन्थ्यो न सक्थ्यो । काली पनि कति राम्रा हुन सक्छन् भन्ने नमुना थिई ऊ । गङ्गाको पानीमा नुहाएकी परीसँग गङ्गाकिनारकै विशाल र सुनसान फैलावटमा अर्थ न बर्थका कुरा गर्दै आधा घण्टा खरबुजाको तपतप चुहिँदो रस अनि आफ्नै ओठ चाटेर स्वाद लिँदै बस्न पाएको मूल्य फगत एक रुपियाँ ! जीवन पनि विचित्रको, सबैभन्दा बहुमूल्य वस्तु सबैभन्दा सस्तोमा पाइने !

मलाई बेलायती कवि एन्ड्रयु मारभेलको कविता ‘टु हिज कोए मिस्ट्रेस’को याद आयो । समय भन्ने वायुपडुखी घोडा नभएको भए खरबुजो थाप्ता उसका चाँदीको औँठीजडित ताता औँलाबाट प्राप्त स्पर्शले लागुपदार्थले भैँ लट्ठिएर दुई हजार वर्ष उसकै अगाडि उभिइरहन्थे । म गङ्गाकिनारमा बसेर दस हजार वर्षसम्म उसका हातबाट खरबुजा खाइरहने थिएँ । उसका गङ्गाजस्ता नीला आँखामा डुबुल्की मारेर म अर्को दस हजार वर्ष त्यसै तातो बगरमा बस्ने थिएँ ।

हजारौँ हजार वर्षअघि पनि किसानबालाहरूले यसै गरी यात्रुलाई यस बगरमा पाकेको खरबुजो खुवाउँथे होलान् । बटुवाहरू पनि ती बालाहरूका रूपमाधुर्य र हाउभाउ पिएर वर्षौँ मातिरहन्थे होलान् । गङ्गाकिनारलाई पवित्र र रङ्गीन पार्न यी अप्सराहरू अवतार लिईलिई यहाँ आएर मानवसेवामा अर्पित भइरहेका होलान् !

गङ्गाको विशाल पुल आइपुग्यो । पुल चार किलोमिटर लामो छ भनेर एक जना यात्रुले भन्यो । अग्लो लाग्छ यो पुल । गङ्गा नदी धेरै वर्षपछि देख्न पाउँदा मनै गदगद भएर आउने हुन्छ । हाम्रा गाउँघरका मानिसहरू बनारस वा गङ्गा नदी भेटिने कुनै पनि ठाउँको तीर्थाटन गर्दा एउटा भाँडामा गङ्गाजल बोकेर लान्छन् र आफन्त, छरछिमेक र साथीभाइलाई सुरुप पार्न दिन्छन् । त्यो सुरुप पार्नुपर्ने पवित्र जल गुडिरहेको गाडीमुनि बहिरहेको थियो । मानिसहरू गङ्गामाताप्रति श्रद्धा व्यक्त गर्न पैसा चढाउँछन् । हामीले पनि यन्त्रवत् एउटा सिक्का चढायौं । हामीले श्रद्धावश नुहेर ढोग्दै भन्यौं-

‘जय गङ्गामाता!’

पूजाले सोधी- ‘पैसा किन फालेको नि खोलामा ?’

‘फालेको होइन, चढाएको । हाम्रो संस्कार । हाम्रो जुगौँदेखिको चलन..... ।’

‘उहिल्यैदेखि सप्लैले गरी कति पैसा फालिसकियो होला यस खोलामा ?’

‘.....!’

पारिपट्टि भागलपुर सहर बेहुलीसरह सिँगारिएर हामीतर्फ फर्कीफर्की मुसुमुसु मुस्काइरहेको थियो । साँझको झिलमिलीमा भागलपुर दीपावलीमा भैं सुन्दर देखिन्थ्यो । एकैछिनमा बस दोडेर गङ्गाको उस किनारमा पुग्यो । भागलपुरको त्यस पुलबाट पारिपट्टिका घरहरू लहरै मिलाएका बिजुलीजडित ईटजस्ता देखिन्थे । चार-पाँचतले घरहरू पनि यस अग्लो पुलबाट होचा देखिन्थे । बस एकैछिनमा हुड्कीकदै सहरभित्र पस्यो । रातको आठ बज्न लागेको थियो, सहर अत्यन्त व्यस्त देखिन्थ्यो । मानिसहरू जताततै भीडभाड गर्दै दौडिरहेका, जताततै किनमेल गरिरहेका, कुनै रमाइलो मेलाजस्तै लाग्थ्यो । केटाकेटी उमेरमा मेरा नातेदार, छरछिमेकी र कुनैकुनै बालसखाहरूले खाने गरेको ‘पहलवान छाप खैनी’को खोलमा ‘चौबे तम्बाकु फैक्टरी भागलपुर’ र त्यससँगै एउटा पहलवानको चित्र देखेको थिएँ । पछि बलवान छाप खैनीले बजार ढाकेपछि त्यो हरायो । त्यो चौबे तम्बाकु फ्याक्टरी यतै कतै होला ।

मैले पूजालाई भनँ- ‘भागलपुर गङ्गाकिनारको एक सुन्दर सहर हो । भागलपुरको पुरानो सहर बसेको जमिन नदीबाट एकदम अग्लो छ । सहर धेरै ठूलो लाग्छ । यो सहर निकै पुरानो पनि हो । हामी यस सहरको भ्रमण गर्न नभएर आजको रात वास बस्न मात्र यहाँ रोकिन लागेका हौं । भागलपुर रेशमी कपडा, सनपाट र चिनी उद्योगका लागि विश्वप्रसिद्ध छ । तेलहन, धान, गहुँ, सुर्ती र सुती कपडाका उद्योगका कारण पनि यो सहर नामुद छ । यो भारतको एक ठूलो व्यापारिक केन्द्र तथा चल्तीको रेलवे जङ्क्सन पनि हो । बिहारमा पटना र गयापछि भागलपुर नै ठूलो सहर हो । बिहारमा यीबाहेक पनि मुङ्गेर, मुजफ्फरपुर, दरभङ्गा, बिहार सरिफ, छपरा, आरा, मोतीहारी, पुर्णियाँ, कटिहारजस्ता अनेक ठूलाठूला सहर छन् ।’

पूजालाई नयाँ ठाउँ, नयाँ मानिस र नयाँ विषय धेरै मनपर्छ । ऊ मेरा कुरा मुख बाएर सुनिरहेकी थिई ।

मैले यस सहरको बारेमा थप जान्न खोजें । हाम्रो बसको कन्डक्टरका अनुसार भागलपुरको आधिकारिक जनसङ्ख्या लगभग चार लाख भए पनि स्थानीय मानिसहरू यहाँ पन्ध्र-सोह्र लाख मानिस बस्छन् भन्दा रहेछन् । मैले कन्डक्टरलाई सोधें-

‘भागलपुरका एकदुई मुख्य ठाउँका बारेमा बताउनुहोस् न । भोलि एकदुई ठाउँ हेर्न मन छ ।’

‘भागलपुर कोई पर्यटकीय शहर नहीं है भाई ! फिर भी यहाँ कई विशाल मन्दिर और मस्जिदें हैं । गङ्गास्नान जरूर करना । यहाँका घाट पवित्र माना जाता है । भागलपुर युनिवर्सिटी भी देखने लायक है ।’ तर मैले पचास सालमा घुम्न आउँदै देखेको, भागलपुर विश्वविद्यालय हेर्नलायक खासै छैन । यो हेरी त हाम्रो त्रिभुवन विश्वविद्यालय नै निकै गतिलो ।

हाम्रो कन्डक्टरका अनुसार भागलपुरका नब्बे प्रतिशत मानिसहरू हिन्दू र दस प्रतिशत मानिस मुसलमान रहेछन् । तर मस्जिद, गुम्बज परेका घर र कालो लुगामा हिँडेका मुसलमान आइमाईको उपस्थिति हेर्दा मुसलमान दस होइन चालीस प्रतिशत छन् कि लाग्ने ।

हुन त बौद्ध धर्मका प्रणेता भगवान् बुद्ध नेपालमा जन्मेका हुन् तर उनले शिक्षा र ज्ञान बिहारमै पाए, धर्मोपदेश उत्तरप्रदेशको सारनाथमा गरे पनि उनको जीवनको धेरैजसो समय यही बिहारमा बित्यो । आजको भारखण्ड राज्य सन् २००० सम्म यसकै एक भाग थियो । गौतम बुद्धले आफ्नो जीवनका महत्त्वपूर्ण बाह्र वर्ष भारखण्डका अनेक ठाउँमा धर्मोपदेश गर्दै बिताए ।

बिहार नाम आफैँमा बौद्ध धर्मसँग जोडिन्छ । कुनै समयमा दुई हजारभन्दा बढी आवासीय शिक्षक र बीस हजारजति आवासीय विद्यार्थी पढ्ने-पठाउने विश्वप्रसिद्ध नालन्दा विश्वविद्यालय बिहारमै थियो । तर आज यहाँ बौद्ध धर्मावलम्बीको सङ्ख्या नगण्य छ । मौर्य र गुप्त साम्राज्यको जग यो बिहार जैन धर्मका संस्थापक महावीरको जन्मभूमि पनि हो । पूर्वका दुई जिल्ला पश्चिम बङ्गाललाई चढाएर अनि झन्डै आधा भूभाग टुक्रिएर भारखण्ड बनेपछि बिहार खुम्चै-खुम्चै टाक्सिएर आजको यस रूपमा आइपुगेको हो ।

हामी बिहारको तेस्रो ठूलो सहर भागलपुरको मध्य भागमा आइपुग्यौं । कन्डक्टरलाई धन्यवाद दिँदै बसबाट ओर्लियौं । बसले हाम्रा लागि कोतवालीरोडस्थित देवीबाबू धर्मशालाको अत्यन्त नजिकै रोकिदिएको रहेछ । सजिलै पुगिने रहेछ ।

देवीबाबू धर्मशाला भव्य रहेछ । घर त धेरै पुरानो हो तर व्यवस्था राम्रो । बाथरुमसहितको आरामदायी कोठा मिल्यो । धर्मशालाका कर्मचारी सहयोगी रहेछन् । उनीहरूले हामीलाई आवश्यकताअनुसारको कोठा दिए । कोठाको बन्दोबस्त

भएपछि सीता आफू अनि छोरीहरूलाई नुहाइदिन र दिनभरि लगाएका लुगाफाटो धुन लागिन् । मचाहिँ बाहिरफेर निस्केर दुईचार अत्यावश्यक सामान किन्न लागेँ ।

नजिकैको होटलमा खाना खान पाइयो । भागलपुरको खाना राम्रो र मीठो हुँदो रहेछ ।

दिनभरिको भरीपछि यहाँ ओभानो सहरमा आइपुगेका थियौँ । यहाँ पानी परेकै थिएन । अर्कै समय भएको ठाउँमा आइपुगेभै भयो । नुहाइधुवाइ र खानपिनपछि सबैजना आरामसँग बस्यौँ । बिजुलीपड्खाको मुनि शीतलमा बसेर आजका दिनको समीक्षा गर्यौँ । सीताको अनुहारमा कटिहार र पुर्णियाँमा देखिएको औँसी र निराशा हट्दै थियो । बसका यात्रु, कन्डक्टर, धर्मशालाका कर्मचारीहरूको व्यवहारले होला उनमा अब भने अगाडि यात्रा गर्ने हिम्मत पलाएको थियो ।

भारतको नक्सा पल्टाएर पूजा र म छलफल गर्न थाल्यौँ । एटलस नक्सामा देखाएर हामी यति टाढा आइपुगेका छौँ भनेर मैले पूजा र अनुजालाई देखाएँ । हामी हिँड्ने रुटमा भागलपुरको नाम थिएन । तर आइयो, जे भयो ठीक भयो तर अब भोलि बिहान कता लाग्ने ? पूजा सोभै बनारस लागौँ भन्न थाली । मचाहिँ एकछिन सोचमा डुबें ।

एक मनले भन्यो- ‘भोलि बिहान मुङ्गेर पुगनुपर्ला र बिहानको खाना त्यतै खानुपर्ला । बेलुका पटना पुगे भइगो नि !’

अर्को मनले भन्यो- ‘यसरी पटना पुग्नै दुई दिन लगाउने हो भने दस दिनमा कहाँकहाँ घुम्न भ्याइएला ?’

फेरि यसो सोचेँ, मेरा लागि पटना नयाँ ठाउँ होइन । बरु गया जानुपर्ला । पहिले पनि जान मन हुँदाहुँदै त्यत्तिकै भएको थियो, नक्सामा हेर्दा त्यति टाढा पनि देखिँदैन । यहाँबाट गया जाने बस पाइएलान् नै ।

एकछिन सोचविचार गरेपछि मैले भनेँ- ‘भोलि गया जाने ।’

पूजा हिन्दी मिसाएर कराउन थाली- ‘गया ? किन गया ? कौन गया ? कब गया ? गया केका लागि प्रसिद्ध छ र ?’

पूजाका प्रश्नको वर्षालाई मेरा उत्तरका छाता तेर्सिए- ‘अँ, गया जाने । गयामा पितृश्राद्ध गर्ने चलन छ । गयाको फाल्गुनदी-किनारमा श्राद्ध गरेपछि पितृहरू तर्छन्, त्यसैले त्यहाँ एकपल्ट श्राद्ध गरेपछि फेरिफेरि श्राद्ध गरिरहन पर्दैन ।’

‘सराद गर्न हिँडेका हौं र ?’ अनुजाको प्रश्न तेर्सियो ।

‘अब त्यति पवित्र ठाउँमा पुगिसकेपछि सराद त गर्नेपथ्यो नि !’

‘अब यो बाटामा केको सराद ?’ अनुजा पड्किई ।

‘बुबाको सराद । बुबा र अरू पितृहरूको श्राद्ध गरेपछि उहाँहरूको स्वर्गमा वास हुनेछ ।’

‘पुरेत कता, टपरी कता, भतेर कता... । क-कसलाई सराद खान बोलाउने नि ?’ अनुजा टेढामेढा प्रश्नले हमला गर्न थाली ।

‘सपै पाइन्छ त्यहीँ । एक घण्टामा सराद सकिन्छ । घरमा जस्तो हो र ? अनि गयामा त भगवान् बुद्धले ज्ञान प्राप्त गरेको ठाउँ पनि हेर्न पाइन्छ ।’

भगवान् बुद्धले ज्ञान प्राप्त गरेको ठाउँ हेर्न पाइने भनेपछि पूजाका आँखामा नयाँ तेज पलाएको देखियो ।

‘त्यहाँ पुगेपछि हामीले पनि ज्ञान पाउँछौं त ?’ अनुजाको प्रश्न उभियो ।

‘तिमीहरू त त्यसै ज्ञानी छँदै छौ नि !’ मैले झटारो हानेँ ।

सीता अगि धोएका लुगा भोलि बिहानसम्ममा नसुक्ने पो हुन् कि भनेर यताउता सारिरहेकी थिइन् । उनी हाम्रा कुरामा भन्दा आफ्नै काममा मग्न देखिन्थिन् । तर उनी हाम्रो कुरामा कान दिइरहेकी रहिछन् । उनले भनिन्-

‘फ्यानको हावाले सुक्छन् त होला नि..... बोधगया पनि त्यहीँ हो र ?’

‘गयाकै छेउमा छ भन्ने सुनेको छु, पुन त म पनि कहाँ पुगेको छु र !’

एकछिनपछि म धर्मशालाका एकजना कर्मचारीलाई भेट्न गएँ । उनले भने- ‘यहाँ से ट्रेन पकडना अच्छा । कल सुबह छह बजे ट्रेन छूटेगी गया के लिये, आपलोग उसी में से जाइये ।’

‘रेलवे स्टेशन यहाँबाट कति टाढा छ ?’

‘एकदम नजिकै ! बढीमा पाँच मिनेट लाग्ला !’

उनका कुरा सुनेपछि भोलि बिहान के-कसो पर्ने हो, अल्मलिन सकिन्छ, बरु अहिल्यै गएर स्टेशन कहाँनिर पर्छ पत्ता लगाएर आउनुपर्ला भन्ने सोचें । द्वारपाललाई मैले छेउमै गएर सोधें- ‘गेट कति बजेसम्म खुला रहन्छ ?’

‘साढे दस बजेसम्म ।’

‘म रेलवे स्टेशन पुगेर आउनुपर्न्यो, भ्याउँछु त ?’

‘भ्याइहाल्नुहुन्छ नि, तर अलि छिटो गर्नुहोस् है !’

म फटाफट बाहिर निस्कें । ढोकेले भनेतिर लागें । दुई मिनेट दक्षिण हिँडेपछि खुल्ला ठाउँ देखियो । रेलवे स्टेशन त्यहीं रहेछ ।

९. किताबचाहिँ नकिन्नोस् है

भागलपुरमा असोज १९ गतेको बिहान शीतल, सफा र शान्त थियो । मर्निङ वाकमा निस्केका मानिस, फलफूलपसले, चियापसले आदि मात्र सत्बलाउन थालेका थिए । रेलवे स्टेशनको देब्रेपट्टि बसपार्क रहेछ । बसपार्क सानै हो तर दिल्ली, कलकत्ता, पटना आदि जाने बसहरू यात्रु लिएर दगुर्न तयार परेका थिए । एक खण्डबाट कन्डक्टर कराइरहेको थियो-

‘जोगबनी ! जोगबनी!’

‘कति न टाढा आइपुगियो भनेको त! जोगबनी भनेको सुन्दा त आफ्नै गाउँको नाम लिएजस्तो लाग्ने ।’ सीता बोल्नु । जोगबनीबाट सोभै यहाँ आएको भए निकै छिटो, सस्तो र सोभो पर्ने रहेछ ।

ट्रेनको टिकट काट्ने ठाउँ र प्लेटफार्म पनि खुल्ला थियो । गयाका लागि टिकट काटिसकेपछि भोला भुइँमा बिसाएर यताउति हेर्न हामीलाई फुर्सत मिल्यो । भारतका रेलवे प्लेटफार्ममा किताबका दोकान हुन्छन्, हामीकहाँ बसपार्कमा रक्सीबियरका पसल भएभैं । ट्रेन आउन अझै केही समय बाँकी भएकाले किताबदोकानमा गएर यसो दुईचार किताब पल्टाएँ । राम्राराम्रा किताब छन्, आफ्नो यात्रावजेटमा तिनका लागि सानो मात्र रकम छ । हाम्रैतिर पाइने पुस्तक यताबाट किन लानु र, तर हाम्रातिर नजाने किताबका दाम देखेरै म त अलमल्ल । गरिब हुनु अभिशाप त्यत्तिकै भनिएको होइन ।

सीताले भनिनु- ‘किताबचाहिँ नकिन्नोस् है ! बोक्न सकिँदैन नि ! यहाँदेखि किन चारचौरास बोक्नुपर्न्यो त ? मन लागेजति उहाँ किने भइहाल्छ नि !’

मेरो समस्याको समाधान निस्कइहाल्यो । ‘हो त नि ! यहाँदेखि बोकिरहुनु किन, फर्कने बेलामा किने भइगो नि !’

एक घण्टा बिताउनु थियो, दोकानअगाडि उभिईउभिई एकदुईवटा किताब ओल्टाइपल्टाइ गरें । छोरीहरू यताउता उफिररहेका थिए । सीता भोला रुँगेर बसेकी थिइन् । मानिसहरूको चहलपहल बढ्दै थियो, सायद ट्रेन आइपुग्ने समय हुन लागेको थियो ।

एउटा पण्डाभेषधारी मानिस मनिर आयो । उसले मलाई कता जाने भनेर सोध्यो । पचास सालमा भागलपुर आउँदाको घटना सम्झेर मैले भनँ- ‘बिहा गर्न ।’

‘तपाईँकै ?’

‘अँ, मेरै । उ : बेहुली उभिइरहेकी छन् ।’ मैले सीतालाई देखाएर भनँ ।

पण्डाले के बुझ्यो कुन्नि, केही नबोली एकातिर लाग्यो । बिहारीहरूको बिहालाई हेर्ने आँखा मलाई मन पर्दैन ।

पचास सालमा यहाँको खै कुनचाहिँ धर्मशालामा हो म वास बस्न आइपुगेको थिएँ । विजुली काटिएर कोठामा गर्मीले बसीसक्नु थिएन, लामखुट्टे उस्तै । आँगनमा अनेक रङ्गरूपका बिहारीहरू थिए । उनीहरू प्रान्तीय राजनीतिको हिसाबकिताब लगाइरहेका थिए । के गरेर समय कटाउने ? म पनि तिनीहरूको गफमा सामेल भएँ ।

केही समयपछि अरू बिस्तारै लाखापाखा लागे । धर्मशालाको म्यानेजर बूढो र एकजना अत्यन्त धर्मात्मा देखिने अधबैँसे बाँकी रहे । अब विषय अध्यात्म र कर्मकाण्डतिर मोडियो । म पनि जानीनजानी यस विषयमा पनि बोल्न थालें । धर्मात्माको ध्यान ममाथि पऱ्यो । उसले मेरो जात, गोत्र आदि सोध्यो ।

‘पवडेल भन्ने पनि ब्राह्मण हुँदा रहेछन् हगि ?’ उसले म्यानेजर बूढातिर फर्केर भन्यो ।

‘पवडेल होइन पौडेल हुँ ।’ मैले भनेँ ।

‘तपाईंको बिहे भएको छ कि छैन ?’

‘छैन !’

‘सोझा बाहुननानी ! आइन्दा यसरी जसलाई पायो त्यसलाई बिहे नभएको भनेर नभन्नू नि !’ अधबैँसे धर्मात्माले भन्यो ।

‘किन र ?’

‘किन भन्नू नि ! तपाईंका कानमा पिस्तोल आउनेछ । तपाईंलाई सालाहरूले आफ्नी दिदीको विवाहयज्ञमा पुऱ्याउनेछन् । अनि पवित्र चँदुवामुनि र सुन्दर पिस्तोलनेर बलेको अग्नि साक्षी राखी तपाईंको शुभ विवाह धूमधामसँग हुनेछ । तपाईंको जीवनकहानी नयाँ ढङ्गले सुरु हुनेछ ।’

‘किन, कसरी ?’

‘प्रस्टै छ नि ! शुभ विवाहको फोटो र भिडियो खिचेर आफूले लग्नेछन्, तपाईंलाई नयाँ दुलही दिएर पठाउनेछन् ।’

‘त्यस्तो नाटकीय बिहे त भोलिपल्टै अस्वीकार गरे भइगो नि !’

धर्मात्माले मलाई छर्लङ्ग पारिदियो- ‘कानुनअनुसार हिन्दू पुरुषले दोस्रो बिहे गर्न लगभग असम्भव छ । पुरुषहरूले जथाभावी दोस्रो बिहे गर्न नपाउन् भनेर महिलाको हित सोची निर्माण गरिएको उक्त कानुनलाई ‘सहयोगी’हरूले बिहे हुन नसकेका बूढीकन्येहरूको सहज उद्धार र आफ्नो गोजीको सुधारका लागि अविवाहित पुरुषहरूलाई अपहरण गरी जबर्जस्ती यस्ता विवाहयज्ञमा बसाउँछन् । हतियारका सामु परेको असहाय युवक चुपचाप अनिच्छित विवाहमा बाँधिन्छ । जतिसुकै नचाहे पनि ऊ यस बन्धनबाट मुक्त हुन सक्तैन । बरु त्यही विवाहलाई स्वीकारेर जीवन चलाउनुमा भलो हुन्छ उसको ।’

‘आफ्नी छोरीको भविष्यको चिन्ता गर्ने बाबुआमाले त्यस्तो आपराधिक तरिकाले पनि बिहे गरिदिन्छन् त ?’

‘केटाहरूको कानुनी अप्ठेरो तिनलाई थाहा छ । जसरी भए पनि छोरीको बिहे हुनसक्यो भने तिनलाई भइगो नि !’

‘मलाई त महिनामा त्यस्ता तीसओटा जग्गेमा राखे पनि केही फरक पर्दैन । केको डर ? आफूले नचाहेपछि चाहेन-चाहेन !’ म हाँसेँ ।

उसले मेरा कुरा बुझेन । मैले पनि उसका कुरा बुझ्नै बाँकी रहेछ । मलाई ऊ भारतीय भन्ठान्दो रहेछ । म आफूचाहिँ उसलाई म भारतबाहिरको हुँ भन्ने थाहा हुनुपर्ने हो भन्ने ठान्दो रहेछु । म नेपालबाट आएको भनेपछि ऊ जिल्ल पऱ्यो ।

‘मलाई जग्गेमा राखेर बिहे गरिदिए भने दुई दिन रमाएर यतै बस्छु अनि बिहेमा पाएको नयाँ लुगा अलि मैलो हुनासाथ आफ्ना घरतिर टाप कस्छु । कसको तागत मलाई रोक्ने ?’ मैले तर्क राखें ।

उत्तर भारतको यस भेगमा विवाह भनेको प्रेम, ममता, विश्वास र भरोसाको उत्सव नभएर होडबाजी, लेनदेन, ठगी र षड्यन्त्रको खेल हुनसक्छ । दाइजो, अनमेल विवाह र पाखण्डले यताको समाज बाहिरबाट हेर्दा परिपक्व, चिल्लो, निरोगी र सुकिलो देखिए पनि भित्रभित्रै कुण्ठित, पीडित, रोगी र सङ्कटग्रस्त छ ।

‘तपाईं नेपाली हुनुहुन्छ भने त कुरै सकियो नि ।’ धर्मात्माले रक्षाकवच मलाई नचाहिने देखियो । मलाई भारतका अविवाहित युवाहरूको फिक्री लागेर आयो ।

ट्रेन आइपुग्यो । मैले भोलाहरू समार्ने । सीताले छोरीहरूका हात पक्रिन् । सजिलै चढ्यौं । मानिसहरू खचाखच भइहाले तर हामीलाई पनि सिट भाग लाग्यो । पूजा र अनुजाको मात्र होइन सीताको पनि जीवनकै पहिलो रेलयात्रा थियो यो । ट्रेन हिँड्यो । भागलपुर छाडेपछि ट्रेन अत्यन्त मनोहारी खेतबारी र गाउँहरू भएर जाँदो रहेछ । गाउँहरू अलिक सुक्का लाग्थे, माटो अलिक रातोरातो र खस्रो लाग्ने, तर गाउँका धेरैजसो घर इँटले बनेका । छानाचाहिँ कतै पक्की त कतै खपडाले बनेका । यतातिरका घरभन्दा बिल्कुल भिन्नै । बस्ती एकदम बाक्ला र अव्यवस्थित । खेतबारीचाहिँ रहरलाग्दा, धानखेत मलिला र हरिया । मानिसहरू गाउँबाट खेततिर लागेको दृश्य दौडिरहेको ट्रेनबाट हेर्दा धेरै राम्रो लाग्ने । छोरीहरू ट्रेनको भ्यालबाट बाहिरको सुन्दर दृश्यमा रमाए ।

कतैकतै देखिएसम्म नाङ्गा तर खेतका गराजस्ता फैलावट देखिन्थे । एकजना स्थानीय यात्रुले मलाई सोध्यो-

‘भाइ, आप कह सकते है क्यों खेत की यह सारी जमिन उजाड पडी है ?’

खेत ? म त छक्क पर्ने । त्यस्तो सुक्का र नाङ्गो चउरलाई त्यो मानिस खेत भन्दै थियो । त्यस मानिसले पूजा र म रमाउँदै गाउँ, ठिस्का, मन्दिर र ताडका रूखहरूका विचित्रका लहर हेरेको देखेर हामी नौला मानिस भन्ने थाहा पाएछ । मैले भनें- ‘खेत ? यस्तो खेतमा के फल्छ र ?’

‘यो खेत अत्यन्त उर्वर छ । यहाँ अत्यन्त धेरै धान फल्छ । तर यस वर्ष गङ्गाजीको बाढी पसेर सबै बाली सखाप पारिदियो । यसरी कुनैकुनै वर्ष गङ्गाजी उर्लेर हाम्रो खेतबाली नष्ट पार्छिन् । धान रोप्नेबित्तिकै बाढी पर्यो भने सर्वनाश हुन्छ । धान रोपेको दसबाह्र दिनसम्ममा बाढी आएन भने त्यस वर्ष बाली अत्यन्त राम्रो हुन्छ । उः परको गाउँनेरबाट गङ्गाजी बहन्छिन् ।’

मैले ध्यान दिएर हेरेँ, बाढीले कतैकतै खाडल पारेजस्तो देखियो । यस्ता नाङ्गा खेतहरू अरू खेतभन्दा होचा रहेछन् । मैले त्यस मानिसलाई हिन्दीमै सोधें-

‘खेत यसरी नाङ्गो छ, अब किसानले के खाने ?’

‘चिन्ता छैन । यस वर्ष अलि चाँडै गहुँ लगाउन पाइन्छ । चाँडै लगाएको गहुँ निकै बढी फल्छ ।’

‘त्यसो भए किन धान लगाइरहनु त ?’

‘एक बाली र दुई बाली मिल्दैन नि भाइ !’

त्यो मानिस सफासुग्धर थियो । टाउकामा कपाल पातला भए पनि नरिवलको तेल लगाएर राम्ररी पछ्याडि फर्काएर कोरेको थियो । खुट्टामा प्लास्टिकका जुत्ता लगाएको त्यस मानिसले सुतीको सेतो कमेज र सेतै धोती लगाएको थियो ।

ट्रेन केहीबेरमा खटखट गर्दै सुल्तानगन्ज पुग्यो । सुल्तानगन्ज भनेको बाबाधाम जाने ठाउँ हो । बोलबम-यात्रामा हरेक वर्ष हजारौं नेपालीहरूसमेत बाबाधाम जान्छन् । गङ्गा नदीदेखि निकै किलोमिटर नाङ्गा खुट्टाले पैदलयात्रा गर्दै गङ्गाजल ल्याएर साउनका सोमवारहरूमा बाबाधाममा चढाउँछन् र आफू पापहरूबाट मुक्त भएको अनुभव गर्छन् । यस सुल्तानगन्जमा साउनमा मात्र होइन वर्षको कुनै पनि महिना र वारमा शिवजीलाई पानी चढाउन विश्वभरिका हिन्दूहरू ओइरिन्छन् र नाङ्गै खुट्टा त्यत्रो लामो र कठिन यात्रा गरी शिवजीलाई गङ्गाजल चढाउँछन् । अचेल त साउने सोमवारमा शिवजीलाई पानी चढाउने चलन हाम्रो नेपालका लगभग सबै शिवालयहरूमा बढ्दो छ । त्यसमा पनि धरानका पिण्डेश्वर महादेवको मन्दिरमा कोसीको जल चढाउनेको भीड रहरलाग्दो हुन्छ । मोरङको सिजुवास्थित विश्वनाथ बाबाधाममा रतुवाबाट जल ल्याई चढाउनेहरूको सङ्ख्या पनि अत्यन्त ठूलो हुन्छ । पूर्वी नेपालमा जस्तै मध्य र पश्चिमी नेपालमा पनि शिवालयहरूमा जल चढाउने भक्तजनको बढ्दो सङ्ख्याले बोलबम तीर्थाटनका लागि भारत जाने परम्परालाई विस्थापित गर्दो छ ।

हामी चढेको ट्रेन लोकल थियो । एकैछिन जोडले कूदने अनि गति कम गर्न थालिहाल्ने । अर्को एउटा सानो बजार वा गाउँ आउँछ, ट्रेन अडिइहाल्छ, फेरि दगुर्न थाल्छ, एकै छिनका लागि गति तीव्र हुन्छ तर तुरुन्तै हाम्रो ट्रेन गति घटाउन थालिहाल्छ । गाउँहरू आउँछन् र जान्छन् । फेरि अर्को गाउँ आउँछ अनि जान्छ । मानिसहरू त्यस्तो तातो घाममा पनि खेतमा काम गरिरहेका छन् । घरहरूका भित्ता र छानामा गोबर टाँसेका छन्, खाना पकाउन बाल्ने गुइँठा बनाएका । गाउँहरू बाक्ला छन् । परम्परागत घरहरूमा भ्याल छैनन् ।

१०. कति बाक्लै बकुल्ला बसेका !

म पहिलो पल्ट भागलपुरभन्दा उताको यात्रामा थिएँ । त्यताका ठूलूला धानखेत, अनौठा ढिस्काढिस्की र खेतका आलीमा लस्कुरै उभिएका ताडका रूखहरू मलाई अनौठा लागिरहेका थिए । ट्रेन खुल्ला भएकाले म यताउता दौडेर बाहिरको विहङ्गम दृश्यमा पौडिरहेको थिएँ । निकैवेरपछि म सीतानेर पुगें । अड्तीस वर्षकी भएपछि जीवनमा आज पहिलो पल्ट ट्रेन चढेकी हुनाले उनको मनमा कस्ता भावहरू उत्पन्न हुँदै छन् भन्ने जान्न मन भयो । उनी पूजा र मजस्तो बाहिरको दृश्य हेर्दै रमाएको भाव शब्दमा व्यक्त गर्दै थिइनन् । उनी मनका कतिपय भाव सार्वजनिक ठाउँमा अभिव्यक्त गर्नु असम्भ्यता मान्छिन् ।

सीतालाई मैले सोधें- 'कस्तो लागिरहेको छ ?'

'खै कस्तो लाग्नु र ? ठीकै लागेको छ ।'

आफ्नो अनुभूति व्यक्त गर्नेसम्म ढङ्ग छैन यिनको ! जीवनमा पहिलो पल्ट ट्रेनयात्रा गर्दै भएकी एक स्नातक नेपाली महिलाले भन्ने शब्द पनि यस्ता हुन्छन् ? उनको अनुहारमा कुनै पछुतो, खुसी वा आश्चर्यका धर्सा कोरिएका थिएनन् । सीता मलाई रहस्यमयी लाग्दिनन्, साधारण सपना, साधारण इच्छा र साधारण भोक ।

मेरो गाउँ इटहरामा घरहरू आफ्नो खेतमा वा खेतबाट नजिकै बनाइएका हुन्छन्, म बस्ने इटहरीबाट दक्षिणको थारूजातिका बस्ती एक ठाउँमा गुजमुज्ज परेका र परपरसम्म खुल्ला खेत अर्थात् थारू भाषामा भन्दा 'बाद' फैलिएका हुन्छन् । एकै ठाउँमा घरहरू सामाजिक सुरक्षाका दृष्टिले ठीक मानिने भए पनि त्यस्तै गाउँमा चोरीडकैतीको पिरलो बढी छ । भागलपुरदेखि उताका घरहरू त हाम्रा थारूगाउँ हेरी झर्नु परपरसम्म खेत छाडी एकैठाउँ गुजमुजु परेका । तिनका होचा घरमा न राम्रा भ्यालढोका छन्, न घरवरिपरि सफासुग्घर ।

यताका हाम्रा थारूगाउँको एउटा पक्ष सारै खराब, हाम्राहरूका घर खर-परालले छाएका हुन्छन् । घरका बारटाटीहरू पनि बाँसका भिक्का र झारपातले बनाइन्छन् । घरहरू सबैतिर राम्ररी माटाले लिपिएका हुँदैनन् । हाम्रा यी गाउँमा आगलागी भयो भने सिङ्गै गाउँ खरानी बन्छ । तर भागलपुरे किसानहरूका घरहरू जति नै बाक्ला र अव्यवस्थित भए पनि छाना खपडाले छाएका र भित्ता ठीकसँग माटाले पोतेका रहेछन् । तिनका धेरैजसो भित्ता माटाले बनेका छन् । सक्नेले त ईँटकै बनाउने गरेको पनि देखियो । यसबाट ती घरहरूमा आगलागी भइहाले पनि पीडा कम हुन्छ ।

यस्तो गर्मी ठाउँ छ, घरमा मानिस कसरी बस्छ हुन्, हुन त बानी परेपछि सबै ठीकै लाग्दो हो । ट्रेन सानातिना बजार र गाउँहरू, खोलाखोल्सा, फाडी र पोखरीतलाउ हुँदै अघि बढ्यो । रेलमार्ग अग्लो पार्नका लागि माटो खनिएका ठाउँमा पोखरी बनेका र त्यस्ता पोखरीमा सेता र राता कमलहरू पोखरी ढाकेर ढकमक्क फुलेका थिए ।

पूजालाई मैले ढकमक्क फुलेका ती श्वेतकमल देखाएँ । मैले भनेँ- 'कमल कति राम्ररी फुलेका हगि ?'

'आबुई ! कमल फुलेका पो ? देख्न त मैले पनि अगिदेखि देखिर'की थें, कति बाक्लै बकुल्ला बसेका भन्ने पो ठानिर'की !' पूजाले भनी ।

हामी कमल फुलेको दृश्यमा रमाइरहेका थियौँ । कतैकतै त्यस्ता कमलपोखरीको लम्बाइ तीनचार किलोमिटरसम्म हुन्थ्यो । मानिसहरू ती सुन्दर दृश्यप्रति कुनै ध्यान दिँदैनथे । बेलाबेला एक हुल मानिस अचानक ओइरिन्थे र डिब्बा खचाखच हुन्थ्यो अनि अर्को स्टेसनमा डिब्बा खाली ।

गयानजिक प्रसिद्ध फाल्गुनदी छ भनेर मैले बूढापाकाहरूबाट सुनेको थिएँ । पितृहरूको उद्धारका लागि गयाश्राद्ध गर्ने भनेको त्यसै नदीमा गर्ने हो । कतिखेर फाल्गुनदी आउने हो भनेर म चिहाइरहेको थिएँ । अनेक सानाठूला खोला आउँथे, तर फाल्गुनदी यही हुनुपर्छ भन्ने खालको नदी देखिएको थिएन । सम्म खेतका बीचमा अनौठा ढिस्काढिस्की देखापर्यंत, तिनलाई डाँडा भनौँ भने होचा, ढिस्का भनौँ भने अलिक अग्ला । पर देब्रेपट्टि होचो पहाड देखिन्थ्यो । पहाड अनियमित थियो । बेलाबेला डाँडाहरू अलि अग्ला हुन्थे भने बेलाबेला ती डाँडा होचिदैहोचिदै गएर मैदानसँगै मिल्थे । फेरि अर्को डाँडो सुरु हुन्थ्यो । डाँडाहरूको फेदबाट कतैकतै चौडा बगर हामीतिर फैलिएको हुन्थ्यो । भरीबर्खाका बेला बग्ने खहरे खोलाका बगरमात्र थिए ती ।

फाल्गुनदी सुक्छा छ र बालुवा खोस्रे पानी निकाल्नुपर्छ भनेर हजुरआमा भन्नुहुन्थ्यो ।

बेलाबेला त्यो होचो पहाड अलि नजिक हुन्थ्यो त बेलाबेला निकै पर पुग्थ्यो । बिस्तारै ढिस्काहरूको सङ्ख्या र साइज बढ्न थाल्यो । सम्म खेत हराउन थाले, बरु अलि नमिलेको भू-भाग आउन थाल्यो । पर देखिने पहाड अचानक अत्यन्त नजिक आइपुग्थ्यो र सुइत भाग्थ्यो । एक ठाउँमा त पहाड खोपेर ट्रेन छिर्ने प्वाल बनाएको रहेछ । हाम्रो ट्रेन त्यस अँध्यारो सुरुङ्गभित्र छिन्थ्यो । सुरुङ्गभित्र ट्रेनको आवाज कानै खाने गरी आउँदो रहेछ ।

एउटा अलिक ठूलै बजार आयो । हुन त प्रत्येक बजार वा गाउँ आइपुग्दा स्टेसनमा ठूलाठूला अक्षरमा नाम लेखिएको हुन्थ्यो । तर ती सानातिना ठाउँको नाम याद गरेर के साध्य ! यस बजारको पनि मलाई नाम याद भएन, सायद जमालपुर हो जस्तो लाग्छ, ट्रेन निकैबेर अडिने रहेछ । स्टेसनमा हामी बसेको डिब्बाबाट देखिने ठाउँमा एउटी आइमाई हरिया मकै पोल्दै बेच्न बसेकी रहिछ । हरिया मकै भन्थो कि आफ्नो त मुखमा पानी रसाउन थालिहाल्छ, त्यसमाथि बिहानदेखि चियासम्म नखाई ट्रेनमा हिँडेका हामी, मकै देख्दा भित्रको आगो बाहिरै फुत्कला भनेजस्तो भइसकेको थियो । म सीतालाई भनेर खुक्क ओर्ले । मकै किनेर भ्यालबाट सीताको हातमा थमाएँ । बोतलमा पिउने पानी पनि सकिन लागेको रहेछ । धाराको पानी लिन लागेको त ट्रेन हिँड्न थालिहाल्यो । ट्रेन हो, हिँड्दै गर्दा पनि चढिहालिन्छ नि भनेर पानी भरिरहेँ । एकछिनपछि त ट्रेनले गति पक्रिहाल्यो । परेन आपत्, दौडिँदै गएर आफू चढेको भन्दा पछिल्लो डिब्बामा बल्लबल्ल चढ्न भ्याएँ । भीडले भन्ने बाहिरै फालिदियो । तर बिहारीहरू मनकारी, सबैले मलाई भित्र घुस्न भरसक मद्दत नै गरे । अर्को स्टेसन आएपछि ओर्लेर आफ्नै डिब्बामा घुसेँ ।

निकैबेरपछि अब ट्रेन गयानजिक पुग्यो भनेर यात्रुहरू आ-आफ्ना सामान मिलाउन, पोकापुन्तुरा हातमा लिन थाले । निदाएका र उँधै गरेका यात्रुहरू जागा भए । एउटा खोलो आयो । पुल पनि ठूलै थियो । छेउमा बसेको अधबैँसे बिहारी मसँग बोल्नुला भैं गर्दै थियो । मैले सोधेँ-

‘भाईजी, फाल्गु नदी’

वाक्य नटुङ्गिँदै त्यसले भन्थो- ‘नहीं, फाल्गु नदी कुछ आगे है । वह तो इस से बड़ी है । फाल्गु नदी पार करते ही हम गया पहुँचते है । आप कहाँ से आए हैं ?’

‘नेपालबाट ।’

‘नेपालबाट ?’

‘हजुर हामी नेपालबाट आएका.. ।’

‘नेपाल महान् देश हो । नेपालका मानिस धर्मात्मा हुन्छन् । नेपालका सारा मानिस यहाँ पितृतारणका लागि आउँछन् । तपाईं सपरिवार हुनुहुन्छ, सरादकै लागि त आउनुभएको होला !’ त्यस बिहारीले मलाई सपरिवार गयातिर आएको अगिदेखि नै ध्यानपूर्वक हेरिरहेको हुनुपर्छ ।

‘हामी त विशुद्ध पर्यटनका लागि आएका हौं । गयाको सहर हेर्न र घुम्नसँग मतलब छ ।’ अलिक लामै यात्रामा निस्केका भन्ने कुरा भन्दा यात्रुको भेषका चोरडाँकाले थाहा पाउन सक्ने खतरा हुन्थ्यो ।

‘तपाईं हिन्दू हैन र ? ब्राह्मण वा छेत्रीजस्तो देखिनुहुन्छ त !’

‘म ब्राह्मण जातिको हुँ ।’

‘हर हिन्दू को यहाँ आकर पितृ गण का उद्धार करना चाहिये । श्राद्ध के लिये गया सर्वोत्तम है । देवगण भी यहीं आकर श्राद्ध करते हैं । आप जो उद्देश्य से भी आये, अब पितृ श्राद्ध करना ही अच्छा है । लोग कहाँ कहाँ से हजारों खर्चा करके श्राद्ध के लिये यहाँ आते है, आप तो उतने दूर से आ ही पहुँचे हैं, फिर मौका मिलेगा या नहीं, सपरिवार आते वक्त श्राद्ध करके ही जाइएगा ।’

‘अहिले पितृश्राद्ध गर्ने भन्ने विषयमा कुनै सोचाइ छैन । म त छुट्टी मनाउन भनेर सपरिवार हिँडेको । भर्खरै सोह्रश्राद्ध सकिएको छ, यो श्राद्ध गर्ने समय पनि होइन । श्राद्ध गर्न त तिथिपर्व पनि हेर्नुपर्न्यो नि !’

त्यो मानिस पण्डा रहेछ । पण्डाहरू गयाश्राद्ध गर्न आउने मानिसहरूलाई बाटैदेखि समातेर आफ्ना यजमान बनाउन खोज्दा रहेछन् । उसले गयामा पितृश्राद्ध गर्न कुनै तिथिमिति चाहिँदैन भन्थो । ऊ मेरो थर, गोत्र, प्रवर आदि विवरण सोध्न थाल्यो । उसले आफू विद्वान् पण्डित भएको दावी गर्न थाल्यो र मेरा लागि एक अपूर्व अवसर जुटेकाले मलाई भाग्यमानी मानिस भन्न थाल्यो ।

ममा पण्डाहरूप्रति अविश्वास, भय र अश्रद्धामात्र बाँकी छ । भारतको तीर्थयात्रा गर्नेहरूले पण्डापुराण लगाएर ममा तिनीहरूप्रति सम्पूर्ण अनास्था भरिदिएका छन् । त्यसले मलाई अनेक किसिमले फकाउन खोज्यो, मैले श्राद्ध गर्दै गर्दिनँ भनेपछि बाबुआमाप्रति कृतघ्न, दुष्ट, नामर्द, अधर्मी आदि भन्न र धम्क्याउन पो थाल्यो ।

उससँगको तर्कवितर्क मेरा लागि एक प्रकारको बुद्धिविलास हुने देखियो । मैले प्रतिवाद गरें- 'मैले मेरा मातापिताको यथाशक्य सेवा गरेको छु । उहाँहरूले खानपान, उपचार, दानपुण्य, तीर्थव्रत र भ्रमण मेरो हैसियतअनुसार गर्न पाइरहनुभएको छ । मेरा पितृहरूको तरनतारनका लागि नेपालमै विष्णुपादुका भनिने पवित्र तीर्थ छ, जुन गयाभन्दा ठूलो हो । गयाका लोभी, नीच र कामी अपात्रको सहायताले कसैका पितृ तर्न सक्तैनन् । मलाई यहाँ तपाईंको कुनै प्रकारको सहायता चाहिँदैन । गयाका सुपात्र ब्राह्मण सडकमा भेटिँदैनन् ।'

गयाको स्टेसन आइपुग्यो । स्टेसनमा रेलगाडी रोकिएपछि हामी आफ्ना पोकापुन्तुरा बोकेर बिस्तारै ओर्लन थाल्यौं । मसँग तर्कवितर्क गर्ने पण्डा पनि हामीसँगसँगै ओर्लियो । ऊ एकछिन सँगै हिँड्न खोज्यो । मैले भनें-

'पण्डितजी, मैने यहाँ आने का अपना उद्देश्य साफसाफ कह चुका हूँ । मै आपसे बिनती करता हूँ, हाम्रा पिछ्छा छोडिये ।'

मबाट माल फुस्कने देखेन सायद, मलाई तथानाम गाली गर्दै र सराप्ते ऊ एकातिर लाग्यो । हाम्रा बाहुनहरूको लोभ नै समाजका अनेक विकृतिको मूल हो भन्ने मलाई लाग्छ ।

बल्लबल्ल एउटा काउसो हटेको थियो । गयामा कतिवटा त्यस्ता काउसा खनिने हुन् भन्ने चिन्ता पनि लाग्न थालेको थियो । हामी स्टेसनबाहिर निस्क्यौं । गयाको रेलवे स्टेसन अत्यन्त भद्दा, कुरूप र अव्यवस्थित थियो । स्टेसनको उत्तरपूर्वपट्टि हलेसी मन्दिरनेरको ढिस्कोसँग ठ्याक्क मिल्ने एउटा निकै अग्लो ढिस्को देखिन्थ्यो । त्यस ढिस्कामा एउटा सस्यानो मन्दिरजस्तो भवन थियो । ट्रेनबाट भर्खर ओर्लेका यात्रुहरूलाई पर्खेर बसेका रिक्सावाला र टेम्पोवालाहरू चिच्याइरहेका थिए । रिक्सा र टेम्पोका अलगअलग स्टेन्ड थिए, आ-आफ्ना स्टेन्डमा रिक्सा र टेम्पोहरूको एकप्रकारको रमितालागदो मेला नै थियो । हामीछेउ पनि थुप्रै रिक्साचालक र टेम्पोवालाहरू आए-

'बाबूजी, आपको कहाँ जाना है?'

'आपको 'आटो' चाहिए?'

'रिक्सा चाहिए आपको?'

हामी 'नहीं, कुछ भी नहीं चाहिए' भन्दै बिस्तारै स्टेसननेरको बजारतिर लाग्न थाल्यौं । दिनको यस्तै बाह्र-साढे बाह्र बजेको हुँदो हो मेरा जन्तरे काकाका शब्दमा हाम्रो 'आन्दा-प्रदेशमा आन्दोलन' भड्किइसकेको थियो । अलिकति हरियो मकै परेको मात्र न हो, नत्र त बिहानदेखि लगभग निराहार व्रत बसेका थियौं ।

स्टेसनअगाडि फराकिलो ठाउँ छ । 'एउटा सुन्दर फूलबारी र पार्क रहेछ, सुन्दर पहिरनमा सिँगारिएका सहरियाहरू हावा खान बिस्तारै यताउता डुलि रहेका थिए' भन्न लायक ठाउँ बनाउनुपर्नेमा मान्छेले कुबुद्धि लिएपछि कसको के लाग्छ ? सडक र बरिपरिको सबै खुल्ला ठाउँमा दिसाका पहाड र पिसाबका पोखरी छन् । त्यस्तरी दिसापिसाब गर्न कसरी सकेका होलान् ! हाम्रो भारतीय उपमहाद्वीपको असभ्यताको नमुना हेर्न टाढा पुगिरहनै पर्दैन ।

हामी दक्षिण एसियालीहरू मैले पढेसुनेका विवरणअनुसार अविकसित, गरिब र अशिक्षित त छँदै छौं, विश्वकै एक नम्बर फोहोरी, लुच्चा, ठग, भ्रष्टाचारी, अल्छी, कामचोर, अन्धविश्वासी, मनोरोगी र पापी छौं । गयाको रेलवे-स्टेसनअगाडि मलमूत्र जथाभावी विसर्जन गरिएको देख्दा मलाई आफैंप्रति ठूलो दया लागेर आयो । कठैबरा हामी ! हामीलाई यो दुर्गन्ध, फोहोर, अव्यवस्था र लापरवाही स्वीकार छ । यस नरकका निर्माता र भोक्ता हामी नै हौं । यो हाम्रो जीवनशैली हो, हाम्रो पहिचान हो । बिहार सम्पन्न, सफा, सुन्दर भए सबैलाई त्यसले प्रेरणा दिन्थ्यो, त्यसको प्रत्यक्ष फाइदा हामी नेपालीले पाउँथ्यौं । भारत फोहोर, रोगी, भोको र चोरवृत्तिको हुँदा हामीलाई पनि उत्तिकै कठिनाइ पर्छ । नेपालीको दुर्भाग्य भन्नुपर्छ, हाम्रो दक्षिणी सीमामा उत्तर प्रदेश र बिहारजस्ता भारतीय राज्य पर्दछन् ।

भारतको बिहार नेपालका अपराधीहरू लुक्ने ठाउँ हो भने भारतमा अपराध गरेर हाम्रो तराईमा सुरक्षित भएर लुकिरहेका अपराधीहरू मनग्गे होलान् । नेपालमा पानी पर्दा बिहारमा बाढी आउने मात्र होइन, नेपालको उन्नतिले भारतलाई पनि फाइदै छ, भन्ने मामुली ज्ञान नजान्नेहरू नै भारतको शासनमा हालीमुहाली चलाएर बसेका हुनाले नै नेपालको विरुद्ध षड्यन्त्र गरेर आफ्नो दुनो सोभ्याउन यी सर्वदा प्रयत्नशील छन् । त्यसैले पनि होला नेपालसँग जोडिएका भागहरूमा भारतको भौतिक विकासको गति अत्यन्त मन्द छ ।

म भन्दै थिएँ यो दुर्गन्ध, यो फोहोर, यो अव्यवस्था हामी हाँसीहाँसी स्वीकार गरिरहेका छौँ । हामी यस नर्कमा राजीखुसीले बसेका छौँ । सरसफाइ, सुव्यवस्था र उज्यालो चाहिने भएको भए यो अवस्था आउन सक्ने नै थिएन । गयाको स्टेसननेरको नर्ककण्डमा बस्न पाउँदा मलाई अरुथोक केही चाहिँदैन भनेर हामी सधैं निश्चिन्त देखिन्छौँ । हाम्रा पितृ तर्नेतर्ने यस 'पवित्र' ठाउँ गयामा देवलोकबाट देवीदेवताहरू आई पितृश्राद्ध गर्दछन् !

हाम्रो जय होस् ! हाम्रा देवताहरूको पनि जय होस् !

गयाको स्टेसनको आलो तथा बासी फोहोर कुल्चँदै, नाघ्दै र हाम्रै असभ्यतालाई सराप्तै अधि बढ्छौँ । स्टेसनबाहिर फोहोर र घिनलाग्दा होटलहरू थिए । तिनका अगाडिपट्टिको खुला ढल गन्हाएर बस्नसम्म नसकिने थियो । तर मानिसहरू त्यही फोहोरनेर भात, दाल-तरकारी वा सुख्खा रोटी थपीथपी खाइरहेका थिए । तिनीहरूमध्येको अलिक सफाजस्तो लाग्ने एउटा होटलमा हाम्रो सानो यात्रुटोली पस्यो । भोकले आन्द्रामा छुत्ती खेल्न थालेपछि त्यस्तैमा पनि खान सकिने रहेछ !

होटलहरूको खाना हाम्रो नेपालको हेरी आधा सस्तो । काठमाडौँ जाँदा-आउँदा मुग्लिन, रामनगर, चन्द्रनिगाहपुर, लाहान, ढल्केबर, हेटौँडा, लालबन्दी, बर्दीबास आदि ठाउँमा राजमार्गका छेउका होटलहरूमा खाँदाको हेरी त एक चौथाइ । ती होटल र यी होटल सरसफाइ, खानाको स्तर, फर्निचर आदि कुरामा खासै फरक होइन तर होटलमालिक र तिनका कर्मचारीको बोलीवचन र व्यवहार आकाश-पाताल फरक छन् । यी भारतीयहरूलाई ग्राहकसँग कसरी बोल्नुपर्छ, कसरी भएसम्म सुविधा दिएर ग्राहकलाई सन्तुष्ट पार्नुपर्छ भन्ने थाहा छ । आफ्नो होटलमा नभएका खानेकुराको माग भएमा अरू होटलतिर छ भन्ने खोजेर त्याइदिने, धेरैवेर ग्राहक आफ्नै होटलमा बसिदेओस् भन्ने, ग्राहकका रुचि बुझ्न सक्तो प्रयास गर्ने, ग्राहकका मालसामानको सुरक्षा गर्ने आदि कला यी भारतीयहरूबाट नेपालीहरूले कहिले सिक्ने ?

नेपालबाट जीवनमा पहिलो पल्ट आएको र सम्भवतः फेरि कहिल्यै नआउने हो भन्ने बुझीबुझी पनि तिनले हामीलाई जस्तो व्यवहार गरे त्यसबाट भारतीयहरूको व्यापारचातुर्यको प्रशंसा गर्न मन लाग्छ ।

११. यह भी कोई सहर है ?

स्टेशनअगाडिको त्यस होटलमा खानपिन गरिसकेर हाम्रो यात्रुदल फेरि सडकमा निस्क्यो । फाल्गुनदी यतै पर्छ होला, फेरि मोरा ठग पण्डाहरूका फेला परिने हो कि भन्ने डर मनमा भएकाले दल कसैलाई नसोध्नी अनुमानको भरमा उत्तरतिर लाग्यो । त्यो गल्ली अलि अगाडि पुगेपछि त कम चल्तीको र दिसापिसाव गर्ने थलो बन्दै गएको पो रहेछ !

पुनः फर्केर अगिको होटलमा आउनुपर्‍यो । होटलवालालाई गयामा घुम्नेपर्ने महत्त्वपूर्ण ठाउँ केके छन् भनेर सोध्ने । उसले भन्यो-

‘भाइसाहब ! गया बहुत बड़ा शहर है । यहाँ देखने लायक कई जगह हैं । आप दो तीन दिन ठहरकर सब देखकर ही जाइएगा ।’

‘नहीं जी, हमलोग को कल दस बजे ही यहाँ से रवाना होना है । इसलिये सब से महत्त्वपूर्ण स्थान ही देख पाएँगे.....।’

‘तो ऐसा कीजिये... । यहाँ बोधगया है । कुछ पन्द्रह बीस किलोमिटर दूर है । आप बोधगया अवश्य जाइये । फाल्गु नदी पर कल सबेरे पितृश्राद्ध करना अच्छा होगा, विष्णुपद मन्दिर है, वह दर्शनीय है । यहाँ मगध विश्वविद्यालय, विश्वप्रसिद्ध सङ्ग्रहालय और अभीअभी बना हुआ हवाई अड्डा भी देखने लायक है ।’

यति त अवश्य घुम्न भ्याइएला भन्ने देखियो । होटलवालाको सल्लाह मान्नु ठीक हुन्थ्यो ।

‘रात कहाँ बिताउनु ठीक होला ?’

उसले भन्यो- ‘यह गया है, आप जहाँ भी ठहर सकते हैं । आप किसी भी होटल लाज पर रह सकते हैं ।’

‘हम लोग किसी धर्मशाला में ठहरना चाहता हैं ।’ हाम्रो दुब्लो थैली हामीलाई कुनै होटल वा ‘लाज’मा सकभर नबस्न सुझाव दिन्थ्यो ।

होटलवालाले त्यहाँ भएका केही मानिसहरूसँग सोधपुछ गर्‍यो । अन्त्यमा उसले हामीलाई टेकारी-रोडस्थित पुरानी गोदामनेरको रामचन्द्रबाबू धर्मशालामा बास बस्नु उपयुक्त होला भन्यो ।

हामी एउटा रिक्सा पक्रेर टेकारीरोडस्थित रामचन्द्रबाबू धर्मशालातिर लाग्यौं । मैले रिक्सावालालाई सोधें-

‘भाइजी, गया में देखने लायक जगह कौन कौन है ?’

‘यह भी कोई शहर है ? इसमें देखने लायक जगह कोई भी नहीं है । देखने के लिये तो बम्बई, कलकत्ता व दिल्ली जाना चाहिये । आप कहाँ से आ रहे हैं ?’

‘हामी नेपालबाट गयाको भ्रमणका लागि आएका । भोलि बिहानसम्म यहाँ अडिने भएका छौं । गयाका घुम्नलायक कुनै धार्मिक, औद्योगिक वा प्राकृतिक स्थानका बारेमा भन्नुहोस् न ।’

उसले पनि विष्णुपद, फाल्गुनदी, बोधगया, अवध विश्वविद्यालय र हवाई अड्डाकै नाम लियो ।

हामी धर्मशाला पुग्यौं । यो ठाउँ रेलवे स्टेसनबाट त्यति टाढा छैन । तर धर्मशाला अलिक पुरानो रहेछ । कोठाहरू ठूलाठूला नै छन् । सरसफाइ राम्रो, चर्पी र पानीको प्रबन्ध समुचित नै छ अनि शान्त पनि । नुहाइधुवाइ गर्ने र लुगा सुकाउने ठाउँ पनि पर्याप्त रहेछ तर नजिकै खानपिनका लागि होटल छैन । विशेष चाडबाडका बेला चाहिँ भीडभाड हुने भएकाले यो ठाउँ बास बस्न असजिलो हुने देखिन्छ । हामीले कोठा र बेडिसमेत माग गर्‍यौं । धर्मशाला अन्यत्र हेरी सस्तो नै मान्नुपर्छ यो ।

यस स्थानलाई पुरानी गोदाम भन्दा रहेछन् । यहाँका लगभग सबै घर पाँच-साततले मात्र थिए । घरका धेरैजसो तला अनेक खालका सामानका गोदाम रहेछन् । गया सहर यस खण्डबाट हेर्ने हो भने गोदामैगोदामको उराठलाग्दो सहरजस्तो लाग्ने । जता हिँडे पनि गोदामैगोदाम मात्र देखिने । मानिसको सङ्ख्या अत्यन्त कम, घर पनि निकै पुराना । आकाश छुने डरलाग्दा घरहरू भए पनि मानिस र ठूला सवारी साधन देख्न नपाइने, फाट्टफुट्ट मोटरसाइकल र सामान ओसारपसार गर्ने ठेलागाडा, ट्रक र ट्र्याक्टर मात्र । कतै चुनैचुनका गोदाम मात्र भएका त कतै लसुनैलसुनका गोदाम मात्र भएका गल्ली ।

१२. माई होम इज भेरी फार फ्रम हिय ...!

हामीले अघि खाना खाँदै गर्दा बोधगया जान कसरी कहाँबाट जानुपर्ने हो भनेर होटलवालाबाट जानकारी लिएका थियौं । रिक्सा र टेम्पोमा लाग्ने भाडासमेत बुझेका थियौं । बेलेमा जानकारी लिइराखेन भने बिहारमा रिक्सावालाहरूले मजाले ठग्न सक्छन् । रिक्सा समातेर दिग्घीतालाब भन्ने ठाउँसम्म जानुपर्ने र त्यहाँबाट टेम्पो चढ्न पाइने रहेछ । पुरानी गोदामबाट दिग्घीतालाब पुग्न रिक्साको यात्रा लामो र दिक्कलाग्दो रहेछ । सहरका साँगुरा गल्लीपछि गल्ली गर्दै अनि भीडभाडबाट छिराउँदै रिक्साले बिहारका अव्यवस्थित खाल्ताखुल्टी परेका सडकैसडक लाँदो रहेछ । खाल्ताखुल्टीबाट तर्काउन खोज्दा रिक्साले सोभो सडकमै घुमाएर र हुत्याएर दिक्क लगाउने । बिहारमा रिक्साभाडा सस्तो छ, तर रिक्साभाडा तय गरेर मात्र चढ्नुपर्छ, नत्र तिनीहरूले नराम्ररी ढाड सेक्ने गर्छन् ।

रिक्साचालकका अनुसार दिग्घीतालाब गयाको निकै महत्त्वपूर्ण चौबाटो हो । सहरका प्रमुख सरकारी र व्यापारिक कार्यालयहरू यस क्षेत्रमा छन् । यहाँबाट टेम्पो चढेपछि निकैबेर टेम्पो सहरका साँगुरा गल्लीगल्ली भएर दक्षिणतिर लाग्दो रहेछ । निकैबेरपछि सहर पातलिन थाल्यो । बाहिरको भाग हाम्रो धरानजस्तो तर उत्तरतिर पानीढलो रहेछ । टेम्पोमा भीड भएकाले होला यो यात्रा निकै लामो लाग्यो । सडक फाल्गुनदीको किनारैकिनार दक्षिणतिर उकालो लाग्दो रहेछ । फाल्गुनदी नाममात्रको नदी रहेछ । बगरमात्र भएकाले मोरङको चिसाङजस्तो छ यो, तर बगरको बालुवाचाहिँ अलिक रातोफुस्रो । बोधगया पुग्नुअगावै हाम्रा पितापुर्खाले पितृश्राद्ध गर्न जाने गरेको ठाउँतिर जाने बाटो र पुल देखा पर्‍यो ।

बोधगया जीवनमा एकपल्ट जानैपर्ने ठाउँ हो । अत्यन्त आकर्षक । मानिसले निर्माण गरेको स्वर्ग नै हो यो ठाउँ । यहाँ भगवान् बुद्धले तपस्या गरेको पीपल र त्यससँग सम्बन्धित मन्दिर, पोखरी र पार्कहरू अत्यन्त सुन्दर छन् । विश्वका हरेक कुनाबाट पर्यटकहरू लुम्बिनीमा भैं यस स्थानको दर्शन गर्न आइरहँदा रहेछन् । चिनियाँ, थाई र जापानीहरूको त भीडभाड नै हुँदो रहेछ । हामी धेरै समय र मन लगाएर वरिपरि घुम्‍यौं । बोधिवृक्षनेर केही पर्यटकसँग अङ्ग्रेजीमा कुराकानी पनि गर्न भ्याइयो । केही थाईहरू हामीसित कुरा गर्न पाउँदा निकै उत्साहित थिए ।

एउटी थाई युवती पूजासँग बोली । पूजालाई उसले सोधी- 'यु आर फ्रम इन्डिया?'

पूजाले तुरुन्त भनिहाली- 'नो, वी आर फ्रम नेपाल । माई होम इज भेरी फार फ्रम हिय... !'

पूजा र त्यो केटी केही बेरसम्म कुराकानी गरिरहेका थिए ।

सीताले बोधिवृक्षमुनि पुगेपछि भनिन्- 'यो भूमि स्वर्ग रहेछ । हेर्नोस् न, कति सफासुगन्ध छ ! मलाई त यहीं भिक्षुणी भएर बस्न पाए हुन्थ्यो जस्तो पो लाग्दै छ ।'

'तिमी भिक्षुणी भएपछि मेरो के गति होला नि !'

'तपाईंले त अर्को बन्दोबस्त गर्नुहोला नै, तर छोरीहरूको पो विजोक हुन्छ होला ।'

'छोरीहरू त हुर्किदै जान्छन्, उनीहरू यताउता हेर्छन्, खेल्छन्, डुल्छन् र नयाँ संसारतिरै रमाउँछन् । म पो सधैंका लागि एकलो हुनेछु त !'

'त्यो त हो । तर पनि एउटा कल्पना..... ।'

'मलाई त कल्पनादेखि पनि डर लाग्छ' मैले भनें ।

'त्यसो भए हामी दुवै भिक्षुभिक्षुणी भएर बसौं न त यसै स्वर्गमा !'

'.....'

मेरा आँखा पर उभिएका थाई युवतीहरूका नाङ्गा र चिल्ला पिँडुलातिर विचरण गर्न थाले । मिनीस्कर्टले ती थाईहरूका आधा पनि 'थाई' छोपेका थिएनन् । मलाई अर्धनग्नता अत्यन्त मन पर्छ । आफ्नो शरीरले कसैलाई नोक्सान नगरी हजारौं आँखा र हृदयलाई सन्धोसुविस्ता बाँड्न सक्छ भने किन ढाक्ने ? म सभ्यताको अर्थ बुझिदैनं । मलाई हाम्रो काठमाडौँका तरुना-तरुनीहरूप्रति माया लागेर आउँछ, तिनीहरूले ती हेरिरहुँ लाग्दा अनुहार सुँगुरको थुतुनोजस्तो पारेर मास्क लगाएर छोप्नुपर्छ, दुर्गन्धी र बिखालु धूवाँबाट बच्न । बिचराहरू !

तर तिनीहरूले सास तान्नपने तर ध्यान तान्न कामलाग्ने अङ्गलाई अलिक खुला राखेर त्यसको क्षतिपूर्ति गरिहाल्छन् । बाठा छन् नि ! सहरका अर्धनग्न तरुनीहरूलाई मेरो थप अनुरोध- आफ्ना खतर्नाक यन्त्रको प्रयोग गरेर सिङ्गै सहरलाई अन्धा बनाओ, लाटो पार र आफ्नो पाउमा खसाल । सक्तैनौं भने यहाँ बोधगयामा आओ र भिक्षुणी भएर बस !

बोधगयाको पीपलको रूखलाई ढल्न नदिन विशेष किसिमका फलामे टेकाहरू राखिएका रहेछन् । अनेक देशका दर्शनार्थी र भक्तहरू घुमीघुमी फोटो खिच्ने, प्रवचन सुन्ने, मन्त्रोच्चारण र भजन गर्ने, मन्दिरवरिपरि साष्टाङ्ग प्रणाम गर्दै घुमिरहने आदि अनेक खालका क्रियाकलापहरू गरिरहेका थिए । ध्यान गरिरहेका सयौं बौद्धमार्गीहरूसँगै बसेर चारैजनाले केहीबेर ध्यान गर्‍यौं । हामी सुन्दरताको अनुपम सहर त्यस बोधगयाका अनेक गुम्बा, मन्दिर र स्मारकहरू हेरेर रमाएको रमायै भइरह्यौं । मुख्य मन्दिरको जीर्णोद्धार भइरहेको रहेछ । मन्दिरको टुप्पामा काम गरिरहेको मानिसलाई हेर्दा माथि आकाशको चरोभैँ सानो देखिन्थ्यो । वरिपरिको भूमि ढिलजस्तो र मन्दिर रहेको जमिन निकै होचो छ । ढिलबाट तल मन्दिरवरिपरि अनेक ढङ्गले उठ्दै र बस्दै आनि सुत्दै भगवान्प्रति भक्ति प्रकट गरिरहेका मानिसहरूको गतिविधि हेर्न रमाइलो लाग्ने ।

त्यसपछि हाम्रो टोली नागपोखरीतिर लाग्यो । सफा पोखरीमा ठूलाठूला रङ्गीचङ्गी माछाहरू रहेछन् । भुजा अर्थात् धानको मुरही खानका लागि माछाको भीडभाड रमाइलो लाग्ने ।

बोधिवृक्षको उत्तरपट्टि हाम्रो भृकुटीमण्डपको हडकडबजारजस्तै खालको तर निकै सानो र व्यवस्थित बजार रहेछ । खानपिनका लागि रेस्तराँ र चियापसलहरू पनि रहेछन् । बोधगया सम्झाउने पोस्टकार्डहरू, बिहारका बौद्धधर्मसम्बन्धी स्थलहरूको परिचय दिने पोस्टकार्ड, भिडियो सीडी र अरू एकदुई सामान किन्यौं । बोधगया सबैतिर राम्ररी हेर्ने हो भने कम्तीमा पूरा एक दिन लाग्ने रहेछ भन्ने बुभियो । विभिन्न देशका बौद्धमार्गीहरूका विशाल बौद्धमन्दिर, स्मारक र पार्कहरू हेर्न केही घण्टाले के पुग्थ्यो !

हिन्दू धर्मको सबैभन्दा घिनलाग्दो रूप हेर्न गयाश्राद्धस्थल नगई नहुने रहेछ । ठग दुष्टहरू केको पितृ तार्न बसेका हुन्थे, मानिसहरूको गोजी टकटक्याउने जुका न हुन् ! पण्डाहरूसँग त मेरो भनाभन नै भयो । मैले त भनिदिउँ-

‘कुपात्रबाट गरिएको काम निष्फल हुन्छ, कुपात्रलाई गरिएको दान नाश हो । तिमीहरू कुपात्र रहेछौ, म गया छ, यहाँ भनेर आएको, गया त उहिल्यै नर्ककुण्ड बनिसकेको रहेछ, यो त उहिल्यैदेखि अधर्मी र नीचहरूको पेटपालो गर्ने, ठगीखाने, मागीखाने भाँडोबाहेक केही लाग्ने रहेनछ । यस्ता अपवित्र स्थानमा पितृश्राद्ध गरें भने बा मलाई पापै पो लाग्ने हो कि !’

सीताले हिन्दू र बौद्ध तीर्थस्थलका बीच तुलना गरिन् । मनै चिरिएर आयो । मलाई यसअघि हाम्रो धर्म यति विकृत, सडेगलेको, भ्रष्ट र पतनोन्मुख भइसकेको छ भन्ने लागेको थिएन ।

बेलुकीपख भएकाले धेरैजसो पण्डाहरू फुर्सतै रहेछन् । धेरै मोलमोलाइ गरेपछि बल्लबल्ल एउटा पण्डा श्राद्ध गर्न तयार भयो । गयामा श्राद्ध गर्न कुनै तिथिमिति, वार, समय केही विचार गर्नु नपर्ने रहेछ । जहाँ जसले जसरी जतिखेर गरे पनि हुने । पण्डाहरूलाई कपालमुण्डन गरेपछि मात्र गर्नुपर्ला भनेको त उसले भनिहाल्यो- ‘कपाल मुण्डन का मतलब शारीरिक शुद्धि मात्र है । आत्मशुद्धि शारीरिक शुद्धि से कई बडा है । बगैर आत्मशुद्धि कोई भी उतनी दूर से यहाँ पुण्य कार्य हेतु नहीं आते ।’

कुनैकुनै पण्डाहरू अत्यन्त नम्रतापूर्वक बोल्थे । जजमानका गोजी टकटक्याउन यी अत्यन्त सियालु रहेछन् । कति पण्डा यजमानको खोजीमा सिलिगुडी, आसाम र नेपालका गाउँगाउँसम्म पुग्छन् अरे । यिनीहरूलाई नेपालका भित्री गाउँको समेत जानकारी हुँदो रहेछ । कतिपयले त हाम्रो तिरका गाउँका पुराना ठूलाबडा र साहुमहाजनको नाम पनि जानेका हुँदा रहेछन् । अनि कतिपयले त यजमानहरूलाई दान गर्न आवश्यक रकम सापटी वा रिन पनि दिने रहेछन् । तोकिएको समयमा घर-ठेगानामा आफैं आएर सो रकम बुझ्दा रहेछन् ।

मैले बिहानको भोजन गरिसकेको छु भनें । पण्डाले सफाई दिइहाल्यो । ‘यहाँ आकर आप ने जो खाया वह पितृप्रसाद है । आप ने जीवन में बडा पुण्य कर्म किया है, फल स्वरूप आज आप यहाँ आ सके । सबेरे खाने से शाम में श्राद्ध करने में कोई बाधा नहीं ।’

यहाँ श्राद्ध गर्नुअगाडि पुनःपुनःमा श्राद्ध गर्नुपर्ने थियो रहेछ । त्यो थाहा भएन । पण्डालाई मैले भनें- ‘पुनःपुनःमा श्राद्ध नगरी आइयो, श्राद्ध गर्न नमिल्ने नै देखियो ।’

पण्डाले भन्यो- ‘अहो ! यो पो मुस्किलको विषय पय्यो त ! अब कसो गर्ने हो ? पुनःपुनःमा श्राद्ध गर्नेपथ्यो । तर फिक्री नलिनोस्, म त्यो श्राद्ध यहीं गरिदिइहाल्छु नि !’

पण्डाले मलाई श्राद्ध गर्नेहरूको लहरमा राख्यो । तर्पण, पिण्ड र दक्षिणा दिनासाथ श्राद्ध सकियो । मैले पण्डाहरूलाई भनें- ‘तिमीहरूकै कारणले भारतवर्षमा क्रिस्तान पसेका रहेछन् । हिन्दू धर्मलाई तिमीहरूले सक्तो नाश गरिरहेका रहेछौ ।’

अन्त्यमा मैले भनें- ‘नेपालमै विष्णुपादुका छ, विष्णुपादुकामा गरिने श्राद्धको महिमा अब ठूलो छ । त्यहाँ पण्डा छैनन् र पण्डाको ठगीमा मानिसले पर्नुपर्दैन ।’

उनीहरूले नेपालमा विष्णुपादुका छ भन्ने सुनेका रहेनछन् ! पण्डावेगर कुनै पितृकार्य वा पूजनकार्य कसरी गरिन्छ भन्ने पनि तिनले बुझेजस्तो देखिएन । नेपाली पण्डासँग त जम्काभेट भएन तर तिनीहरू पनि उस्तै दुष्ट र लोभी छन् भनेको सुनियो । कुनैकुनै पण्डाले त्यहाँ यजमानहरूलाई जबर्जस्ती दान गर्न लगाएको सम्पत्तिले गयामा छ-साततले घर बनाएका छन् र उनीहरूका छोराहरू सेठका छोराहरूका भैं विलासी जीवन जिउँछन् । कसैकसैको जिन्दगी पुस्तौंपुस्ता सारा आर्यावर्तलाई लुट्टालुट्टा पनि तन्त्रमको तन्त्रम नै छ भन्ने पनि सुनियो ।

हामीले विष्णुपद नामको अत्यन्त सुन्दर र ढुङ्गाढुङ्गाले बनेको विशाल मन्दिर पनि हेर्‍यौं । सन् १७८७ मा बनेको यस मन्दिरमा विष्णु भगवान्का पाउ परेकाले पवित्र मानिंदो रहेछ । विष्णुपदमा सीतामाताले आफ्ना ससुरा दशरथको श्राद्ध यहीं गर्नुभएको भन्ने भनाइ छ । मानिसहरूले यहाँ पनि जतिखेर भीड गरेर पितृश्राद्ध गर्दा रहेछन्, रात परिसक्ता पनि मानिस भर्खर आएर श्राद्ध गर्न थाल्दै थिए । यहाँचाहिँ पण्डाहरूले त्यतिसारो घृणास्पद व्यवहार देखाएनन् । हामीले यहाँ पनि बुवाको श्राद्ध गर्‍यौं ।

विष्णुपदको विशाल मन्दिरबाट बाहिर निस्कँदा साँझ परिसकेको थियो ।

१३. तिलकुट

गया सहर साँझको भिलिमिलीमा अत्यन्त सुन्दर देखियो । मानिसहरूको भीडभाड हेर्नलायक थियो । गयाका बजार हेर्दा त हाम्रो खिचापोखरी, न्युरोड, असन, ठमेलतिर जस्तो लाग्ने । मानिसैमानिस जता पनि । सन् १८६५ मा नगरपालिका घोषित यो सहर धेरै पुरानो र महत्त्वपूर्ण मानिन्छ । कतैकतै नमिलेको र अलिअलि ओरालो भू-धरातलमा बसेको गया भारतको महत्त्वपूर्ण व्यापारिक सहर रहेछ ।

यो सहर काठमाडौँभन्दा धेरै व्यवस्थित, सफा र उन्नत रहेछ । सहर पुरानो पनि हो अनि घना बस्ती भएका जिल्लाहरू यसका वरिपरि छन् ।

यदाकदा भारतका सहर सुरक्षाका दृष्टिले समस्यापूर्ण छन्, किनभने हामी वास, सवारी साधनको चयन आदिमा सुरक्षा भन्दा पनि आर्थिक पक्षमा बढी सजग हुनपुग्छौँ । भारतभरि जहाँ घुम्दा पनि म एउटा तरिकाचाहिँ जहिल्यै अपनाउँछु चाहे आसामतिर होस् वा बिहार-युपीतिर : बिहानैदेखि त्यस ठाउँका साना-ठूला स्थानीय पत्रिका किन्ने, फुर्सत भयो कि अलिअलि भए पनि पढ्ने र कुनैकुनै लोकल घटना, संस्था र व्यक्तिका नाममा चिनो लगाउने । तपाईंको हातमा दुईचारोटा स्थानीय पत्रिका छन् भने लुटेरासमेत डराउँछन् । तपाईंको भाषा र पहिरन परदेशी भए पनि त्यस ठाउँका स्थानीय विषयहरू, खासगरी राजनीति, दुर्घटना, मौसम, सहरी समस्या र घटनामा तपाईं स्थानीयसरह रुचि र जानकारी राख्नुहुँदो रहेछ भन्ने भ्रम उत्पन्न हुन्छ ।

रिक्सा चढी फर्कँदा पूजा र अनुजाको सहज हिन्दी र मेरो गयासम्बन्धी जानकारी सुनेर हुनुपर्छ रिक्सावालले सोध्यो- 'आपलोग यहीं के रहनेवाले हैं ?'

मलाई मज्जा लाग्यो । पूजाले भनी- 'नहीं तो ! हमलोग नेपाल से घुमने आ रहे हैं । पहली बार ।'

भारतका सानातिना सहरका गल्लीमा साँझबिहान विदेशी भाषा बोल्नेलाई चोरफटाहावाट डर हुन्छ भन्ने लागेर हामीले हिन्दीमै बोलेका थियौँ । मलाई हाम्रा साथी लामिछानेजीको याद आयो । लामिछानेजी र खुलालजीको जहिले पनि विवाद परिरहन्थ्यो । लामिछानेलाई जित्नेपर्ने, खुलालजीलाई हार्ने नहुने । लामिछानेजीको घर कास्कीको रूपाकोट हो क्यार, तर उनी आफू परिस्थितिअनुसार ठेगाना बताउने मानिस, कसैले हजुरको घर कहाँ हो भनेर सोध्यो भने उनी भन्थे-

'पोखरा हो ।'

तपाईंको घर पोखरा पो हो त हगि भनेर सोध्यो भने उनी पङ्कन्थे- 'कहाँको पोखरा ? मेरो घर रूपाकोटमा हो, रूपाकोटमा !'

कसैले लामिछानेजी त पोखराको होइन, उहाँको घर त पाखाको कुनै गाउँमा छ भनिदियो भने फेरि पङ्कन्थे- 'मेरो घर कहाँ पर्छ भन्ने कुरा मभन्दा तपाईं जान्ने ? तपाईं को हो मलाई पोखराको होइन भन्ने ? मेरो घर पोखरा उपत्यकामै पर्छ, बुझ्नुभो ?'

कति बुझ्नु ? उहाँको घर पोखरा उपत्यकामा हैन, अलिक माथिको रूपाकोट डाँडामा छ अरे । पछि खुलालजीको टिप्पणी हुन्थ्यो - 'केही भने पनि चित्त बुझ्दैन यस मानिसलाई । उल्टो मात्र खेद्छ । यसको फोटो खिच्ने हो भने पनि निगेटिभ मात्र आउँदो हो ।'

हामी हाँस्थ्यौँ ।

एकपल्ट रुद्रजी, लामिछाने र अरू केही सर-मिसहरू कक्षा दसका छात्रछात्रालाई लिएर पोखराको शैक्षिक भ्रमणमा गएका थिए । पोखराको लेकसाइडमा लामिछानेजीलाई देखेर एउटा ट्याक्सीवाला कराएछ- 'भाई जी ! कहाँ जाना है आपको ?'

आफ्नै भन्ने गरेको सहरमा उनलाई त्यसले भारतीय भन्थानिदियो । त्यसै त कालोकालो मानिस, लामिछानेको मुख हेर्न लायक भएको थियो रे । त्यसउपान्त लामिछानेजीले इटहरीमा बसुन्जेल कहिल्यै पोखराको हुँ भन्न सकेनन् ।

धर्मशालामा आइपुग्दा साढे आठजति बज्यो । दिनभरि घुमेकाले थाकेर लखतरान भएका थियौं । अब खानपिनको बेला भएको थियो । टेकारीरोडका दुवैतिर जताततै तिलकुटका भण्डार थिए । तिलको पिठालाई तेलमा पकाएर एक प्रकारको मीठो परिकार बनाइँदो रहेछ । हामीले माघे सङ्क्रान्तिमा खाने तिलको लड्डुजस्तै-जस्तै हुँदो रहेछ तिलकुट । जता गए पनि मानिस पसेर पौडी खेल मिल्छ भने हुने ठूलूला कराहीमा भरिभरि तेल भकभक उम्लिरहेको थियो । दालभात वा रोटी खान पाइने ठाउँको खोजीमा यताउता हिँडिरह्यौं । प्रत्येक घरमा तिलकुट पकाउने, सोरुममा राख्ने र किनबेचको काम गरेको मात्र देखिन्थ्यो । यस्तो लाग्थ्यो मानौं यस सहरका मानिसको खाना तिलकुट मात्र हो र बिहारभरिका करोडौं मानिसहरूका लागि समेत तिलकुट यहीँ पाक्छ ।

भातरौटी खोज्दै हामी धेरै परपरसम्म गयौं । छोरीहरू थकाइ र भोकले पाइलो सार्न छाडे । तिलकुट पकाउने बाहेक अरू खालका होटल पनि भेटिएनन् । केही नलागेपछि त्यही तिलकुट र अरू केही मिठाईहरू किन्यौं । वास पुग्नुअघि पत्रकार मित्र कृष्ण भट्टराईलाई फोन गर्न मन लाग्यो । घरतिर वा हाम्रो खोजी गर्नेहरूले उहाँबाट समाचार पाउने भएकाले राति दस बजेतिर फोन गरें-

‘कृष्णसर ! हाम्रो बटालियन आज गया हमला गरिरहेको छ !’

‘गया ? कताबाट गया पुग्नुभो त ?’

‘आक्रमण गर्दै आइपुग्यौं । हिजो जोगबनीबाट कटिहार हान्यौं । त्यसपछि बस चढेर भागलपुरलाई भ्रम्यौं । हिजोको रात भागलपुरमा क्याम्पिङ भयो । आज बोधगया जित्यौं । आजको वास गयामै हुन्छ । उता इटहराबाट वा अरू कसैले फोन गर्नुभएमा योद्धाहरू राम्रै गरी अघि बढ्दै छन् भन्ने सुनाउनुहोला है ? त्यता अझै पानी पर्दै छ ? यता त छैन !’ दोहोरो कुरा गर्दा राम्रो बुझिँदैनथ्यो ।

‘पानी त भ्रमभ्रम परिरहेकै छ । अनि भोलि कुन सहर ताक्ने हो ?’

‘भोलि कुन सहरमाथि धावा बोल्ने भन्ने भोलि बिहानमात्र तय हुनेछ ।’

‘लौ त कमान्डरज्यू ! युद्ध कुशलतापूर्वक सञ्चालन गर्नुहोला, शुभकामना !’

वासमा फर्केर त्यही तिलकुट र मिठाईको भरमा रात काट्ने निर्णय गर्यौं । सुरुमा त यो मीठै लाग्यो तर चिल्लो र गुलियो हुनाले एकै छिनमा अमन हुन थालिहाल्यो । सबै खाइसकेनौं । बाँकीलाई कागतमा पोको पारेर राख्यौं । छोरीहरू थाकेकाले सुतिहाले । सीता र म बसेर घरसल्लाह गर्न थाल्यौं ।

‘गया घुमिहालियो । अब कता जाने ?’

‘भोलि बिहान बाटामा अगरधूप बालौं, हावाले धूवाँ जता उडाउँछ त्यतै !’ सीता ममाथि शब्दास्त्र प्रहार गर्न छाडिसकेकी थिइनन् ।

‘यहाँबाट बनारस जाऔं । बनारस पुगेपछि अन्त कता जाने भन्ने विषयमा सोचौंला ।’ मैले गम्भीर भएर भनँ ।

तिलकुट र पानीले रात काट्नुपरेकाले त्यो हाम्रा लागि एकप्रकारले अविस्मरणीय नै बन्यो ।

१४. भीषण आक्रमण

तेस्रो दिन अर्थात् २०६२ असोज २० गते बिहीबार । गयाको बिहान, गर्मी थियो । धर्मशालाको शुल्क तिरेर बाहिर सडकमा निस्क्यौं । सबैरे रेलवे स्टेसन जाने रिक्सा पाउन अलिकति झुन्झुट हुने रहेछ । स्टेसनमा आइपुगेर बनारस जानका लागि मुगलसरायको टिकट काटें । ट्रेन आइपुग्न निकै समय बाँकी छ र समय कटाउन पला भनेर मैले आफूलाई हिन्दी भाषाका प्रसिद्ध कथाकार जयशङ्करप्रसादको एउटा कथासङ्ग्रह र छोरीहरूका लागि एउटा चित्रकथा किनँ । हामी तोकिएको नम्बरको प्लेटफार्मतिर जान लाग्यौं । धेरैबटा प्लेटफार्म भएका स्टेसनहरूमा आकासे पुलहरू

बनाइएका हुन्छन् । त्यस्तै एउटा आकासे पुल चढेर हामी उतापट्टि जान लाग्यौं । आकासे पुलको सिँढीका केही खुड्किला चढिसकेपछि, अलिकति सम्म आउँछ, अनि फेरि खुड्किला सुरु हुने गर्छ ।

मानिस हुन कुनकुन कुरा चाहिन्छ, भन्ने परिभाषा गर्न गाह्रो पर्ने रहेछ । हातहरू भए वा नभए पनि मानिस हो कि होइन भन्ने अस्पष्टता रहन्न, खुट्टाहरू भए वा नभए पनि मानिस हो कि होइन भन्ने चिन्न कठिनाई रहँदैन । मानिस हो या होइन भनेर चिन्न प्रकृतिले त मानिसलाई अरुभन्दा पृथक् गरिदिएकै छ, तर मानिस आफैले त्यस अन्तरलाई कहिल्यै आदर गरेन जस्तो लागेर आउँछ । मानिस किन अन्तर कोर्ने त्यस रेखालाई आफूअनुकूल यताउता सारिरहन्छ ?

त्यस सिँढीका पहिला खुड्किला चढिसकेपछि, आएको सम्म ठाउँमा एउटा मानिस सुतिरहेको थियो । मानिसै हुनुपर्छ, र सम्भवतः स्वास्नीमानिस - त्यसको कपाल लामो देखिन्थ्यो । एउटा घिनलाग्दो कपडाले छोपिएकाले अनुहार र शरीरचाहिँ देखिँदैनथ्यो । व्यस्त सिँढीको त्यस भागमा मजासँगले सुत्ने त्यो मानिस यसो हेर्दा लामै समयदेखि त्यहीँ हुनुपर्छ, भन्ने अनुमान गर्न सकिन्थ्यो ।

मानिसहरू आ-आफ्ना हतारमा हिँडिरहेका थिए । प्लेटफार्मका पुलिस र अन्य कर्मचारी आफ्नो काममा व्यस्त देखिन्थे । सबैजना त्यस व्यक्तिकै छेउबाट निर्विकारभावले ओहोरदोहोर गरिरहेका थिए । सबै कुरा ठीकठाकसँग चलिरेको थियो । मानिसहरू त्यस व्यक्तितर्फ एक दृष्टिसम्म नर्दिकन अघि बढिरहेका थिए ।

मैले छोरीहरूलाई त्यो दृश्य देखाएँ । सीताले पनि देखिन् । त्यसको आधाजति टाउकामा रौं थिएनन्, एउटा ठूलो र गहिरो घाउ थियो । त्यति घिनलाग्दो घाउ त मैले भुस्याहा कुकुरको जीउमा पनि देखेको छैन । त्यस भयावह घाउ र कपालभरि सेता औंसा स्याउँस्याउँ गरिरहेका थिए । भएको अलिकति कपाल पनि जिडरिङ्ग र निर्जीव देखिन्थ्यो । त्यसलाई ढाकेको कालो कपडा सायद कुनै समयमा सेतो थियो । हामी काला मानव-मनहरूको चित्र खिच्दाखिच्दा त्यसमा त्यति धेरै कालो लागेको थियो सायद । यस घृणित संसारलाई हेर्न नचाहेकाले आफूलाई ढाक्न नसक्ने भए पनि कपडाको आडमा गुँडुल्किएर लडेको हुन सक्छ ऊ । उसले यस पापी दुनियाँको नजरसँग नजर जुधाउन नचाहेको पनि हुनसक्छ ।

ऊ हाम्रो आफ्नो अनुहार हेर्ने ऐना बनेर चुपचाप लडिरहेको थियो । ऊ हामीसँग कुनै वस्तु मागिरहेको थिएन, माग्न सक्ने अवस्थामा पनि थिएन, ऊ दिन मात्र सक्थ्यो । हामीभित्र मानवताको त्यो गति देख्दा पनि नदुख्ने मन छ, मानव भएर बाँच्न पाऊँ भन्ने आर्तनादले नछुने हृदय छ । हामी आफूलाई पर्दा रुन्छौँ, कराउँछौँ, हारगुहार माग्छौँ, मद्दत दिन नआउने र आफ्नो कथा नसुन्नेहरूलाई सराफ्छौँ अनि अर्कालाई पर्दा चाहिँ रमाइलो मानेर चुपचाप हेरिरहन्छौँ । मानवलाई अर्काको दुःखबाट जित्तिको स्वादिलो मनोरञ्जन कुनै वस्तु, घटना वा कल्पनाबाट प्राप्त हुँदैन । सेलीले 'टु अ स्काइलार्क' कवितामा त्यसै भनेनन् -

Our Sweetest songs are those

That tell of the saddest thoughts

अर्काको दुःखबाट सबैभन्दा ज्यादा आनन्द लिने यस मानिसको जातिलाई के भनिरहनु र, तर पनि हामीले आफ्नै सुरक्षा र सरसफाइका लागि पनि त्यस महाअभागी महारोगीलाई त्यहाँ त्यसरी पल्टन नदिनुपर्थ्यो । अथवा अर्काको मनोरञ्जनका लागि उसले पनि त्यसरी त्यस्तो ठाउँमा निःशुल्क पल्टिरहनुहुँदैनथ्यो ।

भारत गरिबका लागि कुम्भीपाक हो । भारत एक्लाहरूका लागि नर्क हो । मेरो नेपाल पनि नहुनेका लागि नर्क नै हो । खासखुस गर्दै हामी पनि बिस्तारै दृश्यबाट परपर हट्छौँ । एकातिरबाट मानवतामाथि भीषण आक्रमण भइरहेको छ र अर्को क्याम्पबाट मानवजातिमाथि असह्य व्यङ्ग्यास्त्र प्रहार भइरहेको छ । हामी दोहोरो हानाहानका बीच चुपचाप सहिरहेका छौँ ।

प्लेटफार्मको अलिक कम भीड भएको ठाउँमा पुगेर हामी भोला बिसाएर उभियौँ ।

'बिचरी, कति अभागी रहिछे, घरकाले त्यागे पनि माइती वा मावलीपट्टिका कसै न कसैले त देख्नु नि !' सीताको करुणा निकै बेरपछि छर्चल्कियो । मैले घर, माइती, मावली र सबै आफ्नाहरूले त्यागेपछि आइमाईका दिन यस्ता पनि आउन सक्ता रहेछन् भनेर हिन्दीमा भनें । एउटी बिहारी आइमाई कुनै औपचारिकताबिना हाम्रा कुरामा मिसिई- 'ठीक छ, वेश्येलाई । छाला चाउरी नपर्नुजेल दिनहुँ कतिजनाको ओछ्यान बनी, उसबेला माइती पनि घर पनि चाहिएन होला, अब ...!'

ऊ हामीसँग बोल्न खोज्दै थिई, हाम्रो ट्रेन आइसकेको रहेछ। हामी नयाँ मान्छे, यताउति अल्मलिएर भन्ने छुटेको । अलिक भीड थियो । यो ट्रेनचाहिँ एक्सप्रेस परेछ । भुक्किएर सैनिक डिब्बामा चढेछौं । सैनिकहरूले केही भनेनन्, आरामसँग बस्यौं ।

सोन भन्ने एउटा ठूलो नदी आयो । पानी हेर्दा त सोन नदी हाम्रो कोसीभन्दा निकै सानो पो हो कि जस्तो, तर पुल सात किलोमिटर लामो र अत्यन्त अग्लो । सप्तकोशीको पुल त साढे सात सय मिटरजति न हो । सोन नदीको बारेमा मैले पहिले खासै सुनेको थिइनँ । यै यात्राको सिलसिलामा भारतको ठूलो नक्सा पल्टाउँदा देखेको हो । सोन नदी पार गरेपछि सासाराम भन्ने एउटा सहर बाटैमा पर्दो रहेछ । अरू अनगिन्ती ठूलासाना सहर आए-गए । खेतहरू, बारीहरू, सडकहरू, गाउँहरू, केके हो केके । ट्रेन तीव्र गतिले चल्थ्यो । सानातिना स्टेसनमा नरोक्ने हुनाले हामीलाई स्थानपरिवर्तन र यात्राको अनुभव कम भयो । यात्राको स्वाद लिने हो भने लोकल ट्रेनको साधारण डिब्बामै चढ्नुपर्छ । अनेक खालका यात्रु भेटिन्छन्, अनेक खालका ठाउँ आउँछन् ।

अनि मुगलसराय आइपुग्यो । मुगलसराय बनारसनेरको एक ठूलो रेलवे जङ्क्सन हो । यो सहर खासै ठूलो होइन रहेछ । एउटा भारतीयले यसलाई संसारकै सबभन्दा ठूलो रेलवे जङ्क्सन हो भन्यो । संसारकै ठूलो त कुन्नि, भारतको चाहिँ सबभन्दा ठूलो जङ्क्सन यही नै हो भनेर अर्को जान्ने निस्कियो ।

भोक लागेर हलनटडू भइएको थियो । हिजो बेलुका पनि राम्रो खुवाइ परेको होइन । त्यसैले अहिलेको खाना अलिक राम्रो हुनुपर्छ भन्ने हाम्रो इच्छा थियो । भोको टोली होटलहरू भएको गल्लीमा आइपुग्यो । रेलवे जङ्क्सनको छेउ, होटल त के गतिला हुन्थे र, दहीसम्म मुस्किलले पाइयो ।

१५. बल्ल आइपुगियो

मुगलसरायबाट बनारस जान टेम्पो पक्रनुपर्ने रहेछ । टेम्पोमा गर्मी र भीडभाड रहर पुग्ने गरी थियो । सबै यात्रु पसिनाले नुहाइरहेका थिए ।

एकजनाको भाडा आठ रुपियाँ भनेकाले त्यति टाढा नहोला भनेको त मेरी आम्मै ! बाटो त कति हो कति ! मुगलसरायबाट बनारस जाने बाटामा नयाँ बजार र सहरहरू बन्ने क्रम देखियो । हामीले यी दुई सहरलाई नक्सामा हेर्दा एकदमै नजिक देखेका थियौं, तर नक्सा हेरेर के गर्नु, बाटो त धरानदेखि विराटनगरजति नै लाग्यो । टेम्पोमा भएर र गर्मीले हुनसक्छ ।

बनारस पुग्ने बेलामा सहयात्रीहरूले भने- ‘गङ्गानदीको दाहिनेपट्टि रामनगर भन्ने प्रसिद्ध दर्शनीय स्थल छ, तपाईंहरू त्यो ठाउँ जसरी भए पनि भ्रमण गर्नुहोला ।’

बनारस सहर देखिन थालेपछि सडक एकदम अग्लिन थाल्छ । सडकको उचाइले हामी पहाडी बाटामा बसयात्रा गरिरहनेहरूलाई पनि एकप्रकारको अत्यास लाग्छ । सडकमुनि कताबाट हो, एउटा रेलमार्ग आएर पस्छ । यस दुईतले पुलको नाम राजघाट रहेछ । बनारसको प्रसिद्ध घाट राजघाट भएर जाने भएकाले यस पुलको नाम त्यसै घाटबाट राखिएको होला । गङ्गा तर्नुभन्दा पहिले पारिपट्टिबाट बनारसका प्रसिद्ध घाटहरूको विहङ्गम दृश्य हेर्न पाइन्छ । सहरका बाक्ला घरहरू झुट्टा रङ्गीचङ्गी थुप्रामै लाग्ने र घाटहरूसँगैका अनेक मन्दिरहरू मनोहारी लाग्छन् ।

‘बल्ल आइपुगियो ।’ पूजाले भनी । यात्राको थालनीमा चर्चामा परेको यो पहिलो सहर थियो ।

बनारस हो भन्ने बुझेपछि पूजा घाटहरूको मनमोहक दृश्यमा रमाउन थाली । विश्वका नाम चलेका सहरमध्ये यो पनि पर्ने भएकाले हामी भावविभोर अनि गौरवान्वित भएका थियौं । राजघाटबाट बनारस क्यान्ट पुग्न पनि निकै बाटो पर्दो रहेछ । क्यान्ट बनारसको यातायातको मुख्य केन्द्र हो ।

क्यान्टमा उत्रेपछि हामी सोभै पाण्डेपुर अनि बनारस हिन्दू विश्वविद्यालय हेर्न गयौं । यो विश्वका केही ठूला विश्वविद्यालयको सूचीमा पर्दछ । यसका विभाग मात्रै यति धेरै लाग्ने कि सबै घुम्ने हो भने कम से कम पूरा एक दिन छुट्ट्याउनुपर्ने हुन्छ । विश्वविद्यालय-परिसरभित्रको बाबा विश्वनाथको नयाँ मन्दिर हेर्न जाँदा जेजे देखियो त्यतिमात्र हेर्न भ्याइयो ।

बाबा विश्वनाथको नयाँ मन्दिर विशाल छ । सम्पूर्ण भाग सङ्गमरमरले बनेको यो मन्दिर अत्यन्त सुन्दर छ । मुगल शासक औरङ्गजेबले काशीका विश्वनाथको मन्दिर भत्काएर त्यसमाथि मस्जिद बनाएकाले यो नयाँ मन्दिर बनाइएको हो । नयाँ विश्वनाथको मन्दिर पुराना विश्वनाथको मन्दिरको मौलिक स्वरूपसँग ठिक्क मिलाएर बनाइएको हो भनिन्छ ।

नयाँ विश्वनाथको दर्शन गरिसकेर हामी विश्वविद्यालयबाहिर निस्क्यौँ । त्यसपछि सङ्कटमोचन जानु थियो । सङ्कटमोचन हनुमानको प्रसिद्ध मन्दिर नजिकै पर्ने हुनाले रिक्सामा जान सजिलो पयो । मन्दिर पुगेपछि त्यहाँको सङ्गीतमय वातावरणले त्यहीँ बसिरहूँ पादोँ रहेछ । समयडोरीले घिस्याउनेहरूलाई त्यस सङ्गीत-सरगममा धेरै बस्न मिल्दैनथ्यो । मन्दिरको दर्शनका लागि खुद्रा पैसा, फूलपाती, प्रसाद र मालाको परम्परागत बन्दोबस्त गरेर हामी पालो आएपछि भित्र पसेर दर्शन गर्‍यौँ । त्यहीँ बसिरहन जति मन भए पनि साँझ भूमक परिसकेको हुँदा हामी हिँड्यौँ । नजिकै दुर्गामन्दिर पर्छ, अनि नजिकै मानसमन्दिर पनि छ । दुर्गा मन्दिर धेरै पुरानो हो भने मानसमन्दिर अलि नयाँ हो । तर ती दुवै मन्दिर उत्तिकै दर्शनीय छन् । सङ्कटमोचनदेखि हिँडेर दुर्गामन्दिर र मानसमन्दिर आउनुको मजा बेग्लै । साँझको शीतलतामा बनारसका व्यस्त मानिसहरूका बीच त्यसै भीडको एक हिस्सा भएर हिँड्नुको आनन्द बेग्लै ।

बनारसको पाण्डेपुर अब उसवेलाको पाण्डेपुर छैन । आजको व्यस्त पाण्डेपुरमा प्रेमचन्द आए भने उनको उपन्यास रङ्गभूमि कस्तो लेख्थे होलान् ! अब पाण्डेपुर सहरबाहिरको र गरिबहरू बस्ने गाउँ होइन । त्यहाँका सात-आठतले सानदार घरहरू, सडकहरू र ट्राफिक भीड देखा विचित्र लाग्छ । सहर बढ्दै गएपछि गरिबहरूको बसोबासको थलो पनि केन्द्रबाट परेर सदैँसदैँ जाने रहेछ ।

हामी रिक्सा पक्रेर बनारसको मुख्य भाग काशी आयौँ । साँझ निकै ढलिसकेको थियो, अब त्यस रातका लागि वास खोज्न आवश्यक थियो । बनारसका कुनै नाम चलेका धर्मशालाहरूमा रात कटाउनु सस्तो, सुरक्षित, शान्त र आरामदायी होला भन्ने लागेर दुईचार धर्मशाला चाहार्‍यौँ । हामी भागलपुर र गयाका सस्ता धर्मशालामा वास बसेकाले एकप्रकारले धर्मशालाको वासका लागि पल्केका थियौँ ।

तर बनारसका धर्मशाला अत्यन्त अव्यवस्थित रहेछन्, अथवा भनौँ हामीले भेटेजतिमा कुनै पनि भौतिक सुविधाको प्रबन्ध भएको थिएन । गदौलियारोडमा मारवाडीहरूको एउटा ट्रस्टले चलाएको एउटा अतिथिभवन रहेछ : श्री सीताराम च्यारिटी ट्रस्ट, डी. ४८/१४१-ए, मिश्रपोखरा, लक्सा रोड, रामापुरा, वाराणसी । हाम्रो वास त्यही अतिथिभवनमा भयो । मजस्ता निम्नवित्तले बनारस जाँदा यस्तै च्यारिटी ट्रस्टहरूले चलाएका अतिथिभवनमा वास खोज्नु ठीक हुने रहेछ ।

वास मिलेपछि म साढे नौ बजेतिर सहरको झिलिमिली रमिता र घाटको रौनक हेर्न भनेर निस्कें । सहर त डुलिन तर केहीबेर घाटमा घुमँ । अवेर हुनुअघि म डेरा फर्कन थालें । बनारसको भीडभाड र साँगुरा गल्ली, मैले बाटो भुलें । बाटो भुल्दैमा त के बिग्रन्थ्यो र, ठेगाना नै भुसुकै बिसँछु । परेन आपत् ! अब कता जानु ? मूलद्वार एघार बजे बन्द हुने भनिएको छ, डेरा कहाँ छ भन्न नै आफू सक्तिनँ !

ठेगाना सम्भक्त लाख कोसिस गरें, पार लागेन । बल्लबल्ल अलिअलि याद आयो, सरौचियारोड भन्ने । मानिसहरूलाई सोधें । कसैले सरौचियारोड कता पर्छ भन्नै सकेनन् । धेरैबेरपछि बल्ल एउटाले एकातिर देखाइदियो । बल्लबल्ल सरौचिया रोड पत्ता लाग्यो तर हाम्रो डेरा त्यहाँ थिएन । रातको एघार बज्न लागिसक्यो, डेरै बेपत्ता । सीतालालाई उता कति आपत् आइलागेको होला, मन बर्बाद भयो, छातीभित्रै पहिरो गयो ।

गोजी छामें, साथमा फुटीकौडी छैन । यसो पर्ससम्म त बोक्नुपर्छ नि ! बिसर्ने बानीले मलाई सिध्याउने भयो । बनारसको बीच सहरमा आजको रात कटा पौडेल मोजसँग, परिवारलाई पो मारिस् त !

दुईजना मानिसहरू मजत्तिकै फटाफट हिँडिरहेका थिए । एकजनाको मुखबाट निस्केको सुनै - 'गदौलिया।'

ए ! मेरो वास त गदौलियामा पो त, कताको सरौचियामा हुनु ! अब म नाम जप्तै दौडें- 'गदौलिया, गदौलिया..।' विराटनगरको सरौचियासँग मिल्दोजुल्दो नामले मलाई भन्ने बतायो ।

ठीक एघार बजे अतिथिभवनको मूलद्वारमा श्री दिनेश पौडेलजी हाजिर । हस्याडफस्याड गर्दै भन्थ्यो उक्लन्छु, सीता त आनन्दसँग सुकेका लुगाफाटो पट्याएर भोलामा हालिरहेकी !

'बूढो यत्रो बेर हराउँदा चिन्ता लागेन ? ' मैले सोधें ।

‘किन ? के भो र ?’

मैले रामकहानी सुनाएँ ।

तर काशीका कुनै ऐतिहासिक स्थलहरू घुमिएनछ, भन्ने अहिले महसुस हुँदा खेद लाग्छ । काशीका राजामहाराजाहरूका दरबारहरू, सङ्गीतका कलेज र साङ्गीतिक कार्यक्रमहरू अनि काशीवासी वृद्धवृद्धाहरू खोजी गरेर पनि हेर्नुपर्थ्यो, छुटेछन् ।

धन सङ्कटमोचनअगाडिबाट बनारसको नामुद लड्डु किन्नचाहिँ भुलेनछौं । बनारसको लड्डु जो खान्छ, ऊ पछुताउँछ, जो खाँदैन ऊ पनि पछुताउँछ, भनेर बिहेलाई कतिले बनारसको लड्डुसँग तुलना गर्ने गर्छन् । तर म वैवाहिक जीवनको अवमूल्यन गर्ने हरेक सूत्रसित विमति राख्छु । लड्डुमात्र किन, पान र जिलेबी पनि बनारसका नामुद नै हुन् । पानसुपारी नखाने मानिस म, पानपसलहरूतिर यसो हेर्नुबाहेक तिनसित मेरो खासै सम्बन्ध छैन । बनारसका जिलेबीपसल बिर्तामोडका हिउँदे सुन्तलापसलभै पहिलपुर थिए । जिलेबी अर्थात् जेरी मेरो बाल्यकालदेखिको मीठो परिकार हो । यससँग मेरो एउटा स्मरणयोग्य जम्काभेट र विशेष नाता छ ।

इटहरीबाट नजिकै लोचनी भन्ने गाउँ छ । लोचनी र वरपर भाँगडजातिको ठूलो बस्ती छ । हाम्रो परिवार अट्ठाइस सालमा पहाडबाट त्यहाँ बसाइँ सरेर आयो । त्यसै साल हिउँदको घटना छोटकरीमा भन्छु म । भाँगडहरूको धार्मिक उत्सव धरमकरमको समय पारेर गाउँमा स-सानो मेला लागेको थियो । म भर्खर पहाडबाट भरेको बालक, जिलेबीको नयाँ स्वादमा लट्ठिएको थिएँ सायद, आमालाई अरू जिलेबी किनिदिन कर गरिरहेँ ।

गाउँकै मेला भएकाले आमा र उहाँसँग आएका छिमेकीहरूसँग थोरै मात्र पैसा भएर होला थप जिलेबी किनिदिनुभएन । म भगडा गर्न थालें- ‘जुलपी किनिदिनू ! जुलपी किनिदिनू न !!’

मैले निकै ठूलो स्वरमा बालहठ प्रकट गरेकाले आमा र उहाँसँग आउने छिमेकीहरूलाई असजिलो परेर हो वा साँझ पर्दै गएर हो, सबै घर फर्कन थाल्नुभयो । मैले ‘जुलपी’ कि ‘जुलपी’ भनेर फर्कदा बाटाभरि रडाको मच्चाइरहेँ ।

भोलिपल्टदेखि मेरो नाम नै ‘जुलपी भाइ’ । त्यस नामबाट मुक्ति पाउन मैले निकै वर्ष पर्खनुपयो । हाम्रो परिवार २०३५ सालमा त्यहाँबाट इटहरा बसाइँ सरेपछि मात्र त्यस नामबाट मुक्ति पाएँ ! कसैले जिलेबीको नाम लियो कि म भस्करन्थे पछिसम्म !

१६. पर्खिरहेको छ बनारस

उज्यालो भएपछि विश्वनाथ बाबाको दर्शन गर्न गएमा भीडभाड बढेर दिनभर लाग्न सक्थ्यो । हामी चारै नवजी उठिहाल्यौं । लुगाफाटो र पोकापुन्तुरा मिलाइसकेर हिँड्न ठीक परेपछि मात्र छोरीहरूलाई उठाउँ । अँध्यारैमा सडकमा निस्किएलौं । मानिसहरूको लस्कर देख्दै विश्वनाथ बाबाको मन्दिर र छेवैको घाट कता पर्छ कसैलाई सोधिरहनुपर्ने । हामी सोभै गङ्गाकिनारतिर लाग्यौं । यहाँबाट गङ्गाजल ल्याएर बाबाको मन्दिरमा फूलपातीसहित चढाउने परम्परा छ । घाटनेर अलिकति फूलपाती, माटाको एउटा सानो घैला र आवश्यक माला, प्रसाद आदि किन्यौं ।

दशाश्वमेध घाटबाट गङ्गाजल ल्याएर विश्वनाथ बाबाको मन्दिरअगाडि हजारौं मानिसको लाइनमा उभिनुपयो । जल चढाउँदा बिहानको साढे नौ बजिसकेको थियो । पुलिसहरू मानिसलाई क्रमबद्ध ढङ्गले भित्र पठाउँथे । त्यत्रा मानिस भए पनि होहल्ला छैन, ठेलाठेल र पालो मिच्ने छैन । मन्दिरको सुरक्षार्थ मानिसलाई मेटल डिटेक्टरले ठीकसँग जाँचेरमात्र भित्र छिर्न दिँदा रहेछन् ।

काशीका घाट र गल्लीहरू हेर्ने अवसर थियो यो । आमा पच्चीस सालको माघे सङ्क्रान्तिमा आफ्ना मावलकी बूढीहजुरआमाका साथ लागेर काशी आउन पाएको कथा भनिरहनुहुन्थ्यो । ती बूढीहजुरआमा मणिकर्णिका घाटमा काशीवास बस्न आउनुभएको चर्चा उहाँ सधैंसधैं गरिरहनुहुन्थ्यो । मलाई एकाउन्न सालमा मणिकर्णिका घाट नहेरेकामा खेद लागेकाले यसपल्ट यो ठाउँ छुटाउन म चाहन्थेँ । हाम्रा गाउँघरतिर बनारसमा छापिएर आएका पात्रा, नाग र पुस्तकहरूमा कर्णघण्टा, कचौडीगली, नदेसर, बाँसफाटक, दूधविनायक आदि लेखिएको हुन्थ्यो । ती सम्भेर यसपल्ट

उसबेलाका भन्दा बढी गल्लीहरू फनफनी मात्र भए पनि घुमै । बनारसका गल्लीहरू कति साँगुरा छन् भन्ने सबैलाई थाहा छ ।

पन्ध्र सयभन्दा बढी अत्यन्त महत्त्वपूर्ण धार्मिक मठमन्दिर, दशाश्वमेध घाट, मणिकर्णिका घाट र राजघाटजस्ता सयौं चर्चित घाट अनि गुठी, आश्रम र समाजसेवी संस्थाहरू भएको यो काशी सहर धार्मिक मात्र होइन विशाल व्यापारिक केन्द्र पनि हो । यो धर्म, संस्कृति, भाषा, साहित्य, पुस्तकप्रकाशन, राजनीति र खेलकुदको पनि एक महत्त्वपूर्ण र ऐतिहासिक सहर हो । बनारसमा हिन्दू धर्म र बौद्ध धर्मका साथै मुसलमान र क्रिस्टियनहरूका पनि महत्त्वपूर्ण धार्मिक संस्थाहरू छन् । बनारस लड्डु र पानका लागि प्रसिद्ध त छ नै, यहाँका रेशमी साडी बनारसी साडीको नामले विश्वप्रसिद्ध छन् । यहाँ सुनचाँदीका गरगहना, बाजागाजाका सामान, माटाका भाँडाकुँडा, खेलौना, पटका, सुती लुगा र खेलकुदका सामान पनि बनाइन्छन् । धातुका भाँडाकुँडा र हतियार बनाउने, चिनीमिल, धानमिल, र गहुँका मिलका लागि समेत बनारस प्रसिद्ध छ ।

बनारस विश्वको एक विशिष्ट अध्ययन-अनुसन्धान र शैक्षिक केन्द्र हो । बनारस कलेज (१७९१), बनारस हिन्दू विश्वविद्यालय (१९१६), वाराणसी संस्कृत विश्वविद्यालय (१९५८) र राजा जयसिंहद्वारा निर्मित वेदशाला आदिले यस सहरलाई संस्कृत शिक्षा र पूर्वीय दर्शनका साथै आधुनिक शिक्षाको विश्वप्रसिद्ध प्राज्ञिक थलोका रूपमा चिनाएका छन् । बनारस सहरका बारेमा इसापूर्व सात आठ सय वर्ष अधिसम्मका स्पष्ट प्रमाणहरू पाइन्छन् तर हिन्दू शास्त्रले यसलाई अनादिकालदेखिको सहर मानिआएको छ । रामायण र महाभारतमा यस सहरको स्पष्ट उल्लेख भएकाले यो अत्यन्त प्राचीन सहर हो भन्ने पुष्टि हुन्छ । तर यहाँ सोहीँ शताब्दीको अन्त्यतिरका एकदुई घर मात्र बाँकी छन् । बनारस एक पर्यटकीय सहर पनि हो, बर्सेनि पन्ध्रबीस लाख धार्मिक र अन्य पर्यटकहरू यस सहरको भ्रमणमा आउने भएकाले बनारसको महत्त्व विशेष छ ।

बनारसलाई अन्य सहरसँग जोड्ने रेल, सडक र हवाई-यातायातको राम्रो प्रबन्ध छ । यहाँ क्यान्ट र काशी गरी दुई रेलवे स्टेशन छन् भने अनेकौँ सडकमार्गहरूले सहरलाई सुगम बनाए पनि सहरभित्रको ट्राफिक व्यवस्था अत्यन्त नराम्रो छ । जताततै रिक्सा, 'आटो' र बसगाडीहरूले गर्दा ट्राफिक जाम भइरहन्छ । जनसङ्ख्याको हिसाबले बनारस काठमाडौँ भन्दा दुईगुना मात्र होला तर कतिपय हिसाबले हेर्ने हो भने यो सहर काठमाडौँभन्दा अत्यन्त अव्यवस्थित लाग्छ । काशीको पुरानो अर्थात् मुख्य सहरका घरहरू आधुनिक सुविधा पुऱ्याउन नमिल्ने छन् भने सडकहरू यति साँगुरा छन् कि दोहोरो साइकल हिँडाउन पनि मिल्दैनन् । साँढे र गाईहरू व्यस्त सडकको बीचमा ढल्कीढल्की हिँडेका अनि गजधुम्म परेर बसिरहेका देख्न पाइन्छ । बनारस घुम्न चाहनेले सहरभित्रको यात्राका लागि रिक्सा पक्रनु ठिक हुन्छ ।

राजा पृथ्वीनारायण शाहले काशीनरेशकी छोरी बिहे गरेको इतिहास छ । तर नेपाल र बनारसका बीचको जनस्तरको सम्बन्ध अत्यन्त पुरानो हो । बुढचौलीमा काशी नजाने मानिस तर्दै भन्ने लोकोक्तिबाटै बनारसलाई नेपालीले कति महत्त्व दिएका छन् भन्ने छर्लङ्गिन्छ । बनारसमा नेपाली मन्दिर भनिने प्रसिद्ध मन्दिर छ । काठमाडौँकै मन्दिरहरूको शैलीमा बनाइएको उक्त मन्दिर त्यहाँका अरू सबै संरचनाभन्दा भिन्न देखिन्छ ।

विद्याध्ययनका लागि नेपालीहरू बनारस जाने परम्परा धेरै पुरानो हो । हाम्रा अनेक कविलेखकहरू, गुरु र पण्डितहरू अनि वर्तमान नेपालका बीपी कोइराला, मनमोहन अधिकारी, मदन भण्डारी आदि मात्र होइन, नेपाली काङ्ग्रेस, एमाले, राप्रपा, माओवादीलगायत लगभग सबै पार्टीका धेरैजसो नेताहरू बनारसकै शिक्षाले बनेका हुन् । तर अचेल नेपालले बनारसलाई भुल्दै गएको देखिन्छ । हाम्रा पितापुर्खाले लाखौँ रुपियाँ अनि रगतपसिना खर्च गरेर त्यहाँ अनेकौँ धर्मशाला, पाटीपौवा, मठमन्दिर, छात्रावास, विद्यालय र छापाखानाहरू खोलेका छन् । हाम्रा हजारौँ नेपाली दाजुभाइहरू त्यहीँका रैथाने भएर बसेका छन् । बनारस हाम्रो पनि हो ।

अझै बनारस हामीलाई पर्खेरै बसिरहेको प्रतीत हुन्छ ।

१७. त्यो धूलो बिसर्ज

दशाश्वमेध घाटबाट फर्केर सारनाथतिर लाग्नुअघि गदौलिया चोकनेरको एउटा सानो चियापसलमा पसेर हाम्रो परिवार बिहानको खाजा खान थाल्यो । एउटा नेपाली अनुहारको युवक छेवैमा आएर होटलवालासँग हिन्दीमा बोल्न थाल्यो । मैले उसलाई नेपालीमा बोलाएँ- 'भाइ नेपालबाट हो ?'

ऊ छक्क पय्यो । उसले भन्यो- 'हुँ त ! अनि हजुरहरू कहाँबाट नि ? कसरी चित्रभो ?'

'इटहरीबाट..... । नेपालीजस्तै लागेर बोलाइहेरेका!'

'राउत छेत्री हुँ । सानोतिनो नोकरी छ । के गर्ने दाइ, दुई पैसा यतै बढी कमाइ हुन्छ । नेपालमा कामै पाइन्न।' ऊ थोरै बोल्न चाहन्थ्यो । उसको मन कुनै गह्रौँ भारीले थिचेको छ भन्ने अनुमान गर्न सकिन्थ्यो । उदयपुरको गाईघाटनजिकको एउटा सानो गाउँबाट यहाँ रोजगारीका लागि आएको रहेछ ऊ ।

हामी नेपालीहरू पर्यटकजाति होइनौँ । धार्मिक, व्यापारिक, सांस्कृतिक, साङ्गीतिक वा अनेक किसिमले पर्यटन गर्न सकिन्छ तर हामी धार्मिक हिसाबले बाहेक कमैमात्र पर्यटकीय भ्रमणका लागि भनेर धन, समय र जाँगर खर्च गर्न तयार हुन्छौँ । डेढ दशकअघि काठमाडौँ कोटेश्वरको नवज्योति स्कुलमा म काम गर्थेँ र मसँगै काम गर्ने एकजना शिक्षिका हुनुहुन्थ्यो, गुलाफमैयाँ श्रेष्ठ । उहाँ काठमाडौँमा जन्मेकी, ललितपुरमा घर भएकी एक पैतीसबसे स्नातकोत्तर शिक्षिका, तर उहाँले त्रिपुरेश्वरदेखि सूर्यविनायकसम्म पुग्ने टूली बस दिनहुँ देखे पनि कहिल्यै सूर्यविनायकसम्म पुग्नुभएको थिएन ! आमनेपाली जाति-जनजाति उस्तैउस्तै भए पनि काठमाडौँ उपत्यकाका नेवारहरूचाहिँ सायद विश्वकै सबभन्दा कम घुम्ने जातिमध्ये पर्दा हुन् । काठमाडौँका रैथानेहरूका लागि थानकोट नै संसारको पल्लो छेउ हो भनेर उपत्यकाबाहिरकाहरू ठट्टा-रमाइलो गर्छन् ।

हामी गरिब । गरिब हुनाले पनि घुम्न पाइने रहेछ । गरिब नेपालीका छोराछोरी काम खोज्दै अरब र मलेसिया घुमिरहेका छन् । हाम्रा पितापुर्खाहरू काम र मामकै खोजीमा बर्मा, भुटान र भारतका कुनाकाप्चा चाहार्दै हिँडे । गरिब भएकाले नै गोर्खालीहरू लाहुरे भएर बेलायतीहरूको बन्दुक बोकेर भियतनाम, मलाया र बोर्नियोका जङ्गल छिचोले । हडकड, सिङ्गापुर, ब्रुनाई र सारा युरोप, अस्ट्रेलिया अनि अमेरिकाभरि नेपालीहरू गरिबीको घाउ निको पार्न घुमिरहेका छन् । बनारसको गदौलियारोडमा भेटिएको त्यो युवक भारतका होटल र फ्याक्टरीहरूमा अभावको ओखती खोज्ने लाखौँ 'कान्छा' र 'बहादुर' नेपालीहरूमध्ये एक थियो ।

गदौलिया-रोडनजिकैको अर्को चोकबाट सोभै सारनाथ जाने टेम्पो पाइने रहेछ । भगवान् गौतम बुद्धले प्रथम धर्मोपदेश गरेको सारनाथ बौद्ध धर्मावलम्बीहरूको एक महत्त्वपूर्ण तीर्थस्थल हो । यो बनारसबाट अलिक उत्तरपूर्वस्थित सानो गाउँ हो, तर अहिले यो बनारससँग पूरै जोडिएको र सहरीकरण भएकाले गाउँजस्तो देखिँदैन । सारनाथ जाने बाटैमा मैले काम गर्ने संस्था एसओएस बालग्रामको एक शाखा रहेछ ।

सारनाथमा हाते तानमा बुनिएका बनारसी साडी बुन्ने विश्वप्रसिद्ध कालिगडीको नमुना सजिलै देख्न पाइन्छ । सारनाथमा भगवान् बुद्धले आफ्ना पाँच चेलाहरूलाई प्रथमपल्ट धर्मोपदेश गरेको स्थान, मैत्रेय बुद्धको मन्दिर, जापानी मन्दिर, बौद्ध महाविहार, अशोकस्तम्भ आदि विशेष महत्त्वका ठाउँ छन् । एउटा स्थानीय गाइडले हामीलाई सस्तैमा घुमाइदियो । हिन्दी बोल्ने र बुझ्नेका लागि त्यहाँ गाइडहरू अत्यन्त थोरै पैसामा घुमाइदिन तयार हुने रहेछन् ।

निकैवेर बाहिरफेर घुमेर अनि कतिपय पुरातात्विक महत्त्वका ठाउँहरू हेरेर गाइडका साथ हामी सारनाथभित्र प्रवेश गर्थौँ । त्यहाँको अशोकस्तम्भ, मैत्रेय बुद्धको मन्दिर, बुद्धले प्रथम धर्मोपदेश दिएको ठाउँ र बिहारहरूका खण्डहर हेर्ने पर्ने ठाउँहरू हुन् । हामी त्यहाँको सफा र हरियो चउरमा निकैवेर पल्टियौँ र आफूसँग ल्याएका खाजा खायौँ । युरोपेली र एसियाली पर्यटकहरू निकै भए पनि भीडभाड, होहल्ला र फोहोर हुने गरी त्यो सङ्ख्या थिएन ।

स्वर्गबाट एकछिन घुम्न भनेर भारतीय पट्टीको रूप धारण गरेर आएका अप्सराहरू हरियो चउरमा हाँसका चालले यताउता गरिरहेका थिए । लोभी भारतीय पट्टाहरू अलि परपरबाट थुक निल्दै अघि बढ्थे ।

उता सुकिला साडीमा बेरिएका भद्दा र कुरूप मोटी आइमाईहरू आफ्ना तालुखुइले र भुँडे लोग्नेहरूलाई भेटाउन कन्दैकन्दै हिँड्थे । यिनलाई पनि घुम्नुपर्ने !

सारनाथको स्वर्गीय आनन्द निकैवेर लुटेर मात्र हामी परिसरबाहिर निस्क्यौँ । भोक जाग्न थालेको थियो । तर सारनाथमा अलिक राम्रा होटल र रेस्टुराँहरू अत्यन्त महँगा । त्यसैले हामी सोभै क्यान्टिनर हाँन्रियौँ । क्यान्टिनमा बसस्टेन्डनेर हाम्रो इटहरीको हीरा होटलजस्तो सानो होटलमा खाना खायौँ ।

बनारससँगको हाम्रो अजम्मरी साइनो छ, तर मेरो पुस्ताले बनारसलाई माया मार्न थालेको देख्छु म । नेपाली भाषासाहित्यको इतिहासमा बनारसले गरेको योगदान, नेपालको प्रजातान्त्रिक र कम्युनिस्ट आन्दोलनलाई पुर्‍याएको गुन कहिल्यै विर्सिँनसक्नु त छँदै छ, हाम्रा बाबुबाजेहरूले धर्म, ज्ञान र चेतना यसै सहरबाट बटुलेर गाउँगाउँ प्रकाशमय पारेको दृश्य सबैका अगाडि छ । क्यान्टिनको रेलवे स्टेसनबाट बनारसतिर फर्केर फेरि एकपल्ट मेरा पितापुर्खाले ज्ञानको भोकमा भौँतारिएका गल्ली र उहाँहरूले कुल्चेको धूलालाई नविसने प्रतिज्ञा गर्दै म आँसुले डब्डबाएका आँखाले बनारससँग बिदा माग्दै थिएँ ।

सीता मेरो भावभङ्गिमा देखेर अलमलमा परिरहेकी थिइन् । धमिलिएका आँखा बोकेर मैले प्लेटफार्मको झिलिमिलीमा रमाउँदै उफ्रिरहेका आफ्ना छोरीहरूलाई हेरिरहें ।

१८. चमेलीबाई धर्मशाला

हिजो गयाबाट मुगलसराय आउँदा ट्रेनको आर्मी-डिब्बामा चढ्दा भएको सहज यात्रालाई सम्झेर इलाहाबाद जान पनि आर्मी डिब्बामै चढिहेर्छौं । पूजा र अनुजाको सिकारु हिन्दी बोली सुनेर होला भारतीय सैनिकहरूले हामीलाई सहजै स्वीकार गरे । यस रेलयात्रामा दुईजना मध्यप्रदेशका भारतीय पूर्वसैनिकसँग परियो । बडो उज्याला र फरासिला रहेछन् तिनीहरू । उनीहरूले हामीलाई यात्रामा होसियारी अपनाउनुपर्ने धेरै कुराहरू सिकाए । सानो गल्लीमा नपस्ने, सानो होटलमा नखाने, सानो लजमा नबस्ने आदि । यस्ता कम चल्लीका ठाउँमा नयाँ मानिसहरू ठगी र लुटपाटमा पर्ने ज्यादा खतरा हुन्छ भनेर तिनले भनेका थिए ।

हाम्रा सहयात्रीहरू इलाहाबादबाट नजिकैको गाउँका रहेछन् र उनीहरू आफ्ना घर आजै पुग्ने रहेछन् । मैले तिनलाई हेरेँ : एउटा त्यस्तै पचपन्न वर्षको दुब्लोपातलो र कालोकालो र अर्को अलिक होचो-मोटो थियो । सायद होचोचाहिँ चिनी या यस्तै कुनै रोगले पीडित थियो । तिनीहरूको लबाइखवाइ हेर्दा गाउँतिर दुःखसुख गुजारा गरेर बसेका छन् भन्ने लाग्थ्यो ।

इलाहाबादको पुरानो नाम प्रयाग हो । मुगल बादशाह अकबरले सन् १५७५ मा अल्लाहबाद नाम दिएपछि यसले यो नाम अक्षसम्म बोकिरहेको छ । इलाहाबादमा विश्वप्रसिद्ध जामा मस्जिद र इलाहाबाद विश्वविद्यालय छन् । दुब्लोचाहिँले इलाहाबादको इतिहास बतायो ।

ज्ञानपुर, गोपीपुरजस्ता सानातिना सहर छिचोल्दै ट्रेन इलाहाबादनजिक आइपुग्छ । साँझको झिलिमिली परैबाट भव्य देखिन्छ । इलाहाबादनेर गङ्गा तरिन्छ । हामीले यसपल्टको यात्रामा भागलपुरमा र बनारसको राजघाटमा गरी दुईपटक गङ्गा तरिसकेकाले यो तेस्रो गङ्गातराइ भइरहेको थियो । पहिलो पल्ट तर्दा बसबाट भागलपुरको भव्यता देख्न पाइएको थियो, दोस्रोपल्ट टेम्पोबाट डरलाग्दो अग्लो पुलमाथिबाट दिनको समयमा गङ्गाकिनारका अनगिन्ती मनोहारी घाटहरू र रामनगरपट्टिको सुन्दरता देख्न पाइएको थियो भने यो तेस्रो पल्टको दृश्य अघिल्ला पल्टभन्दा सर्वथा भिन्न थियो । ट्रेनबाट इलाहाबादको बिजुलीको झिलिमिली अचम्मको चमकदार देखिन्थ्यो । दसैँ नजिकिँदै गएकोले त्यताको तयारी हेरिरहूँ लाग्ने थियो । सडकका दुवैतर्फ देखिएसम्म परपर पनि लामालामा टचुबलाइटहरू जडान गरिएका । संसार उज्यालाको साम्राज्य भएको थियो ।

हामी उनीहरूसँग विदावारी भयौं । साँझको साढे सात बजेको हुँदा हो, ती दुई समेत इलाहाबादमै उत्रने रहेछन् । ती दुई पूर्वसैनिकले हामीलाई वास बस्न चमेलीबाई धर्मशालामा बेस हुन्छ भने । तिनीहरूले सिफारिस गरेको धर्मशालाका लागि टेम्पो चढ्न लागेका थियौं ती फेरि आइपुगे । सँगै खाजा खाएर मात्र छुट्टिऔं भनेर तिनले ढिपी कसे । हामी मानेनौं । चियासम्म त खाऔं भन्न थाले । हामीले पहिले वास अनि अरू कुरा गर्ने भन्यौं । तिनले हामीलाई एउटा टेम्पोमा चढाए, भाडा कति हो भनेर पहिल्यै सोधिदिए, हामीलाई चमेलीबाई धर्मशालाको ठीक अगाडि रोकिदिनू भने, अनि मात्र ती आफ्नो बाटो लागे ।

तिनीहरू ठग हुन सक्छन् भनेर हामी डराउन थालेका थियौं तर बिचराहरूको मनमा पाप रहेनछ । चमेलीबाई धर्मशाला प्रयाग जाने सडकमै पर्दो रहेछ । भोलि हामी प्रयाग जान लागेको कुरा तिनलाई बताएकाले तिनले हामीलाई त्यस धर्मशालामा बस्न उपयुक्त हुने सिफारिस गरेका रहेछन् ।

चमेलीबाई धर्मशाला रेलवे स्टेसनबाट खासै टाढा होइन रहेछ । व्यवस्थापकसँग हामीलाई चाहिने खालको कोठाको माग गर्छौं । ठूलो भएर पनि धर्मशालाका कोठाहरू अत्यन्त फोहर र अव्यवस्थित थिए । हपहप गर्मी छ, मानिसहरू जताततै सुतिरहेका : कोठा, आँगन र बरन्डाहरूमा पनि । यसो हेर्दा कतिपय व्यक्तिहरू त्यहाँ स्थायी रूपले बसेका जस्ता देखिन्थे । तिनीहरूले आफू बस्ने कोठाका भ्यालमा पर्दा हालेका थिए र ढोकाअगाडि डोरमेट राखेका थिए । भुईँतलामा चाहिँ मानिस त के सुँगुर राख्न पनि नमिल्ने कोठा र फर्निचर देख्दा हामी आत्तियौं । तर सबै कोठा मानिसले ओगटिराखेका थिए ।

माथिल्लो तल्लाको अवस्था भने केही राम्रो थियो तैपनि त्यहाँ सिलिडमा भुन्ड्याइएका फ्यान घुमैदैनथे । मानिस चढ्दा लचकलचक गर्ने खाट अनि बन्द गर्नु र खुला राख्नुमा खासै फरक नपर्ने भ्याल । साँगुरा न साँगुरा कोठा छन्, कुना र भुईँ पान थुकेर र चुरोटका टुक्रा फालेर अचम्मखाले दुर्गन्ध आइरहेको । कोठाका कुनामा बिस्कुट, खैनी, टुथपेस्ट र अनेक थोकका खोल, पत्रिका तथा कागतका टुक्रा फ्याँकिएका, । तेस्रो तल्ला पाटीजस्तो थियो । मानिसहरू हाम्रातिरका भैंँ दाउराले भात पकाइरहेका अनि जताततै फोहोर, धूलो र खरानी मात्र । यत्रो सहर छ, नजिकै जङ्गल पनि छैन, तर पनि यहाँ तिनीहरू दाउरा बालिरहेका । फुस्रा भुसतिघेहरू र जोगीजस्ता देखिने युवाहरू यताउति भुईँमा पसारिरहेका । कसैलाई कसैको मतलब छैन । हेर्दै डरलाग्दा र घुरेर हेर्ने मानिसहरू पनि यताउति टहल्दै छन् ।

माथिल्लो तलाका बाथरूममा पानी आउँदो रहेनछ । धाराहरू धेरै अगाडिदेखि बन्द भएका हुनुपर्छ । चर्पीमा दिसाका लिँड सुकेर गुईँठा भएका थिए । भुईँतलाको बाथरूममा पस्ता तीनचारओटा धारा देखिए । त्यहाँ दसपन्ध्रजना लोग्ने मानिसहरू नुहाइरहेका थिए भने 'स्त्री स्नानागार'बाट भिजेको कपाल भएका आइमाईहरू भित्र-बाहिर गरिरहेका थिए । धर्मशालाको एक छेउमा लहरै चारपाँचओटा चर्पी थिए । चर्पीनेर टिनको ठूलो ढुवाड थियो । त्यसको पिँधमा पानी थियो । मानिसहरू सानो टुमलेटमा त्यसबाट अलिकति पानी भिकेर बोकी खाली हुने चर्पीमा पसिहाल्थे ।

म्यानेजर आफैँले खाली रहेका कोठा सबै देखायो । प्रत्येक कोठा अर्कोभन्दा अझ नराम्रो र सानो लाग्थ्यो । अन्त्यमा एउटा सानो न सानो च्यापजत्रो कोठा हामीले रोज्नुपर्थ्यो । त्यसमा मुस्किलले दुइटा सानासाना खाट अटेका थिए । हाम्रा सामान खाटमुनि राख्नुपर्ने देखियो । बुरुस, मन्जन, ताला, ऐना आदि भ्यालमा राख्यौँ । कोठा बुक गर्नुभन्दा पहिले म एकछिनका लागि बाहिर निस्कें । सीतालाई कोठामा बसिरहन र म्यानेजर आएर पैसा जम्मा गर्न वा कोठा खाली गर्न भनेमा उहाँ नआउन्जेल म केही गर्न सकिन्नँ भन्नु भनेर म हिँडें । अलिक पर पुगेपछि त्यताका पसलेहरूलाई वास बस्न उपयुक्त राम्रो धर्मशाला वा लजको बारेमा सोधें । उनीहरूले फेरि चमेलीबाई धर्मशाला नै उपयुक्त थलो हो भने-

'भाई जी ! आप सपरिवार आये हैं । सब से अहं बात सुरक्षाका है । इसलिये जितना भी हो तकलिफ सहकर वहीं ठहरना उचित है ।'

नजिकका कुनै व्यवस्थित लजहरूमा हत्तपत्त यसरी अवेर भइसकेपछि कोठा नपाइने रहेछ । अब मसित अर्को कुनै उपाय बाँकी थिएन । सीधै रेलवे स्टेसन गएर भोलि बिहानमात्र पुगिने कुनै स्थानको यात्रा थाल्नु पो उचित हो कि जस्तो पनि लाग्न थाल्यो । बिहान सबेरैदेखि बनारसको गर्मीमा घुमेको घुमेकै भइएको थियो, अब रातभरि ट्रेनमा यात्रा गर्नु अर्को महादुःख होला भन्ने लाग्यो ।

फेरि फर्केर धर्मशाला आएर कोठा बुक गरें । कोठामा आएर पड्खा हेर्छु, ब्लेडहरू हातले घुमाएका भन्दा ढिलो गरी घुमिरहेका छन् । लामखुट्टेको भीडले बिहेको सहनाई बजाइरहेको छ । गर्मी पनि आफ्नो कार्य राम्ररी गरिरहेको छ । आजको साँझ नुहाउने र लुगा धुने भन्कट पनि नपर्ने देखियो ।

हामी कोठाको 'व्यवस्था' भइसकेपछि खाना खान भनेर निस्क्यौँ । अलिक पर्तिर एउटा सस्यानो र व्यस्त तर सफा होटल रहेछ । मानिसहरू खानेले खाइरहेका, बाँड्नेले बाँडिरहेका । दृश्य हेर्नलायक थियो । हामीले पनि दालभात, दही, पापड र सुख्खा रोटी आदिको अर्डर दियौँ । आरामसँग मीठो खाना खायौँ । उत्तरी भारतका होटलमा खाना खानु र हाम्रा सहरी होटलमा खानुमा खासै फरक अनुभूति नहुने ।

'बरु एकछिन होटलमै पड्खामुनि आराम गरेको भए हुने ।' फर्कदा बाटामा सीताले भनिन् ।

धर्मशालाको म्यानेजरवरिपरि निकैजना भारतीयहरू थिए । यो म्यानेजर धर्म, दर्शन र जीवनका बारेमा चाखलाग्दा कुरा गर्छ, जस्तो थियो । उसलाई इलाहाबाद आउनाको उद्देश्य बताउनुमा मैले कुनै खराबी देखिनँ । कुनै औपचारिकता निर्वाह नगरीकन सोधें- 'इलाहाबादमा नहेरी नहुने केके ठाउँ छन् होला ?'

'देखने लायक जगह तो बहुत है भाई यहाँ ! यह इलाहाबाद है । भारत का स्वतन्त्रता सङ्ग्रामका राजधानी है यह शहर । नेहरू का घर है यह । गान्धीका दूसरा घर है यह । आज का मध्यप्रदेश और उत्तरप्रदेश राजधानी था यह लम्बी समय तक ।' ऊ राजनीतिका कुरा निकाल्न थाल्यो । बीजेपी र काङ्ग्रेसका कुरा निकाल्यो अनि उसले प्रान्त टुक्रिएको प्रसङ्ग कोट्याउन थाल्यो । ऊ उत्तराञ्चललाई राज्यसम्म मान्न स्वीकार्दो रहेनछ । ऊ भन्दै गयो-

'उत्तराखण्डको राजनीति अपराधी, ठग, भ्रष्टाचारी र गुण्डाहरूको इसारामा चलन थालेकाले यस्तो दिन आयो । हेर्दै जानोस् भाइ, त्यो भगौडा उत्तराखण्ड कुनै दिन फेरि उत्तरप्रदेशको पाउमा शरण पर्न आउनेछ : बाबा म तपाईँबाट अलग भएर बस्न नसक्ने रहेछु, मेरो नादानीका लागि माफ गरिदिनुहोस् भन्दै ।'

मलाई उसको प्रान्तीय राजनीतिसँग कुनै लिनुदिनु थिएन । ऊ निकै उत्साहित हुँदै मलाई सम्झाउन कोसिस गरिरहेको थियो । मैले आफ्नो उद्देश्य फेरि राखें- 'यो तपाईंहरूको मामला । मलाई त भोलि इलाहाबाद घुम्नु छ । कुनकुन ठाउँ घुम्नैपर्ने होलान् ?'

उसले प्रयाग र आनन्दभवनकै कुरा सबभन्दा पहिले राख्यो । अनि अशोक-स्तम्भ, अकबरको राजमहलको खण्डहर र अरू केके थप्यो । हामी नेपालबाट घुम्न आएका भन्दा उसले स्वर फेरेर बिन्तीको भाषामा भन्यो-

‘भाइ ! म तपाईंलाई एउटा बिन्ती गर्छु, तपाईं महादसैंको मुखमा यस सुन्दर सहरमा आउनुभएको छ, कृपा गरेर नवमीसम्म यहीं बस्नुहोस् । त्यत्रो टाढा नेपालदेखि आउनुभएको रहेछ, फेरि यस समयमा आउन अनुकूलता पर्छ-पडैन, आएको बेला बरु एकदुई रात यहीं बसेर हाम्रो राम-रमाइलोमा भाग लिनुहोस् । सडकहरूमा भर्खर मानिसहरू उत्सवको तयारी गर्दै छन् । महानवमीको दिन इलाहाबादले स्वर्गलाई यहीं ओराल्छ ।’

‘त्यसो गर्न पाए त खुब रमाइलो हुने थियो होला । तर म त अरू निकै ठाउँ घुमेर दसैं मान्न घरै फर्कुला भन्ठान्दै छु!’

ऊ हाँस्यो । ऊ फेरि गम्भीर भएर बोल्न थाल्यो- ‘यात्रा भनेको गाडी चढेर परपर पुग्नुमात्र होइन । यात्रा भनेको त कुनै ठाउँको आत्मा स्पर्श गर्नु हो, त्यस ठाउँसँग केही माग्नु र केही दिनु हो । तपाईं आज इलाहाबादमा भर्खर आएर वास बस्नुभएको छ, भोलि बिहान सबैरे तपाईं दिल्ली लाग्नुहोला, के अब तपाईंले म इलाहाबाद घुमेको छु भन्न सक्नुहुन्छ ? अहं । यसरी यात्रा गर्नु भनेको त जीउलाई दुःख दिनु मात्र हो । तपाईं दुईचार दिन यहीं बस्नुहोस् । आज इलाहाबाद भनिने एक महान् भूमिमा वास गर्न आइपुग्नुभएको छ, यस भूमिको महानता छोएर मात्र तपाईं फर्कनुहोस् । दसैंको तयारी त तपाईंको गाउँसहरमा पनि आफ्नै तरिकाले गरिँदै होला । चाडवाड मान्नका लागि साथीभाइ, आफन्त र घरपरिवारले तपाईंहरू उहाँ फर्कनुहुने अपेक्षा अवश्य गर्दा हुन् । त्यति अपेक्षा नै कसैले गर्दैन भने आफ्ना भनेर तिनलाई किन ठानिरहनु नि ! तर हेर्नोस्, हाम्रो आदरणीय पाहुना हुनुहुन्छ, तपाईंलाई इलाहाबादले यस धर्मशालाको दुःख, अव्यवस्था र उकुसमुकुसमात्र चिनाएर फर्कन दिन मिल्दैन, हामी यस नेपाली परिवारलाई इलाहाबादको तर्फबाट एक भव्य दशमी पर्व दिनेछौं ।’

वरिपरि उभिएका कालाकाला भारतीयहरूले होमा हो मिलाए । सबैले एक स्वरमा कराए- ‘तपाईंहरूले यस वर्षको दसैं इलाहाबादमा हामीसँग मनाउनुपर्छ, कति रमाइलो हुन्छ यहाँ ! दसैं मनाउन अमिताभ बच्चन त बम्बईदेखि यहाँ आउँछन् !’

केही अधिसम्म तिनीहरू निकै काला, मैला र कुरूप थिए, हेर्दाहेर्दै तिनीहरू त मेरै मावली-ससुरालीका जस्ता मनपर्ने अनुहारका देखिन थाले । फराक छाती, चम्किला आँखा, उज्याला मस्तिष्क, सुकिला मन बोकेका ती भारतीय मलाई साह्रै मन परे । आत्मसम्मान, सामूहिकताको भावना र आफ्नो रीतिथितिप्रति अथाह श्रद्धाप्रेम भएको व्यक्तिले मात्र अर्को ठाउँका मानिसलाई यसरी निम्ता गर्न जान्दछ । मलाई मानिसको शरीर एउटा मात्र भएको सत्यले घोचन थाल्यो । म एकै समयमा इलाहाबादको दसैंमा बाँच्न चाहन्थें, आफ्नो गाउँघरमा रमाएर दसैंका जमरा पहिर्न चाहन्थें, भारतभ्रमण गर्न चाहन्थें र मेरो तलबको परिधिभित्रका अन्य रहरलाई पनि साकार पार्न चाहन्थें । ग्रीकहरूले *Ars longa vita brosis* (जीवन छोटो छ, जान्नु धेरै) जीवनका यस्तै अवस्थाका लागि भनेका रहेछन् ।

उनीहरूले हामीलाई भोलिपल्ट प्रयाग र आनन्दभवनको भ्रमण गर्न भने । म उनीहरूको प्रेम पाएर धनी भएँ ।

रातको करिब एघार बजे हामी लामखुट्टे भगाउने धूप बालेर सुत्थौं । सुत्थौं पनि के भन्नु, पसिना पुछ्दै ढल्किइरह्यौं ।

१९. पेसेन्जर मैदान गई है

२०६२ असोज २२ गते शनिवार अर्थात् हाम्रो यात्राको पाँचौँ दिनको बिहान हामी सधैंभन्दा छिटो गरी उठ्यौं । बिहान भनेर के गर्नु, गर्मी कति भने ! हामी पोकापुन्तुरा ठीक पारेर धर्मशालाबाट बिदा भयौं । स्नानागारमा भीडभाड भए पनि हातमुख धुनका लागि भने मौका पाइयो । हामी गङ्गास्नानका लागि जान लागेकाले चियाचमेना केही नगरी प्रयागधामतिर लाग्यौं ।

प्रयागधाम अर्थात् स्थानीय नाम सङ्ग्राम । गङ्गा, यमुना र सरस्वती नदीको त्रिवेणी । शास्त्रवर्णित सरस्वती नदी यहाँ भूमिगत भएर मिसिन आउँछन् भन्ने विश्वास छ । मानिसहरू फाट्टफुट्ट मात्र हिँड्दै थिए । हामी सबैरै त्यहाँ पुगेका भएर मात्र होइन, यो समय प्रयागदर्शनको चत्तीको समय नभएर पनि हो । दसैंअगाडिको यस समयमा उत्तरी भारतका सबै गाउँ र सहरमा भारतीयहरू दुर्गापूजाको तयारीमा लाग्ने भएकाले प्रयागमा तीर्थयात्री धेरै हुँदैनन् ।

हामी चढेको टेम्पोमा बिहारीहरूको एक परिवार पनि थियो । लोग्नेमानिस बिहारकै कुनै कलेजको लेक्चरर हुँ भन्थ्यो र स्वास्नीचाहिँ निकै बाठी हुँ भन्ने र गफाडी थिई । दुइटा बाह्र-तेह्रबर्स छोराछोरी अङ्ग्रेजी माध्यमको स्कुलमा पढ्दै गरेका जस्ता लाग्थे । तिनीहरूको चालढाल र लवाई हेर्दा राम्रै आर्थिक हैसियतका हुनुपर्छ भन्ने लाग्थ्यो । दुवै लोग्नेस्वास्नीसँग मोबाइल फोन थियो । छोराचाहिँले डिजिटल क्यामरा भिरेको थियो । त्यसबाहेक हामीसँग यात्रा गर्नेमा चारजना उडिया केटाहरू थिए । तिनीहरू भर्खर कलेजबाट निस्केका र सैनिक सेवामा प्रवेशका लागि छनोट भई तालिमकेन्द्रमा रिपोर्ट गर्नुअघि घुम्न यहाँ आएका थिए । केटाहरू हिन्दी, बङ्गाली, अङ्ग्रेजी र उडिया भाषा बोल्न सक्थे । मबाहेक टेम्पोका सबै यात्रु जीवनमा पहिलो पल्ट प्रयाग दर्शनार्थ आएका थिए ।

हामी सङ्ग्राममा आइपुगेर टेम्पोबाट ओर्लियौँ । केटाहरू हाम्रा साना छोरीहरूसँग रमाइलो मानेर बोलचाल गर्न थाले । उनीहरू हामी नेपाली हौँ भन्ने थाहा पाएपछि, नेपालको बारेमा जान्न उत्सुक देखिए । केटाहरू निकै सुन्दर, फुर्तिला र फरासिला थिए । तिनीहरू हामीसँग अङ्ग्रेजीमा कुरा गर्थे । हिन्दीभन्दा अङ्ग्रेजी बोल्न तिनलाई सजिलो लागेको देखिन्थ्यो । तिनीहरूले नेपाल आउन भिजा कहाँ लिनुपर्छ, दिल्लीमै अथवा सीमामा भनेर सोधे । भारतीयहरूलाई हाम्रा दुई देशका बीचको सम्बन्धको बारेमा अत्यन्त थोरै थाहा छ । मैले नेपाल जान कुनै पनि भारतीयलाई कुनै प्रकारको भिजा वा पासपोर्ट चाहिँदैन तर अहिले नेपालको परिस्थिति असहज भएकाले आफ्नो परिचय खुल्ने कुनै आधिकारिक प्रमाणपत्र बोकेर हिँड्नु राम्रो हुन्छ भनँ । हामी नेपालीलाई नै पनि देशभित्र आवतजावत गर्नुपर्दा अचेल सहज नभएको पनि भनँ । हरेक भारतीयले जीवनमा काठमाडौँ, पोखरा, जनकपुर र माउन्ट एभरेस्टको फेदको नाम्चे पुग्नैपर्छ भन्ने मेरो आग्रह उनीहरूसमक्ष राख्न पनि बिसिनँ । आफैँ नाम्चे नपुगेको म, उनीहरूलाई कसरी त्यहाँ पुग्न 'कम्भिन्स' गर्न सक्थेँ र, तैपनि उनीहरूलाई कलकत्ताबाट काठमाडौँ र पोखरा घुम्न गाडीभाडा केकति लाग्छ, सीमामा के-कसो गर्नुपर्छ, पैसा कहाँ र कसरी साट्नुपर्छ अनि कुन भाषामा कुरा गर्नु ठीक हुन्छ आदि बताएँ ।

मेरो कुरा सुनेपछि तिनीहरूले एक-आपसमा भने- 'नेपाल त एकपल्ट जानैपर्ने रहेछ ।'

हामी यमुना नदीको किनारमा पुग्यौँ । त्यहाँबाट एक किलोमिटरजति डुङ्गा चढेर सङ्ग्राम पुगनुपर्छ । हामी डुङ्गाको भाडामा मोलमोलाइ गर्न थाल्यौँ । माभीहरूले प्रतिव्यक्ति नब्बे रुपियाँ भाडा लाग्छ भने । निकैबेर मोलमोलाइ चल्थो तर कुरा मिलेन, बिहारीहरूचाहिँ पचहत्तर रुपियाँ तिर्न सहमत भए । उनीहरू गइहाले । मैले केटाहरूलाई भनँ- 'हामी छजना छौँ, यिनीहरू दलाली गर्थ्यो भने प्रतिव्यक्ति दस रुपियाँमा लान तयार हुन्छन् ।'

केटाहरूले मेरा कुरा कसरी पत्याउन् ! तैपनि औपचारिकतावश तिनले मेरो कुरा सुने । मैले डुङ्गावालालाई भनँ- 'लाने हो भने हामी यति छजना छौँ, जनाको दस रुपियाँले लग नत्र बरु हिँडेरै जान्छौँ ।'

उनीहरू जनाको पैतालीस रुपियाँमा लान तयार भए । केटाहरू जाऔँ भन्न थाले । मैले तिनलाई बल्लबल्ल रोकेँ । फेरि मोलमोलाइ चल्थो । माभीहरू पच्चीस रुपियाँमा लग्न तयार भए । हिँडेरै गए पनि गङ्गास्नान गर्न पण्डाहरूले जनाको साढे बाइस रुपियाँ घाटदस्तुर लिइहाल्छन् भनेर माभीले भने । केटाहरू एकपछि अर्को रेट सुनेर छक्क परे । अब केटाहरू जाऔँ कि जाऔँ भन्न थाले । माभीहरू अबै मोलमोलाइ गर्ने हो भने सरकारी दररेटअनुसारको पचहत्तर रुपियाँ लाग्छ भन्न थाले । हामी हिँडेरै जान्छौँ भनेर हिँड्यौँ । अलिक पर पुगेपछि केटाहरूलाई बेकारमा यी नेपालीका पछि लागिएछ भन्ने लाग्न थालिसकेको थियो । तर एकै छिनमा माभीहरू आए, तिनीहरू पन्ध्र रुपियाँमा लान तयार भएर आएका थिए । केटाहरूको अनुहार उज्यालियो ।

पूजा र अनुजा पहिलो पल्ट डुङ्गा चढेका थिए । उनीहरू अलिअलि डराएका थिए । सीता यसअघि पनि चढिसकेकी भएकाले डराएकी देखिइनन् । बाउन्न सालको कुरा, फेवातालमा डुङ्गा भाडामा लिएर आफैँ खियाउन मलाई मन लागेको थियो । सीता त नाइँनाइँ, हुँदैन-हुँदैन भन्दै थिइन् तर फिलिमहरूमा नयाँ जोडीले गरेजस्तो नौकाबिहार गर्ने रहरले मैले जबर्जस्ती उनलाई डुङ्गामा चढाएँ । आफैँ खियाएर एक घण्टा वारपार र वरपर गराएको, सीताको भालेसातो उड्यो । 'नौकाबिहारको आनन्द लिने कार्यक्रम' सकेर किनारमा निस्केपछि सीता लामो सास तान्दै बोलेकी थिइन्- 'आज पनि बाँचियो ।' यहाँ पनि गङ्गा र यमुनाको विशाल जलराशि आँखावरिपरि देख्दा उनको मन पूर्ण सन्तुलनमा थिएन होला । भारतीय केटाहरू हामीसँग यात्रा गर्न पाएकामा अब खुसी भए । हामी पनि उनीहरूलाई साथी पाउँदा खुसी थियौँ ।

सङ्ग्राम पुग्यौँ । सङ्ग्राममा गङ्गा र यमुनाको पानी प्रस्ट छुट्टिन्थ्यो । गङ्गाको पानी अलिक दुधिलो थियो, त्यसमा मसिनो बालुवाको मात्रा थियो । जमुनाको पानी अलिक सङ्ग्लो र नीलो थियो । गङ्गाको बहाव जमुनाको भन्दा कडा लागे पनि

ती दुई नदीको सङ्गममा एकप्रकारको भुमरी पर्दो रहेछ । मानिसहरू के भन्दा रहेछन् भने यहाँ त्रिवेणीमा मिसिएका गङ्गा र जमुनाको पानी बनारसमा समेत अलगअलग देख्न सकिन्छ । त्यस्तो कुरा बनारसमै हुँदा सुन्न पाएको भए ख्याल गरिन्थ्यो होला । दुई नदीको पानी मिसिन समेत यति कठिन हुन्छ भने मानिसका विचारहरू कहाँ सहजै मिल्छन् र !

हामीले गङ्गाजमुनाको सङ्गममा नुहाउने योजना बनाएका थियौं तर त्यहाँ नुहाएबापत जनाको दस रुपियाँ तिर्नुपर्ने कुरो सुन्दा मलाई उठ्नु रिस उठ्यो । जीवनभर मैले नुहाइएको पानी गङ्गाकै हो, म हरदिन गङ्गास्नान गर्ने मानिस हुँ भनेर पण्डाहरूलाई भनौं । साँच्चै हाम्रो घरछेउका खोलाखोल्सामात्र होइन, नेपालमा परेको प्रत्येक थोपो पानी बगेर गई गङ्गामै मिल्छ । त्यतिमात्र कहाँ हो र ! हरेक नेपालीले गरेको दिसापिसाब र लास डढाएको खरानीसमेत गएर गङ्गामै मिलेर पवित्र गङ्गा नै बन्दछ । सङ्गममा स्नान गरी सूर्यलाई नरिवल, दूध र जल चढायौं । सयौं मानिसहरू सङ्गमस्नान गरिरहेका थिए । उता सङ्गमको किनारमा पनि नुहाउनेहरूको उस्तै भीड थियो । पण्डाहरू पनि व्यस्त, माभीहरू पनि व्यस्त । तर सबैभन्दा व्यस्त थिए मसिना केटाहरू । मानिसले सूर्यलाई नरिवल र अर्घ्य चढाउँछन् । नरिवल बढेबढे अलि पर पुग्छ अनि केटाहरू हाम फालेर त्यो नरिवल समातेर ल्याउँछन् । फेरि अर्को व्यक्तिलाई दस रुपियाँमा त्यो बेच्छन् । नरिवल किन्ने र बेच्नेको त्यो नाटक एकछिन मैले त वाल्ल परेर हेरिरहेँ ।

सङ्गममा नुहाउने कार्यक्रम सकिएपछि हामी ढुङ्गा चढेर बिस्तारै फर्क्यौं । किनारमा आएपछि मैले हाम्रो टोलीलाई सम्राट् अशोकले बनाएको किल्लामा लगें । दिन चढ्दै गएकाले आउने-जानेको सङ्ख्या बढ्दै थियो । अशोकले यमुनाकिनारमा बनाएको यो किल्ला भव्य छ । अगिल्लो पल्ट म आउँदा किल्लाको दक्षिणपट्टि अलिकति बगर थियो । अहिले नदीले त्यस बगरलाई कटान गरी किल्लासम्म नै आफ्नो सीमा बढाएको थियो । विशाल ढुङ्गाहरूले बनाएको यो किल्ला अत्यन्त विशाल र हेर्नलायक छ । भित्र एउटा बटवृक्ष छ, स्थानीय मानिसहरू यसलाई अक्षयवट भन्छन् । वरको यो रूख कहिल्यै नमर्ने र विशाल छ । वरको मूल रूखको फेदमा अहिले रामसीताको भूमिगत मन्दिर छ । हामीले त्यस गुफाजस्तो बनाइएको ढुङ्गे भूमिगत सुरुङ्गभित्र पसेर मानिसहरूको लामो लाइनमा पालैसँग देवताहरूको दर्शन गर्थौं । किल्लाबाहिर निस्केर हामीले केही फोटा खिच्यौं अनि बाँधतिर लाग्यौं । बाटाका दुवैतिर मानेहरूको लहर लामो न लामो भइसकेको रहेछ । हामीले केही चानचुन पैसा माग्नेहरूलाई दियौं ।

उडिया भाइहरू हतारमा थिए र छुट्टिनुपर्ने बेला आयो । तीनचार घण्टा सँगै हिँड्दैमा हाम्रा बीचमा सम्बन्ध गाढा भइसकेको थियो । अहिले सम्झँदा हाँसो उठ्छ तर छुट्टिनुपर्दा हामीलाई त्यस बेला देखेले हाम्रा छोरीहरू आफ्ना काका अथवा मामासँग अब निकै वर्षका लागि छुट्टिँदै छन् भनेर अनुमान गर्न पुग्थे । हाम्रो पनि हविगत उस्तैउस्तै थियो । केटाहरू अघि बढे । सङ्गमको बगरमा विहानको घाम छिप्पिँदै थियो र मानिसहरूको भीडभाड बढिरहेको थियो । भोक लागेर हलनटट्ट भइसकिएको थियो । हामी त्यहीं बसेर सानोतिनो होटलमा भारतीय ब्रेकफास्ट अर्थात् पुरीजिलेबी या समोसा अथवा त्यस्तै केही खाने सुरमा थियौं । केटाहरूबाट छुट्टिएपछि हामीले नजिकैको होटलमा पसेर पुरी-तरकारी खायौं ।

अनि हामी मैदानतिर लाग्यौं । बाह्रवर्से कुम्भमेला लाग्ने विशाल खुल्ला चउरलाई मैदान भनिन्छ । मैदानप्रवेशमै ताजा तथा बासी दिसापिसाबका मूर्तिरूपहरूले बाटाका दुवैतर्फबाट निकै परपरसम्म स्वागतार्थी भएर हामीलाई स्वागत गरेका थिए । हाम्रा भारतीय मित्रहरू 'दिसामैदान'का लागि नामुद छन् । प्रयागको यो मैदान अत्यन्त खुला छ । कर्तव्यबोधले ओतप्रोत भएका असल भारतीयहरूले यस मैदानलाई भारतीय शैलीमा विशिष्ट प्रयोग गर्ने गरेका छन् ।

अस्तिका दिन गया आइपुग्नुअघि एउटा सानो स्टेसनमा रेल अडिएको थियो । एउटी आइमाई त्यसबेला आफ्नो पोको सिटमा राखेर डिब्बाकै चर्पीमा पसेकी थिई । केही नयाँ मानिसहरू ट्रेनमा चढेर हाम्रा अगाडिको त्यस खाली सिटमा बस्न खोजे । छेउकी आइमाईले तिनलाई रोक्दै भनी-

'सिट खाली नहीं है, पेसेन्जर मैदान गई है'

ट्रेनभित्रको चर्पीलाई त मैदान ठानेर उपयोग गर्नेले यहाँ यत्रो सक्कली मैदान नै भेटेपछि त्यसै छाड्लान् त ?

मलाई पहिले म विराटनगरको मोरङ क्याम्पसमा बीए पढ्दाको एउटा सुन्दर घटनाको याद आयो । म त्यस बेला विराटनगरदेखि सीधै पश्चिम केसलिया नदीपारि सुनसरीको भीमपुर भन्ने गाउँमा एकजना खड्काको घरमा बसेर नानीहरू पढाउँथे । त्यसो गरेबापत म दुई छाक खाना अनि वास पाउँथे । त्यहाँ बस्ताका रमाइला, आनन्ददायक र स्मरणीय घटनाहरू धेरै छन् तर एउटा प्रसङ्गमिल्दो घटनाचाहिँ अहिल्यै सुनाइहालौं ।

क्याम्पस विहान लाग्थ्यो । विहान छ बजे कक्षा सुरु भएर एघार बजेसम्म पढाइ चल्थ्यो । हिउँदको समय, विहान मन नलागीनलागी म पाँच बजे उठ्थे । मुख धुनैपथ्यो, चर्पी जानै पथ्यो । चर्पी त थिएन, पर खेतमा जानुपथ्यो । शनिवार ढिलो उठ्ता मात्र बाँसभाडतिर गइरहनुपथ्यो ।

बिहान चाँडै गरेर भीमपुरबाट विराटनगर लाग्नुपर्थ्यो । विराटनगरको पश्चिमपट्टि नहरको दायाँबायाँ आजको जस्ता पक्की घर थिएनन्, भारतीय मित्रहरू र हाम्रै मदिसे दाजुभाइहरूका भुपडीघरहरू थिए । ती घरहरू मदेसका खेतमा पाकेको धान रँग्न धानको लार-पराल, ढोडे र पिठारीका हाँगाहुँगी काटकुट पारेर एक घण्टामा तयार पारेको हिउँदे याक्साजस्ता सुन्दर थिए ।

बिहानको पौने छ बजेतिर नहरको डिलमा आइपुग्दा अँध्यारै हुन्थ्यो । अँध्याराको सदुपयोग गर्न स्थानीय महिलाहरू लस्कुरै डिलमा टक्रचाकटुक्रुक ध्यानमुद्रामा बसिरहेका हुन्थे । साइकलको आवाज र साइकलमा बसेको मेरो मधुरो आकृति नजिक आएपछि उनीहरू जुरुक्क उठ्थे र म अगाडि बढेपछि पुनः आ-आफ्नो ठाउँमा बसेर साविक कार्यमा लाग्थे । मलाई नहरै नहर लगभग पाँच-छ मिनेट साइकल कुदाउनुपर्थ्यो र त्यस अवधिभरि नहरको डिलका ती सयौं आइमाईले उठेर स्वागतसम्मान गर्नुपर्थ्यो । ती आइमाईहरूले हरेक दिन गर्नेगरेको त्यस प्रकारको अभिवादन आज पनि स्वादिलो याद बनेर मेरो मनभित्र सुरक्षित छ । कहिलेकाहीँ अलि ढिलो भएर उज्यालो भइसकेको बेला म आइपुगेँ भने नहरको त्यस डिलमा महिलाहरूको पालो सकिएर पुरुषहरू बसेका हुन्थे । अटेरी पुरुषहरूचाहिँ बिहानको त्यस्तो स्पष्ट उज्यालामा मलाई त्यति नजिकै देख्ता पनि देखेको नदेख्थे गरेर चुपचाप आफ्नो लोहोटा समातेर बस्थे । मलाई अपमानबोध हुन्थ्यो ।

हामी मैदानको बसपार्कमा आइपुग्यौँ । मेरी आमा पच्चीस सालतिर बनारस आउँदा प्रयाग पनि आएको कथा गर्नुहुन्थ्यो । उहाँलाई त्यही प्रयागको चिनो होस् भनेर एक जोर चप्पल किन्यौँ । हामी गृहीँ सामान बोकेर यात्रा गर्न तयार नभएकाले यथासम्भव केही नकिन्ने पक्षमा भए पनि यहाँ आएपछि मन थामिएको थिएन ।

हामी अब आनन्दभवन हेर्न जान लागेका थियौँ । एउटा ट्याक्सी रिजर्भ गरी जान लागेका, अगि सुरुमै भेटिएका भारतीयहरू आइपुगे । उनीहरू पनि उतै जाने रहेछन् । दुवै परिवार मिलेर ट्याक्सी रिजर्भ गरौँ भनेर मैले उनीहरूलाई प्रस्ताव राखेँ । ट्याक्सीको भाडा मज्जासँग मोलमोलाइ गर्नुपर्थ्यो । ट्याक्सीभाडामा मोलमोलाइ गरेर सस्तैमा मिलाएको देखेर त्यो बिहारी आइमाई छक्क परी । बाटामा उसले मलाई सङ्गममा खर्च कति भयो भनेर सोधी । हिसाब गरें : सङ्गममा डुङ्गा, पण्डा, नरिवल, दूध अनि स्नानशुल्क गरी हाम्रो परिवारले जम्मा एकासी रुपियाँ खर्च गरेछ । उनीहरूले तीन सय पचहत्तर खर्च भयो भने । स्वास्नीचाहिँ लोग्नेलाई ग्वाङ्गो भनेर सराप्न थाली । यता मचाहिँ पैसा जोगिएकामा भन्दा आफ्नी पत्नीका अगाडि बाठो देखिन पाएकामा मक्ख !

हामी चढेको बस प्रयागराजको विशाल मैदान भएर दौडिइरहेको छ । जता हेरे पनि अलपत्र परेको चउर छ, सायद यो चउर कुनै राजामहाराजा वा सेठमहाजनले कुम्भमेलाका लागि सयौं वर्षअघि उपलब्ध गराएको हो । त्यो जमिन कुम्भमेलाका लागि अर्पण गर्ने मानिसहरू अत्यन्त दूरदर्शी रहेछन् । आजको जनसङ्ख्यालाई समेत धान्ने गरी त्यत्रो जमिन दिनु चानचुने कुरा होइन । आजभन्दा छयानब्बे वर्षअघि अर्थात् १९६८ सालमा नेपालको सर्वप्रथम जनगणना भएको थियो । त्यस बेला नेपालको जम्मा जनसङ्ख्या साठी लाखजति थियो । आज त्यो सङ्ख्या बढेर दुई करोड सत्तरी लाख नाघिसकेको छ । भारतको जनसङ्ख्या पक्कै पनि यस्तै दरमा बढेको हुनुपर्छ । तर जसले त्यतिखेरै आजको कुम्भमेलाको आकारको कल्पना गर्थ्यो त्यो असाधारण मानिस नै थियो ।

दायाँबायाँ जता हेरे पनि चउरैचउर छ । तर निर्जन नाङ्गो चउरका बीचबीचमा जताततै 'मैदान जान' चर्पीहरू बनाइएका, सडक र सडकमाथिबाट गाडी कुदाउन मिल्ने पुलहरू बनाइएका । चउर बेस्याहार भए पनि अनगिन्ती चर्पी र आकासे पुल देख्ता कुम्भमेलामा कति मानिस यहाँ आउँदा हुन् भन्ने केही अनुमान गर्न सकिन्छ । पूर्णकुम्भको अवधिमा हरेक दिन दस लाखभन्दा बढी तीर्थयात्रु त्यहाँ महास्नानमा भाग लिने आशाले आएका हुन्छन् जब कि चौबीस घण्टामा दुई लाखभन्दा बढी मानिसलाई यस्सो चोपलिन मात्र पनि त्यहाँ ठाउँ नै पुग्दैन । कुम्भमेला लाग्ने ठाउँका ती आकासे पुल र भित्ताहरूमा जताततै मानिसभन्दा ठूलाठूला अक्षरमा 'गङ्गादर्शन ही गङ्गास्नान है' भनेर लेखिएको छ । नुहाउने पालो नपाई फिर्नुपर्ने अभागीहरूलाई सान्त्वना दिन यो भुटो वाक्य त्यति राम्ररी भित्तामा लेखिएको हुनुपर्छ, गङ्गादर्शन नै गङ्गास्नान हुने भए किन मरिहत्ते गरीगरी मानिसहरू गङ्गास्नान गर्न खोज्थे ? अत्यन्त फराकिलो भए पनि मानिसहरूले प्रयोग नगरेकाले होला चउर अहिले कुरूप र बेकारको बन्जरभूमि लाग्थ्यो । कुम्भमेलाको समयमा यहाँ आउनु भनेको ट्रेन वा बसको भीडमा किचिएर मर्न तयार हुनु, होटल वा लजमा ओत नपाएर रातभर सडककिनारमै जागराम बस्नु हो । हुन त त्यसमा पनि भिन्नै आनन्द होला ।

२०. एउटै घरमा चार घण्टा भ्रमण

आनन्दभवन पुग्दा बिहानको आठ बजेको थियो । आनन्द भवन त दस बजेमात्र खुल्ने रहेछ, परेन अब फसाद ! नजिकै होटलसोटल केही छैन । गर्मी बढेर खपीनसक्नु छ । हामी बरु यताउति डुलेर दस बजाऔं भनेर अलमलिन थाल्यौं । भारतीय यात्रुहरू एकातिर लागिहाले । हामीलाई शिवमन्दिर हेर्न मन थियो, तर त्यो त धेरै टाढा पर्छ भन्ने सुनियो । जताततै दुर्गापूजाको तयारी चलिरहेको थियो । एक ठाउँमा मानिसहरू विशाल पण्डाल खडा गर्न लागेका थिए । एउटा निकै ठूलो र लामो सिनेमाहलजस्तो पाल टाँगेका थिए र बाँकी काम गरिरहेका थिए । शीतलताका लागि यो ठाउँ उपयुक्त थियो । हामी एकछिन बस्यौं । छोरीहरूले केटाकेटीका लागि भनेर सडकसडक डुल्नेहरूले बेच्ने हल्का खाजा खाए । हामीले आफूसँग भएको खाजा खायौं ।

आनन्दभवनको गेट खुल्यो । शुल्क तिरेर त्यहाँ छिर्नुपर्छ । इन्दिरा गान्धीले आफ्ना पिताको कमाइ र बाबुबाजेका पालादेखिको सम्पूर्ण पुख्र्यौली सम्पत्तिसहित यो आनन्दभवन सरकारलाई बुझाएर एउटा दर्शनीय सङ्ग्रहालयको रूप दिलाएकी हुन् ।

हामीले त्यहाँ धेरै कुरा हेर्न पायौं । नेहरूपरिवारको निजी जीवनको झलक, भारतीय स्वतन्त्रतासङ्ग्रामको झल्को, नेहरूको राष्ट्रप्रेम, महात्मा गान्धी र इन्दिरा गान्धी, नेहरूपरिवारको पुस्तकालय र अनेक कुराहरू नहेरी नहुने छन् । यहाँ भारतीयहरूको भारतप्रेमको विशिष्ट नमुना हेर्न पाइन्छ । नेहरूले प्रयाग, गङ्गायमुना र मैदानप्रति व्यक्त गरेका उक्तिहरू त्यहाँ पढ्न पाएँ, देशप्रेमको अनुपम नमुना लाग्यो । हामीले उनीहरूबाट सिक्नुपर्ने कुराहरू कति हो कति छन् । त्यहाँ एउटा वेधशाला पनि छ, तर हामीले त्यो वेधशाला हेर्ने समय निकाल्न सकेनौं । बाटामा सामान नकिन्ने हाम्रो नियमावली यहाँ आएर फेरि मिचियो । हामीले त्यहाँको पुस्तकपसलबाट नेहरूको आत्मकथा र दुईतीनओटा बालबालिकाका लागि काम लाग्ने किताब किन्यौं । किताब किन्नभन्दा बोकन गाह्रो हुन्छ यात्रामा । झोलाहरू भरिएका हुनाले प्रत्येक नयाँ सामानले नयाँ समस्यासमेत जन्माउने गर्छ ।

इन्दिरा गान्धीको स्मारक भवनबाट निस्केर फोटो खिच्न खोज्दा पूजा पिसाब लाग्यो भन्न थाली । ऊ त्यसै भवनको एउटा चर्पीमा पसी ।

केहीबेरको अलमलपछि हामी आनन्दभवनबाहिर निस्क्यौं । पूजाले भनी- 'इम्पोर्टेन्ट कुराहरूको इन्फर्मेसन सबैलाई हुनुपर्छ ।'

'के महत्त्वपूर्ण कुरो प्यो त्यस्तो ?' सीता बोलिन् ।

'हामी एउटै ट्वाइलेट युज गर्थ्यौं ।'

'को-को ?'

'इन्दिरा गान्धी र म। हुन त ती कुरा अब हिस्ट्रीका म्याटर भइसके, तैपनि... । हिस्ट्रीलाई हजुर के भन्नुहुन्छ ?'

हामी हास्यौं । सीताले भनिन्- 'इतिहास.....। हिस्ट्री भनेको इतिहास..... ।'

पूजाले दोहोर्याई- 'इतिहास भनेको हिस्ट्री।'

मैले पूजातिर हेर्दै भनँ- 'त्यसो भए तिमीले इन्दिरा गान्धीले प्रयोग गर्ने गरेको चर्पी प्रयोग गर्थ्यौ ?'

'त्यो त अब हिस्ट्री भइगो नि । किन र ?'

'ज्ञान, जोस-जाँगर र देशभक्ति पनि उस्तै भए पो !' मैले तीर हानें ।

'टाइमले देखाउला।' उसको स्वर अब मसिनो हुन थालेको थियो ।

आनन्दभवनको चारघण्टे भ्रमणपछि एउटा रिक्सा समातेर आवासीय क्षेत्र हुँदै हामी रेलवे जङ्क्सन आयौं । प्रसिद्ध जामे मस्जिद, शिवमन्दिर, विश्वविद्यालय र अनेक हेर्नलायक ठाउँहरू हेर्न नभ्याई हामी अघि बढ्न लागेका थियौं । जीवन छोटो छ, गर्नु धेरै छ । हामीले जीवनमा धेरै कुरा गर्न नपाई मर्नुपर्ने हुन्छ । म चार वर्षभन्दा बढी काठमाडौं बसें र नागार्जुन, साँगा, गोदावरी, फूलचोकी र शिवपुरी चढ्ने अवसर जुटाउन सके पनि मैले चन्द्रागिरिको डाँडो चढ्न कहिल्यै भ्याइनँ । अब त काठमाडौं गएँ भने पनि हजार चन्द्रागिरि चढ्ने काम लिएर गएको हुन्छु, के भन्ने खै ! धन्न उसबेला खासा, तातोपानी, खँड्पू, खोपासी, बुडमती, लेले, बनेपा, वज्रवाराही, कीर्तिपुर, पनौती, पाँगा, थानकोट, सतुङ्गल, सीतापाइला, चापागाउँ, चाँगुनारायण, टोखा, बोडे, नगदेश, बालकुमारी, ठिमी, धुलिखेल, मातातीर्थ र काठमाडौं उपत्यकाका सानाठूला गाउँ, बजार र तीन सहरका गल्लीगल्ली घुमँछु ।

आज इलाहाबाद राम्ररी नघुमी छोडिहाल्नुपर्दा एउटा जीवन नै अपुरो जिएभैँ लागिरह्यो । इलाहाबादको मुख्य सहर त हेर्ने पाइएन । कमसे कम मानिसको भीडभाड, आकाश चुम्ने घरहरू र गाडीहरूको अनन्त लस्करको अनौठो जीवन देख्न पाइने थियो । यत्रो दिन हामीले यात्रा गरेर कटिहार, भागलपुर, गया, मुगलसराय, बनारस र इलाहाबाद पार गरे पनि कुनै सहरको व्यस्तता हेर्ने रहै नगरेको हो कि जस्तो लागेर आयो । सहर भनेको रेलको स्टेसन र मन्दिरहरूमात्र होइन, तर सहरभित्रको नियमित जीवन नहेरी हामी एकोहोरो कुदिरहेका थियौँ । हामी अब इलाहाबादबाट कानपुरतिर लाग्ने विचारमा थियौँ ।

२१. जरिवाना तिर

इलाहाबादको विशाल जङ्क्सन । टिकट लिएको केहीबेरमै एउटा ट्रेन आयो । कलेज पढ्ने एउटा स्थानीय विद्यार्थी पनि हाम्रो साथी भएको थियो । हामी नयाँ मानिस, उसकै पछि लागेर चढ्यौँ, ऊ त अर्को ट्रेन आएपछि हामीलाई छाडेर त्यसतिर पो लाग्यो । पोकापुन्तुरा र नानीहरू भएकाले हामी ओर्लेनौँ, त्यसैमा बसिरह्यौँ ।

ट्रेनले समयमै कानपुर पुऱ्यायो । ओर्लेर स्टेसनबाहिर निस्कन लाग्दा चेकिङले टिकट माग्यो । मैले आफूले इलाहाबादमा काटेको टिकट दिएँ । टिकट चेक गर्ने त्यस लुइरेले त हामीलाई एकातिर पो उभिन भन्छ, ए ! यात्रुहरू धमाधम टिकट देखाउँदै बाहिर निस्किरहेका थिए । हामीलाई त्यसले एकछिन रोकेपछि भन्यो-

‘भाइजी, तपाईंले काटेको टिकट सही हो, यस टिकटले इलाहाबादबाट कानपुर आउन पाइन्छ तर तपाईं गलत ट्रेनमा चढ्नुभयो । यो सुपरएक्सप्रेस ट्रेन हो । यस ट्रेनमा चार सय किलोमिटरभन्दा कम दूरीका यात्रुले चढ्न पाउँदैनन् । तपाईंले एक्सप्रेस ट्रेनको टिकट काटेर सुपरएक्सप्रेस ट्रेनमा चढ्नुभयो । तपाईंले नियम तोड्नुभयो । अब तपाईंले कानुनअनुसार पाँच सय रुपियाँ जरिवाना तिर्नुपर्छ ।’

रमाइलोका लागि परिवारसहित भारतको भ्रमण गर्न निस्केको निम्नवित्त शिक्षक, मैले आफ्नै देशमा कानुन तोडेको अभियोग एक पटक पनि लागेको छैन, जीवनमा कसैको विरुद्ध अदालतमा मुद्दा त के पुलिसमा उजुरसम्म गरेको छैन, कानुनको पालन गर्ने यस्तो व्यक्ति अर्काको मुलुकमा कानुनी अपराध गर्दै हिँड्न सक्तैन । मैले पुलिसलाई अङ्ग्रेजीमा भनें- ‘आफू बालबच्चासहित गलत काम गर्न म भारत पसेको होइन । म पारिवारिक भ्रमणमा निस्केको हुँ । मेरो देशमा ट्रेनसेवा छैन, यहाँका लाउडस्पीकरले बोलेको अङ्ग्रेजी पनि बुझ्दैन । मैले कसो गर्न हुन्छ वा हुँदैन भन्ने जानकारी दिने यहाँ केही व्यवस्था छैन । प्लेटफर्ममा उभिएका अरू यात्रुले देखाएको ट्रेन चढ्नुवाहेक हामीसँग अरू कुनै उपाय छैन । ट्रेन कहिले यस प्लेटफर्ममा त कहिले त्यस प्लेटफर्ममा आउँछ भनेर यता र उता कुदाउँछन् । बल्लबल्ल ट्रेन आउँछ, पूर्व जाने मानिस पश्चिमतिर जाने ट्रेनमा चढिने अवस्था छ । मलाई कुन ट्रेनमा आउने हो थाहा भएन, मानिसहरूले कानपुर जाने ट्रेन यही हो भनिदिए अनि चढेका हौँ । भर्खर टिकट काटेर आएकाले पनि मबाट गल्ती गर्ने मनसाय नरहेको स्पष्ट हुन्छ ।’

बजिया किन सुन्थ्यो ! उसले हामीलाई रोकिराख्यो ।

म उसँग नरम भएर बोलेँ- ‘मबाट गल्ती भएकै होला, त्यसैले त तपाईंले रोक्नुभएको हुनुपर्छ, तर अब म कसो गरूँ त ?’

उसले भन्यो- ‘अब जरिवाना तिर्ने, अनि जाने ।’

म नम्र भएँ- ‘म विदेशी हुँ । म नेपालबाट आएको हुँ । तपाईंहरूको कानुन तोड्न अर्काको मुलुक पसेको होइन म । मेरो नियत बेठीक नदेखिएपछि मलाई दण्ड तिराउने हो भने म गर्वसाथ दण्ड तिर्छु तर यहीँबाट म सोभैँ घर जान्छु । मैले इलाहाबादबाट कानपुर आउने टिकट काटेको हो र यो कानपुर नै हो भने मैले गलत कार्य आफूले जानीजानी गरेको छैन । मेरो भूलबाट कसैलाई मर्का परेको छैन । तपाईं मलाई अब जरिवाना तिराउने कुरा गरिरहनुहुन्छ भने म यहाँबाट बाहिर निस्कन्न । म सोभैँ अर्को ट्रेन पक्रेर घर जान्छु ।’

‘तपाईंलाई अझ बढी जरिवाना लाग्छ !’

‘मलाई तपाईंहरूका दुवै राष्ट्रभाषा हिन्दी र अङ्ग्रेजी आउँछ । भाषा बुझ्ने मानिसलाई त यात्राका नियम ठीकसँग बुझाउन सक्नुहुन्न । अब हामीबाट भूल हुँदा तपाईं त्यत्रो जरिवाना तिराउने कुरा गर्नुहुन्छ भने भाषासमेत नबुझ्नेले कति दुःख पाउँछन् यहाँ ?’

‘मलाई तपाईंका गन्थन सुन्ने फुर्सत छैन ।’

‘.....’

भारतीय रेल-कर्मचारीसँग भगडा गर्नु भनेको सडकट निम्त्याउनु हो । हामी ट्रेनतिरै फर्क्यौं । उसले केही भनेन । केहीबेरपछि अर्को ट्रेन आइपुग्यो । हामीले चढ्नुपर्ने भनिएको चाहिँ रहेछ । हामी नयाँ यात्रुहरूसँगै अर्को ढोकाबाट बाहिर निस्क्यौं । टिकट जाँच्नेले जाँच्यो, केही भनेन ।

बाहिर निस्कँदा त पूजा छैन ! पूजा उतै भीडमा छुटिछ। बेलुका भइसकेको छ, कानपुर भनेको दसवटा प्लेटफर्म भएको विशाल जङ्क्सन हो र दसौँ हजार यात्रुहरू यताउता गर्दै छन् । अब छोरी कता परी, कसरी भेटिनु ? हे महाआपत् ! सीता र कान्छीलाई ‘यहीं बसिराख्नु नि !’ भनेर म पूजालाई खोज्न फेरि प्लेटफार्महरूतिर दौडें । एकपछि अर्को गर्दै मैले दसैँ प्लेटफार्म दौडेरै घुम्ने । कतै छैन । यस्तो आपत्मा मनको गति कति तीव्र हुँदो रहेछ भने ! वा ऊ आत्तिएर रुँदै मुटु फुटुन्जेल दौडिरहेकी छे, वा पुलिसले पक्रिएर कतै हामीलाई खोज्दै छ कि, मैले पुलिसको अगाडि घर फर्कन्छु भनेको सुनेकी थिई- इलाहाबाद जाने ट्रेन पक्रिई कि ! अब कसो गर्नु ठीक हुने हो ! दसपन्ध्र मिनेट दौडेको-दौडचै गरे पनि कतै नभेटेपछि म पुलिसहरूलाई सोध्न थालें । मूल गेटका पुलिसहरू र अरू यताउता गर्ने पुलिसलाई सोध्दा पनि कुनै उपाय नदेखेपछि एक नम्बर प्लेटफर्ममै फर्कें ।

‘हुन त पूजालाई आफू कहाँ छु, कसरी पुलिसको मद्दत लिनुपर्छ भन्ने थाहा छ । बाबुआमाले आफूलाई कसरी खोज्लान् भन्ने अनुमान पनि गर्न सक्छे ऊ । नभेटिए पनि हराउँदिन कि ! यस्तो मानवसागरका बीच यसरी खोजेर पार लाग्दैन । अब माइक भएठाउँ गएर सूचना भन्न लगाउनुपर्छ ।’ मैले सोचें । म माइक भएठाउँ जाँदै थिएँ, काली बोक्सी त पर लुखुरलुखुर हिँडिरहेकी है ! उसको हिँडाइमा हराएको केटाकेटीमा हुनुपर्ने बेचैनी र हडबडी केही देखिँदैन ! मैले परैबाट जोडले कराएँ । उसले टाउको उठाई । मलाई देख्ता पनि उसमा कुनै परिवर्तन देखिएन, मानौं ऊ इटहरीको चोकमा छुटेपछि भेटिएकी हो । मैले उसको हात जोडले समातें । हामी बाबुछोरी अरू दुईजना भएकातिर लाग्यौं । सीता रोएर बसिरहेकी थिइन् । परिवारको पुनर्मिलन भयो । हामी कानपुरको खुला आकाशमा सास फेर्दै अगाडि बढ्यौं । साँझ पर्न लागेको थियो । हामीले वाटामा हिँडिरहेका केही मुसलमान धर्मगुरुजस्ता सेतो गोलो टोपी लगाएका अलिक पाका मानिसलाई सोध्यौं-

‘साहब ! हमें आज रात कानपुर में ठहरना है । कोई सस्ता लज व धरमशाला के ठिकाना बताइए न !’

‘आपलोग इधर क्यों आया ? शहर के तरफ जाइये न !’

‘कानपुर का मुख्य शहर रेलवे के उस पार है क्या ?’

‘कानपुर तो उधर ही है । आप के पास टिकट है ?’

‘जी हाँ, है ...।’

‘तो फिर से उलटे पाँव प्लेटफार्म में जाकर उधर पार कीजियेगा । इधर तो आर्मी ब्याराक, कोयला भण्डार और छोटेछोटे बस्तियाँ है ।’

हामी फेरि प्लेटफार्मतिरै गयौं । पारिपट्टि टिकट जाँच हुँदै रहेछ । हामीले आफूसँग भएका टिकट देखायौं ।

जाँचकीले सोध्यो- ‘बच्चों का टिकट ?’

हामीले नानीहरूका टिकट काटेकै थिएनौं । मैले सत्य बोल्नुपर्छो बोलें - ‘बच्चियाँ छोटी है, इनका भी टिकट ?’

‘कितने वर्ष के हैं ?’

‘यह बडी सात और छोटी पाँच ...।’ परिस्थितिको आँकलन गरेर मैले छोरीहरूको उमेर सकेसम्म घटाएँ ।

‘आप के पास दोनों बच्चियाँ के टिकट होनी चाहिए था ।’

म अलमल्ल परें । हामीले भागलपुरदेखि गया, गयादेखि मुगलसराय, बनारसदेखि इलाहाबादसम्म आउँदा कहिल्यै छोरीहरूका लागि टिकट काटेका थिएनौं, काट्नुपर्छ भन्ने थाहै भएन, टिकट जाँच्नेले पनि यिनीहरूको टिकट मागेका थिएनन् । अब परिणत फसाद !

त्यसले भन्यो- ‘दोनों को टिकट काटना चाहिए था । पाँच वर्ष और उससे बडे बच्चों को आधा भाडा लगता है । आप को बिना टिकट बच्चों को यात्रा कराने पर जुर्माना लगता है ।’

‘जुर्माना ?’

‘जी, हाँ पाँच सौ बारह रुपये ...।’

कानपुर पस्तेदेखि अनेक खाले आपत् आइरहे । वास खोज्न अवेर भइरहेको थियो । मैले भनँ-

‘हामी नेपालबाट आएका पर्यटक हौं । भागलपुरबाट गया, गयाबाट मुगलसराय र बनारसदेखि इलाहाबाद यसै गरी रेलयात्रा गरिरहेका छौं, गाडीमा टिकट चेक हुन्थ्यो, हामीलाई कहाँ पनि बच्चाको टिकट खै भनेर मागिएन त ? हामीसँग ती टिकट अझै छँदै छन्।’

‘आपको नियमानुसार जुर्माना लगता है ...। देखिये ..’ उसले नियमावलीको एउटा सानो पुस्तिकामा पाँच वर्षमाथिका बालबालिकालाई आधा भाडा लाग्ने नियम देखायो, बिनाटिकट यात्रा गरेमा लाग्ने जरिवाना पनि देखायो । हामीसित कुनै उत्तर थिएन । सीता रुन थालिन् । म यसै त कालो मानिस, मेरो अनुहार डर र चिन्ताले भन् कालोनीलो भयो । सीता कनीकुथी त्यससँग हिन्दीमा माफ माग्नु थालिन् । किन टेर्यो ऊ.. । उसले हाम्रा कुरै सुनेन । अन्त्यमा मैले उसलाई एकजनाको पूरा भाडा हातमा थमाएँ । ऊ एकछिन त मानिरहेको थिएन तर पछि उसले हामीलाई धकेल्दै बाहिर निकाल्यो ।

बल्लबल्ल त्यस आपत्बाट पार पाइयो । पछि राम्ररी बुझेको त गल्ती हाम्रै रहेछ । पाँच वर्षमाथिका बालबालिकाको भाडा तिर्नुपर्ने नियम रहेछ । तर भारतमा घूसले जहाँ पनि काम गर्ने !

२२. कनौडिया धर्मशाला

अब बेलुका हुन लागेको थियो । रेलवे प्लेटफार्मबाहिर निस्कनासाथ कानपुरको भव्य स्वागतद्वार देखियो । छेवैमा एउटा ठूलो धर्मशाला पनि खडा रहेछ । दुङ्गो खोज्दा दुङ्गै भेटिएको थियो, हामी तुरुन्त त्यता गयौं । तर धर्मशाला अत्यन्त अव्यवस्थित र सुनसान लाग्ने । अलिक ठूलै जमात हिँडेका बेला यो उपयुक्त भए पनि अहिलेलाई हामी यहाँ बस्न तयार भएौं । हामी बजारको मुख्य भागतिर पस्यौं । एउटा होटलको दलाल हामीलाई पछ्याइरहेको रहेछ । हामी त्यसका चिप्ला कुराका पछि लागेर उसले भनेको होटलतिरै गयौं । तर त्यो होटल साँगुरो, अँध्यारो र सुनसान गल्लीभित्र थियो । कोठाहरू साना, अँध्यारा र असुरक्षित लाग्ने खालका थिए । कोठामा लगाइएका कुलरहरू कामनलाग्ने र भ्यालढोकाहरू पनि कच्चा थिए । मलाई डर पनि लाग्यो, यस्तो अँध्यारो छ, लुटपाट गरि पो हाल्ने हुन् कि, त्यो होटल छाडी हामी पुनः बजारतिर पस्यौं ।

बाटो रिक्सा, साइकल, मोटरसाइकलजस्ता साना साधनले कति भीड भने एकप्रकारको रमाइलो नै लाग्ने । मानिसको भीडले ठेलेरै अगाडि बढाउला जस्तो । परिवारका सदस्य एकबाट अर्को छुट्टियो भने पर देखिए पनि भेट्न मुस्किल । हामी कानपुरे भीड छिचोल्दै अघि बढ्यौं । नयागन्जको कनौडिया धर्मशाला बाटैमा पर्दो रहेछ । वास बस्न मिल्छ कि भनेर हामी त्यो धर्मशाला हेर्न भित्र गयौं । अगिल्लो दिन विरक्तलाग्दो ठाउँमा बसेर आएकाले हो कि, यो त हामीलाई अत्यन्त व्यवस्थित लाग्यो । नुहाउने, लुगा धुने, सुकाउने र नानीहरू उफ्रने-खेल्ने पनि प्रशस्त ठाउँ भएको खुल्ला भवन रहेछ । ठाउँ बजारको बीचमा पर्ने, खाना खान होटलहरू नजिकै र कोठा पनि हावादार अनि फराकिला भएकाले हामीले यो ठाउँ ठीक ठान्यौं । आजको वास यहीँ हुने तय भयो ।

धर्मशालाको प्रबन्धक बृहो फरासिलो र सहयोगी रहेछ । मैले सोधें- ‘बाह्र वर्षअघि म यहाँ आएको थिएँ । त्यसपल्ट म यहाँको राणी सती धर्मशालामा वास बसेको थिएँ । त्यो धर्मशाला कतापट्टि पर्छ ?’

ऊ निकैवेर घोरियो । अन्त्यमा उसले भन्यो- ‘हेनोस् भाइ, कानपुर निकै ठूलो सहर हो र यहाँ लगभग सय-पचासवटा जति सानाठूला धर्मशाला छन् । म सबै धर्मशालाको नाम पनि जान्दिनँ तर राणी सती धर्मशाला अलिक नाम चलेकै हो । मैले यो नाम सुनेकै हुँ तर मैले तपाईंलाई कहानेर पर्छ भनेर ठ्याक्कै भन्नचाहिँ सकिनँ ।’

मैले उसलाई आफू सपरिवार यहाँ आउनाको उद्देश्य बताएँ- ‘हामी पतिपत्नी नेपालका स्कूलका शिक्षकहरू हौं । अहिले नेपालमा विजया दशमीको अवसर भएकाले पन्ध्रदिने बिदा छ । दसैं त हरेक वर्ष मानिएको हो, हाम्रो परिवारले यस वर्षको दसैं तपाईंको भारतका एकदुइटा महत्त्वपूर्ण सहर घुमेर मनाउने विचारले यता पसेका हौं । भोलिको दिन हामी

कानपुरका सबैभन्दा मुख्यमुख्य ठाउँ घुमेर आगरा पुग्न चाहन्छौं । भोलि एक बजेसम्ममा घुमिसकिने कानपुरका मुख्य ठाउँहरू केके हुन् ?'

म्यानेजर त मसँग रिसाएभैं गर्न थाल्यो । उसले ममाथि आफूभन्दा सानालाई गरिने प्रेमपूर्ण भौँक खन्यायो । ऊ करायो- 'भोलि एक दिन कानपुर घुम्ने रे ! एक दिनमा कानपुर घुमिन्छ कतै ? कानपुर त सत्तरी लाख मानिस बस्ने महानगर हो मास्टरसाहेब ! यो कुनै गाउँ हो र ? कमसे कम पाँच दिन यहाँ बस्नोस् । विजया दशमीको पावन अवसरमा यहाँ धुमधाम हुन्छ । तपाईं हाम्रो धुमधाममा भाग लिएर मीठो सम्झना बोकी घर फर्कनुपर्छ । कानपुरको दसहरा पर्व हिन्दूहरूको सान हो । भारतीय स्वतन्त्रता-सङ्ग्राम यसै सहरबाट सुरु भएको हो । मोतीलाल नेहरूलाई संसारले चिन्छ, उनी यसै सहरमा बसेर कहिले आगरा त कहिले इलाहाबादमा बकालती गर्थे । मोतीलाल, पण्डित जवाहरलाल र बापूजी यहाँ बस्थे । उनीहरू यिनै गल्लीगल्लीमा जनता उठाउँदै 'जागो भारतवासी !' भन्थे । यहाँ मोटरसाइकल, बन्दुक र छालाजुत्ताका विशाल फ्याक्टरी छन् । स्टील, फलाम, कपडा, सुती, अन्न र खेलौनाका लागि कानपुर भारतकै ठूलो सहर हो । तपाईंलाई यहाँका विश्वप्रसिद्ध हीराका गरगहना-पसलमात्र घुम्नका लागि एक दिन लाग्ला । बन्दुक फ्याक्टरी घुम्न पूरा एक दिन, मोटरसाइकल र कपडा र मिलमिसिनरी फ्याक्टरी घुम्न एक दिन, पार्क र अरू रमाइला ठाउँहरू घुम्न एक दिन । तपाईं त स्कूलको मास्टर हुनुहुँदो रहेछ, भारतको स्वतन्त्रतासङ्ग्राम विश्वप्रसिद्ध छ, यसको बारेमा कलेजमा पढ्नुभयो होला नै ।'

नेपालका मानिसले भारतीयहरूका घरेलु कथा पढिरहनुपर्दैन । हामीले आफूलाई पहिले राम्ररी चिनुपर्छ, अनि फुर्सत निकालेर छिमेकीलाई- म उसलाई यसो भन्न चाहन्छु, तर भनिनँ । चालीस लाखजति जनसङ्ख्या भएको कानपुरलाई ऊ सत्तरी लाखको सहर भन्दै थियो ।

तैपनि मैले बोल्न डर मान्नुपर्छ भन्ने थिएन, मैले भनें - 'अर्काको देशका सानातिना घटना जानिरहनु जरुरी छैन । तपाईंलाई नेपालको बारेमा के थाहा छ त ? मैले साइन्सबाट इन्टर गरें, पछि अङ्ग्रेजी र गणित विषय लिएर ग्रेजुएट भएँ, पोस्टग्रेजुएटमा अङ्ग्रेजी साहित्य पढें । अङ्ग्रेजीमा बढी ध्यान दिने गरेकाले मलाई विश्वको इतिहास कम थाहा छ । तैपनि रुचिवश पढेकाले मलाई भारतको इतिहास केही थाहा छ ।'

'शिक्षक हुँ भन्ने, विश्वको इतिहासचाहिँ थाहा छैन भन्ने... । भारतको बारेमा के थाहा छ ?' उसको भावमा ममाथि कडा आक्रमण देखियो । टुहुरे पर्यटनमा हिँडेका हामीलाई कुनै सानो बजारको स्कूलमा कखरा चिनाउने असहाय गरिब मास्टर, जीवनमा जिउने कला र संसारको रीत नबुझेको कच्चा मानुष भनेर उसले चिनिसकेको थियो । वास्तवमा त्यसको खुबी देखेर म छक्क पर्छु ।

मलाई आत्मरक्षा गर्न निकै मुस्किल पर्थ्यो । तैपनि म उसका अगाडि मूर्ख देखिन किन चाहन्छु र ! मैले भनें- 'हेर्नोस् म्यानेजरसाहेब ! म नेपाली हुँ र सचेत नेपाली हुनुको नाताले मैले भारत, चीन, भुटान, बङ्गलादेश, पाकिस्तान, इरान, अफगानिस्तान, सम्पूर्ण मध्यपूर्व, थुप्रै अफ्रिका, सिङ्गे युरोप, अमेरिकाको निकै इतिहास थाहा पाउनुपर्छ ।'

मबाट बोल्दाबोल्दै घमन्डी लवज निस्कइहाले । पानी पोखिए सोहोर्न मिल्छ, मुखबाट शब्द पोखिएपछि सोहोर्न मिल्दो रहेनछ । म आफ्ना शब्दमा ओकलिने घमन्डको कारण धेरै पटक दुःख पाइसकेको मान्छे, यहाँ फेरि फेला पर्छु । सोचेर बोल्ने र बोलेर सोच्नेका बीचको फरक यही त हो ।

'भारतको इतिहासचाहिँ तपाईंलाई के थाहा छ त ?' उसले मलाई खेदो गर्न छोडेन ।

उसको चर्को स्वरले म पनि तातिहालें क्यार, भनिदिउँ- 'म सिन्धु घाटीको सभ्यता, वैदिक आर्यहरूको इरान-अफगानिस्तानबाट पूर्व सँदै आएको कथा, सिन्धुमा वैदिक सभ्यताको विकास, पुराण, महाभारत, रामायण, दक्षिणका द्रविड राज्यहरूका कथा, भारतमा मुगल साम्राज्यको स्थापना, विकास, अङ्ग्रेजको भारत आगमन, इस्ट इन्डिया कम्पनी र कलकत्ता सहरको विकास, अङ्ग्रेजहरूले क्रमशः भारत कब्जा गरेको कहानी सबै मिलाएर थोरबहुत भन्न सक्छु ।'

म्यानेजरको आँखामा मप्रतिको धारणा अलिकति बदलिएको देखियो । म भन्दै गएँ- 'मेरा पितापुर्खाहरू १२४४ को विक्रमीमा पौडीगढवालबाट नेपालतर्फ गाँस, वास र सुरक्षा खोज्दै पसेका हुन्, पौडी मूल थलो हुनाले हाम्रो थर पौडेल भएको । तपाईंलाई भनिहालूँ ममा भारतको सामान्यज्ञान एउटा सामान्य भारतीयमा जति भन्ने होला । मैले सामान्यज्ञानसम्बन्धी दुइटा किताब लेखेको छु भने भारत, चीन र भुटानसम्बन्धी सामान्यज्ञानका कार्यक्रम चलाएको छु । म भारतको स्वतन्त्रतासङ्ग्रामको कुरा पनि गर्न सक्छु । शिवाजी, लखनऊको रेजिडेन्सीको कहानी, रानी लक्ष्मीबाई र भारखण्डका सन्थालहरूले गरेका अङ्ग्रेजविरुद्धका लडाइँ भन्न सक्छु । मलाई मिजोरम, नागाल्यान्ड, मेघालय, आसाम, अरुणाचलप्रदेश, सिक्किम र भारखण्ड, उत्तराञ्चल, पन्जाब र भारतका विभिन्न प्रान्तका इतिहास, राजनीति, भाषा, संस्कृति, भूगोलजस्ता विषयमा रुचि पनि छ । म भारतबाट निस्कने फ्रन्टलाइन, आउटलुक जस्ता खबरपत्रिकाहरूको

नियमित-अनियमित पाठक हुँ । म हिन्दी साहित्यका मूर्धन्य साहित्यकारको पाठक हुँ भने कादम्बिनी र सरिताजस्ता साहित्यप्रधान पत्रिकाको पनि म पाठक हुँ । मैले भारतका केही ठूला नेता र साहित्यकारका आत्मकहानी र जीवनी पढ्न पाएको छु ।

आसाम, पश्चिम बङ्गाल, बिहार, उत्तरप्रदेशजस्ता घना बस्ती भएका भारतीय राज्यको मैले थोरबहुत भ्रमण गरेको छु । मैले हिन्दी भाषाका चारपाँच सय फिल्म हेरेको, हजारौं हिन्दी गीत सुनेको, भारतका चर्चित सिनेकर्मी, नेता, वैज्ञानिक र उद्योगीव्यापारीहरूको बारेमा जानकारी राख्ने गरेको छु । यीबाहेक केरला, उडिसा, पन्जाब, काश्मिर, महाराष्ट्र, दिल्ली, राजस्थानलगायतका अनेक प्रान्तका भारतीयहरूसँग सङ्गत पनि गरेको छु भनेर भन्नूभन्नू भइरहेको थियो ।

उसले सोध्यो- ‘कानपुरको बारेमा चाहिँ कति थाहा छ नि ?’

म बिचरालाई के थाहा ! कमसे कम यसपल्ट यता पनि आउँदै छौं भन्ने थाहा भएको भए अलिअलि सूचना बटुल्ने थिएँ । तैपनि जानेको डराईडराई भनिदिएँ- ‘सन् १८५७ को विद्रोहमा कानपुरमा राजा नाना साहेबको नेतृत्वमा सयौं अङ्ग्रेजहरूलाई भारतीयहरूले घाट उतारिदिएका थिए भन्ने पढेको सम्म हुँ । भारतीय सिपाही विद्रोह र यहाँको बिबीघरको नरसंहारले बेलायतीहरूको ढाड भाँचेको थियो । झाँसीकी रानी लक्ष्मीबाईको वीरताको कहानीमा कानपुरको पनि प्रसङ्ग आउँछ । जवाहरलाल नेहरूको आत्मवृत्तान्तमा कानपुर र वरपरका ग्रामीण किसानहरूको जागरण तथा विद्रोहको लामो वर्णन पनि पढेको छु ।’ मलाई त्यस सिपाही विद्रोहमा बेलायतीहरूले नेपालीको मद्दत नपाएको भए उसबेलै भारत नछाडी धर पाउने थिएनन् भन्न मन लागेन । मेरा अगाडि एउटा देशभक्त भारतीय जमेर बसिरहेको थियो ।

सीताले कोठाबाटै हाम्रा गफ सुनिछन् । उनले छेउमा आएर मलाई कोट्याइन् । उनका आँखा भन्दै थिए- ‘त धेरै बोलिस् । किन चर्कीचर्की बोल्नुपरेको यस पराई मुलुकमा पनि ? घाँटी यस्तो खराब छ, डाक्टरले नबोल्नु भनेको छ तर तँ जहाँ गए पनि कुर्लीकुर्ली आफ्नै बखान गर्छस् । आफूले काम गरेको संस्था राम्रो, आफ्ना साथी असल र विद्वान्, जुन विषयमा पनि आफूले निकै जानेको छु भन्छस् । तँलाई दुनियाँले दुई पैसाको पनि गन्दैन, बुझिस् ? अब राजनीतिका कुरा निकाल्ने होला- नेपालमा राजाले सत्ता हातमा लिएर गल्ली गरे, अब राजतन्त्रको अन्त्य अवश्यम्भावी छ आदि । के मतलब छ यी भारतीयलाई तेरा कुराको ? के जित्छस् ? के पाउँछस् ?’

म्यानेजरको स्वर बदलियो । उसले भन्यो- ‘हामी यहाँकाले थाहा पाउने पनि यति त हो, हामीले थाहा पाउने पनि तिनै किताबबाट त हो । मास्टरजी, तपाईंलाई यति धेरै थाहा रहेछ, अनि किन कानपुरको यात्रा गर्न एक दिन मात्रै ? कानपुर कुनै गाउँले बजार त होइन । कारमा चढेर दिनभर गल्ली-गल्ली फन्का लगाए पनि एकै दिनमा त सक्नुहुन्न ।’

ऊ अब मलाई कानपुरमाहात्म्य सुनाउन थाल्यो । धेरैबेर आफ्ना कुरा राखिसकेपछि अन्त्यमा म्यानेजरले भन्यो- ‘मास्टरजी ! कानपुरजति ठूलो औद्योगिक सहर दक्षिण एसियामै अर्को छैन । गङ्गाकिनारको यो सहर देवभूमि पनि हो । त्यसो भएकाले यहाँ घुम्न लायक ठाउँ अनगिन्ती छन् ।’

कानपुरलाई त उसले बढाउँदैबढाउँदै साङ्घाईभन्दा ठूलो भन्छ कि भन्ने मैले ठानें । मैले विषय बदल्दै भनँ- ‘कानपुरका लागि हामीसँग एक दिनमात्र छ । यस एक दिनको सदुपयोग हुने गरी यात्राको योजना बनाउन मद्दत गर्नुहोस् न ।’

उसले भन्यो- ‘हेर्नोस् मास्टरजी ! मेरो काम तपाईंलाई अनुरोध गर्ने हो । मैले आफ्नो काम गरें । तर भोलि एक दिन मात्र घुम्ने हो भने मेरो के लाग्छ र, यसो गर्नुस् : भोलि यहाँबाट सबैरे सोभै चिडियाघर हेर्न जानुहोस्, चिडियाघर हेरिसकेपछि बिठुर जानुहोस्, बिठुरबाट फर्केर जेके टेम्पल पुग्नुहोस्, जेके टेम्पलमा साँझको फिलिमिली हेरिसकेर अन्त्यमा मोती फिल पनि पुग्नुहोस् । मोतीफिलको फिलिमिलीपछि यहीं वास बस्न आइपुग्नुहोस् ।’

‘यति यात्रा सक्न कति समय लाग्ला त ?’

‘बिहान तपाईंहरू चियानास्ता गरिसकेर साढे छ बजे निस्कनुहोस् । आफ्ना सामान यहीं छाड्नुहोस् । यहाँबाट फूलबाग पुग्नुहोस्, त्यहाँबाट बडेचौराहा पुग्नुहोस् । बडेचौराहाबाट चिडियाघर जाने टेम्पो पाइन्छ । त्यहाँ पुग्दा आठ बज्ला । चिडियाघर हेर्दा बाह्र बज्ला । त्यसपछि बाहिर निस्केर खानपिन गर्नुहोस् । खानपिनपछि कल्याणपुर जाने रिक्सा वा टेम्पो पक्रनुहोस् । कल्याणपुरबाट सोभै बिठुर जाने बस वा टेम्पो पाइन्छ । बिठुर पुग्दा दुई बज्ला । दुई बजे पुगेमा एक घण्टा त्यतै अल्मलिए हुन्छ । बिठुरमा खाजा खाएर फर्की पुनः यतै आउनुहोस् । टेम्पोमा आफू जेके मन्दिर जाने बताउनुहोस् । उसले कहाँ उत्रनुपर्ने हो उतारिदिन्छ, त्यसपछि रिक्सा पक्रेर जेके मन्दिर हेर्नुहोस् । जेके मन्दिरमा बेलुकीपख बडो मनमोहक जमघट देख्न पाइन्छ । पाँच बजेसम्म जेके मन्दिरमा रमाउनुहोस् । जेके मन्दिरबाट निस्केर रिक्सा चढी मोतीफिल लाग्नुहोस् । मोतीफिलको सायंकालीन फिलिमिली अद्वितीय हुन्छ, एक घण्टा मोतीफिलमा रमाएपछि पुनः यहीं आउनुहोस् । नौ बजे आइपुग्नुहुनेछ । यहीं आएर रातको खाना यतै कतै लिनुहोस् र आराम गर्नुहोस् । म के भनू ?’

म कागजमा म्यानेजरले बताइदिएको यात्राको नक्सा बनाउन थाले । अलमलिँदा म्यानेजरले सुधारिदिन्यो । भोलिको दिन कसो गर्ने भन्ने टुङ्गो लागेपछि म कोठातिर लागें । म्यानेजर पनि आफ्नो शयनकक्षतिर लाग्यो । त्यस दिन हामी बसेको धर्मशालामा बीस-तीसजनाभन्दा बढी मानिस वास बस्न आएको देखिएन । पाँचतले भवनको सिरानतलामा व्यवस्थापकको आवास र भुइँतलाको एक कोठामा एकजना सेवकको वास रहेछन् । सेवक एकैजना भए पनि धर्मशालाको सरसफाइ, बिजुली र अन्य सामानको सम्भार राम्ररी भएको रहेछ ।

भुइँतलामा दसवटा जति कोठा र कोठाहरूको बीचमा एउटा भलिबल खेलन भन्ने पुग्ने खुला ठाउँ, भुइँतलाको खुल्ला भएको ठाउँमाथि फलामे जाली राखेको । माथिल्लो तलामा मानिस हिँडडुल गर्दा धूलो भर्ने भएकाले सायद बिहेबटुलो आदि गर्दा माथिल्ला तलामा भुइँमा गलैँचा ओछ्याउनुपर्दो हो । तेस्रो र चौथो तलामाथि बीचको आकाश खुला थियो । सबै कोठा अत्यन्त राम्रा र आधुनिक पाराका, ट्वाइलेट-बाथरूमहरूको सङ्ख्या पनि मनगो र पानीको दुःख नहुने भएकाले हामीजस्ता आयवालाहरूका लागि यो राम्रो आश्रयस्थल मान्नुपर्छ । तर बिहार र उत्तरप्रदेशमा रातमा कहिलेकाहीँ लामो समयसम्म बिजुली निभ्ने भएकाले गर्मीका समयमा कुलर नभएको यस घरमा वास बस्न अलि कठिन पर्ने हुन्छ ।

हामी दोस्रो तलाको सडकपट्टिको कोठामा बस्ने भयौँ । हामी गएका बेलामा धन्न बिजुली निभेन, रातभर पड्खा चलेकाले शीतल भइरह्यो ।

कानपुरमा खाना सस्तो । हामीले छेउको एउटा सानो होटलमा तन्दुरीरोटी, दाल, तरकारी, अचार र दही खायौँ । खाना राम्रो र मीठो मात्र होइन त्यतिसारो व्यस्त होटलका कर्मचारी पनि कति रमाइला ! हामीले आफ्नै छरछिमेकको घरमा खाएभैं गरेर खाना खान पायौँ । सुत्दा लगभग एघार बजेको थियो । कानपुरको त्यो गल्ली त्यतिबेला पनि उत्तिकै भीडभाडले भरिएको थियो । राती म दुई बजेतिर उठेर बाहिर बरन्डामा निस्कें । तल होटलमा मानिसहरू भीडभाड गर्दै खाइरहेका थिए । म फेरि साढे तीन बजेतिर उठें, होटलतिर चिहाएको त मानिसहरू साँझका भैं खानपिनमा व्यस्त !

मैले छोरीहरू र सीतालाई उठाएर कानपुरको सहरी व्यस्तता देखाएँ । मलाई एकखाले पीर पर्न गयो । काठमाडौँमा साँझको सातआठ बजिसक्ता मानिसहरू आआफ्ना घरभित्र घुसिसकछन् । सडक शून्य र डरलाग्दो हुन्छ । यता कानपुरमा रातको साढे तीन बजे पनि दिनका भैं सडक भरिभराउ छ, होटल र पसलहरू आ-आफ्ना काममा छन् । अरूले सय वर्षमा नगरेको काम हामीले दस वर्षमा गरेर उनीहरूको उन्नतिलाई भेटाउनुपर्नेमा अरू दिनको चौबीस घण्टा काम गरिरहेको बेला हामीचाहिँ छ घण्टा गरेर कहिले उनीहरूलाई भेट्ने ?

२३. भारत हिन्दू राज्य घोषित हुनसक्छ

२०६२ साल असोज २३ गते आइतबारको बिहान हामी कानपुरको नयागन्ज चौराहास्थित कनौडिया धर्मशालामा बिउँभियौँ । अगिल्लो रात इलाहाबादमा बडो कष्टका साथ काट्नुपरेको र बिहानदेखि प्रयाग, आनन्दभवनजस्ता ठूलाठूला ठाउँ घुमेर पनि घण्टौँ रेलयात्रा गरेपछि कानपुर जङ्क्सनको अर्को सुखान्त नाटक समापन गरेकाले थाक्नु थाकिएको थियो । बिहान अलि निकैबेरसम्म सुतियो । आजको रात भने बडो आरामसँग बित्यो । बिहान म्यानेजरले बताएअनुसार चियानास्ता गर्नपट्टि लाग्नुपर्नेमा हामी त्यसै हिँड्न ठीक पर्यौँ । पोकापुन्तुरा पनि बोकेरै हिँड्यौँ ।

‘भरसक यतै आउनेछौँ, कुनै प्रतिकूलता भएमा हामी यता नआई सोभैं आगरा लाग्नेछौँ । उताबाट फर्किँदा कानपुर भएरै फर्कन्छौँ होला, त्यसो भएमा हामी यहीं वास बस्न आउने प्रयास गर्नेछौँ ।’ सीताले म्यानेजरलाई भनिन् ।

हामी रिक्सा लिनुभन्दा कानपुरे मर्निङ वाक गर्न हौसिएका थियौँ । हामी बसेदेखि उत्तर लागेपछि तिरपालका दोकान देखिन थाले । हरेक घर कम्तीमा चारतले थियो र प्रत्येक घरको डिजाइन लगभग उस्तै थियो । सहरका घर कस्ता हुन्छन् भन्ने नमुना हेर्न त्यहाँ पुग्नुपर्छ । हामी त इटहरी, वालिङ र धुलिखेललाई पनि सहर भन्न खोज्छौँ ! तिरपालका दोकान सडकका दुवैतर्फका दुई तलामा थिए । बिहान छ नबजीकन निस्केकाले हामीले खुला दोकानहरू देख्न नपाए पनि साइनबोर्डबाटै यी तिरपालदोकानहरू कत्रा हुन् भन्ने अनुमान गर्न सक्थ्यौँ । एउटा गल्लीमा पसेको त निकै बेर हिँडे पनि ज्वेलरहरूका दोकान नसकिने जस्तो लाग्ने । सुनचाँदीका गहना भन्दा पनि हीरा, पन्ना, मुगा, मोतीका गहना बनाउने र व्यापारीहरूको अचम्मलाग्दो गल्ली र पसलैपसलको कहिल्यै नटुङ्गिने क्रम देखेर हामी त दड्कास !

बल्लबल्ल फूलबाग पुगियो, बाटो त निकै लाग्यो । बाफ रे ! दिउँसो यो ठाउँमा कति भीडभाड हुँदो हो ! फूलबाग पुगेर हेर्दा यस्तो लाग्यो मानौँ संसारको केन्द्र कानपुर नै हो र कानपुरको केन्द्र यही फूलबाग हो । बिहानको आधा उज्यालो र बिजुलीको आधा उज्यालोले फूलबागलाई कल्पनातीत सुन्दर बनाइरहेको थियो । मर्निङ वाकमा हिँडेका युवायुवतीहरूको ताँती रहरलाग्दो थियो । यिनैले त हो सहरहरूलाई जवान बनाउने !

मैले तरुनीहरूको एक हूलमाथि आँखा डुलाउँदै सीतालाई भनें- 'मानिस सहर पसेपछि किन कहिल्यै गाउँ फर्कन मान्दैन, थाहा छ ?' मनभित्रको पुरुष कुनामा कुनै अपरिभाषित, अचेतन लोभ एकाबिहानै पैदा हुन लागेको थियो ।

मेरो भाव पढ्नमा सीता सधैं माहिर, उनले ममाथि चिसो पानी खन्याइन्- 'सहर बाँच्न लायक हुनाको कारण उ : त्यस्ता लोभलाग्दा युवकहरू हुन् । यिनको दर्शन पाउन मात्र पनि मानिसले सह्रै पस्नुपर्ने हुन्छ ।' शारीरिक व्यायामले गठिलो ज्यान बनाएका लगभग अर्धनग्न युवाहरूको परेडतर्फ उनका आँखा डोरिएका थिए ।

'युवाहरूभन्दा त युवतीहरू कति हो कति राम्रा देखिन्छन् ।' मैले ढिपी गरें ।

फराकिलो सडकमा हिँडाइ निकै ढिलो देखिने । हामी हिँड्दै थियौँ र हाम्रा आँखा सौन्दर्यशास्त्रीय विषयमा पस्दै थिए । सुन्दरता के हो र कसरी मस्तिष्कले वस्तुलाई सुन्दर वा कुरूप ठहर्‍याउँछ भन्ने विषयमा मेरो कुनै अध्ययन छैन । अब कानपुरको यस बिहानीमा सुन्दरताप्रतिको सन्तुलित नजर निर्माण गर्न सीताबाट सहयोग पाइने देखियो ।

'अहिले तपाईंको मस्तिष्कमा भएको पुरुष रासायनिक तत्त्व बोल्दै छ । एक छिन त्यस रसायनलाई सम्हालेर राख्नुहोस् । सत्य पत्ता लागिहाल्छ ।'

'कसरी ?'

'कसरी भन्ने अब ? कुखुरा, ढुकुर, परेवा र अरू चराहरूका भाले सुन्दर देखिन्छन् कि पोथी ? फूलको भाले भागको सुन्दरता राम्रो कि पोथी भागको ? राँगो सुन्दर कि भैंसी ? गाई सुन्दर कि गोरु ? भाले पोथीमा आकर्षित हुनु र पोथीलाई भाले राम्रो लाग्नु त हर्मोनको चलाखी न हो, तर मस्तिष्कलाई एकैछिन यौनमुक्त अवस्थामा राखेर हेर्ने हो भने सामान्यतया पोथी भद्दा, फुस्रो, सानो, रोगी र कमजोर देखिन्छ, चाहे जीवजन्तु, चराचुरुङ्गी हुन् वा मानिस....! जीवहरूमा पुरुषजाति पूर्ण, छरितो, भर पर्न लायक र सुन्दर हुन्छ ।'

सुन्दरताको स्वस्थ र गैरलैङ्गिक दृष्टिकोण निर्माण गर्नमा भन्दा पनि सीतालाई कुतर्क गरेरै भए पनि हराउन म मथिङ्गल खियाइरहेको थिएँ । छोरीहरू हाम्रा कुराबाट पर थिए र उनीहरू जहाँ थिए मन पनि त्यहीँ चराउँथे । फूलबागको मनोहारी बिहानीमा उनीहरूले भेटेको आनन्द ईर्ष्यालाग्दो थियो ।

'तिमीलाई खोज्न गाउँ पस्नुपर्‍यो नि !' म कुराको यस त्यान्द्रोबाट कुनै किनारमा उत्र्न खोज्दै थिएँ ।

'तर तपाईंलाई त काठमाडौँमा मात्र भेट्न सकियो !'

जति लिँडेढिपी गरे पनि अन्त्यमा मैले हारें । हाम्रो बिहेअघि म काठमाडौँको कोटेश्वरमा बस्थें र सीता मोरङको सिजुवामा थिइन् ।

स्कूलकलेजका छात्रछात्राहरू, सेना वा पुलिसमा प्रवेश गरी देशसेवा गर्न इच्छुक हड्ढाकट्टा केटाहरू, दिनभरि पसलमा बस्ताबस्ता कुँजिन लागेका खुट्टाको भरमा हिँडेका अधबैँसे बेपारीहरू, बूढाबूढीहरू र कुनै हतारको काम परेर हिँड्नेहरू सडकमा थिए । कोही प्यासेन्जर पाइन्छ कि भनेर एकाबिहानै सडकमा निस्केका रिक्सावालहरू घण्टी बजाउँदै अघि बढ्थे ।

फूलबागमा रमाएर टहल्न हामीलाई योजनाले दिएन । हामी रिक्सा पक्रेर बडेचौराहा पुग्यौँ । बडेचौराहामा टेम्पो पक्रेर चिडियाघर पुग्यौँ । चिडियाघर खुल्ने बेला भएको थिएन । हामी वरिपरिको दृश्यमा रमाएर घुमिरह्यौँ । अलिकति फुर्सत मिलेकाले मैले कृष्णजीलाई फोन गरें ।

कृष्ण भट्टराईजी हामी डेरा बसेकै घरमा बस्ने नेपाल टेलिभिजनका सुनसरी संवाददाता हुनुहुन्छ । हामी अलगअलग पेसामा लागेका सधैं मिल्ने छिमेकी र साथी भएका छौँ । हामी कानपुरमा कुशलतापूर्वक घुमिरहेको कुरा उहाँलाई बताएमा आफन्त र साथीभाइलाई हाम्रो बारेमा जानकारी लिन सजिलो हुने भएकाले मैले उहाँलाई फोन गर्नु ठीक हुन्थ्यो । मैले कृष्णजीलाई इटहरा घरमा दसैंमा हामी आइपुग्न अलिक ढिलो हुन्छ जस्तो लागेर खबर गरिदिन अनुरोध पनि गरें । इटहराको घरमा खबर गर्न सोमवारेको पीसीओमा फोन गर्नुपर्‍थ्यो । पीसीओमा हुने भीडले खबर टिपाउने पालै पाइँदैनथ्यो । त्यो खबर घर पुर्‍याएको बीस रुपियाँ तिर्नुपर्‍थ्यो ।

त्यसपछि हामीले बिहानको खाजाभुजा लिनु ठीक ठान्यौं । हामी एउटा सानो होटलअगाडि पुग्यौं । होटलमा तात्तातो जिलेबी पाक्दै रहेछ । छोरीहरूले स्वाद मानेर अघाउँजी जिलेबी खाए । उनीहरूले दही पनि खान मन गरे । त्यस होटलमा भैंसीको दूधको बाक्लो दही पाइँदो रहेछ । स्थानीय पसले र ग्राहकहरू तँछाडुमछाडु गर्दै त्यहाँ दही किन्दा रहेछन् । हुन त बिहार र उत्तरप्रदेशका धेरैजसो सहरमा दही स्वादका साथ खाइन्छ र सस्तै पनि पाइन्छ ।

पूजाले मुखभरि दही पादै भनी- ‘भगवान् कृष्णले त्यसै चोरेका हुन् र दही !’

अनुजाको मनचाहिँ दहीमा भन्दा दूधमा रमाउँछ ।

सीताले भनिन्- ‘कृष्णजीले दही चोरेको ठाउँ पनि हेर्न पाउनेछौ ।’

अनुजाले दाहिने हात हल्लाउँदै भनी- ‘नजाने, दिदीले चोर्न सक्नुभयो भने...?’ अनुजा साह्रै रहस्यमयी छे । कम बोल्ने मानिस अझ सुन्दर र रहस्यपूर्ण लाग्छ मलाई । भाव अलिकति लुकाएकै राम्रो, जसरी कपडाभित्र लुकाई शारीरिक रहस्यको रक्षा गरिन्छ ।

हामी चिडियाघर खुल्ने बेलासम्म आफ्नो रुचिअनुसारका खाजाभुजा गरेर सोही होटलमा आनन्दसँग बस्यौं । आठ बज्यो । चिडियाघरअगाडि मानिसको चहलपहल सुरु भयो । हामी आफ्ना भोलाकुटुरा बोकेर मूल गेटमा पुग्यौं । चिडियाघर घुम्नुजेल हामीले भोला त्यहीं बिसाउन पाए हुन्थ्यो भन्ने लागेर टिकटघरमा कर्मचारीलाई भोला राखिदिन अनुरोध गर्थौं ।

भारतीय सरकारी कर्मचारी नेपालका जस्तै त हुन्, के सुन्थे ! सर्भिस अर्थात् सेवा भन्ने शब्दको अर्थ उनीहरूको भाषामा शासन हो । हामी भोला बोकीबोकी चिडियाखाना घुम्न बाध्य भयौं । कानपुरको चिडियाघर जाउलाखेलको चिडियाखानाजस्तो सानो होइन, त्यो राम्ररी घुमिसक्न पूरा एक दिन लाग्ला । चिडियाघरमा केटाकेटीका लागि खेल्ने ठाउँहरू, चराचुरुङ्गी, शाकाहारी र मांसाहारी जन्तुहरू, जलजन्तुहरू, माछा, सर्पवर्ग र सानाठूला अनेक प्रकारका प्राणीहरूका लागि यहाँ व्यवस्थित ठाउँ बनाइएको छ । हरेक ठाउँ र जन्तु सीता र छोरीहरूका लागि नयाँ हुन्थे । म पनि उत्तिकै रमाएको थिएँ । हामीले हात्तीको छेउमा उभिएर, जेब्रा, भालु आदि जन्तुका नजिकबाट र केटाकेटी खेल्ने ठाउँमा निकैवटा फोटा खिँच्यौं । सबैतिर घुमिसक्ने कुरै थिएन, बाह्र बजेतिर हामी त्यहाँबाट निस्क्यौं ।

अब दिनको तातो घाममा सेकिनु बाँकी थियो । मलाई अलिअलि जरो आइरहेको थियो र सिटामोलका गोली खाँदै हिँडिरहेको थिएँ । छोरीहरू पनि अलिअलि साँक्कसुँक्क गरिरहेका थिए । रुघाले सबैलाई समातिरहेको भए पनि हामीले यात्राको रमाइलो लिन छाडेका थिएनौं । मैले त्यस दिनको हाम्रो कार्यसूची हेर्ने । अब खानपिनको समय थियो ।

तर चिडियाघरअगाडिका होटल निकै साना भएकाले त्यहाँ खानपिनको कुनै चित्तबुझ्दो व्यवस्था होला जस्तो थिएन ।

हामी रिक्सा पक्रेर कल्याणपुरतिर लाग्यौं । अलिक पर एउटा स-सानो चोक आउँदो रहेछ । त्यहीँबाट कल्याणपुरका लागि बस पक्रनु ठीक हुन्छ भनेर मानिसहरूले भने । नजिकैको एउटा चल्तीको होटलमा पसेर मजासँग दालभात खायौं । घरबाट हिँडेदेखि यता दालभात खान यतिको अनुकूलता मिलिरहेको थिएन ।

कल्याणपुर कानपुरकै एक उपनगर रहेछ । यो सहर अत्यन्त अव्यवस्थित तर तीव्रगतिमा निर्माण भइरहेको देखियो । कल्याणपुरबाट बिठुर जान अर्को टेम्पो पक्रनुपर्ने रहेछ । यस्तै दुई-अढाई बजेको हुँदो हो, हामी बिठुर पुग्यौं ।

हामी नेपालको **भैंसालोटनलाई** लवकुश जन्मभूमि मान्छौं । त्यहीँ वाल्मीकिको मठ छ । देवघाटनेर सीता अग्निपरीक्षामा भूगर्भ-प्रवेश भएको मानिने ठाउँ छ । तर भारतीयहरू बिठुरलाई लवकुश जन्मभूमि मान्दा रहेछन् । लवकुशको जन्म भएको भनिएको ठाउँमा मन्दिर बनाइएको रहेछ । लवकुशले प्रयोग गर्ने गरेको भनिएको इनार पनि रहेछ । पाठशाला, इनार र वरिपरिका फलैँचा, चौतारा, मन्दिर र भवनहरू सबै अत्यन्त पुराना देखिन्छन् । मुख्य मन्दिर अत्यन्त अग्लो ठाउँमा छ । मन्दिरको परिसरबाट धेरै परपरसम्म देखिन्छ । परपरसम्म अनेक देवदेवीका पुराना मन्दिरहरू देखिन्छन् ।

सीताले भनिन्- ‘थाकिएछ । ढाड धेरै दुख्यो ।’

पीपलको रूखमुनिको छाया परेको चौरमा उनी तन्ना ओछ्याएर पल्टिन् । म उनलाई त्यहीँ आराम गर्न दिएर पण्डाहरू भएतिर लागें ।

मैले एकजना पण्डालाई सोधें- ‘यी मन्दिरहरू केकेका हुन् ?’

पण्डाले भन्यो- 'बाबूजी, बिठुरमा यस्ता अनेक मठमन्दिर छन् । सबैको बारेमा जानेर साध्य हुन्न । सबैभन्दा मुख्य मन्दिर यही हो, अरू विष्णु, शिव र देवदेवीहरूका अनगिन्ती मन्दिर हेरेर तपाईंहरूजस्ता टाढाका यात्रुका लागि साध्य हुन्न । तर एक ठाउँ अवश्य जानुहोला । नजिकै साईबाबाको ठूलो मन्दिर छ । उत्तर भारतकै सबैभन्दा ठूलो साईकेन्द्र हो त्यो । अवश्य हेर्नुहोला ।'

'यहाँबाट कति टाढा छ ? त्यहाँ जान बस वा ट्याक्सी के पाइन्छन् ?'

'टाढै छ नि ! बस वा टेम्पो त पाइँदैन, कानपुरदेखि वा कल्याणपुरदेखि ट्याक्सी ल्याउन सकिन्छ ।'

'हामीलाई आज कानपुर पुग्नु छ । भोलि बिहान त हामी आगरातिर लागिहाल्छौं । ताजमहल हेर्न मन छ ।'

'किन हेर्नुप्यो त्यो मुसलमानहरूको तीर्थस्थल तपाईं-हामीले ?'

'त्यो मुसलमानहरूका लागि तीर्थस्थल होला, हाम्रा लागि त्यो प्रेम र कलाको अनुपम नमुना हो ।'

पण्डा मेरा कुराले त्यति खुसी देखिएन । उसले मन अलि मलिनो पारेको प्रस्ट देखिन्थ्यो । ऊ मलाई पटकपटक यहाँसम्म आइसकेपछि कमसं कम एक दिन बसेर साई केन्द्र हेरेर मात्र जान अनुरोध गरिरहेको थियो । उसले वरपर देखिने अलिक ठूला आकारका मन्दिरहरूका बारेमा बतायो । निकै परपरसम्म मन्दिरका गजुरहरू खडा देखिन्थे ।

बिठुर गङ्गाकिनारको बस्ती रहेछ । उत्तरपट्टि विशाल फैलावटमा गङ्गानदी देखिन्थ्यो । हामी गङ्गासम्म जान चाहन्थ्यौं । गङ्गाको विशाल फाँट, परपरसम्म काँसघारी र नदीको फैलावटले श्रद्धा र आनन्द भन्दा पनि भय बढी पैदा गर्थ्यो । यस्तो विशाल नदीमा बाढी आएर किनार कटान गर्न थाल्यो भने ! तर पनि जुगौंदेखि यो नदी शान्तिपूर्वक आफ्नो स्थानमा बहिरहेको छ ।

धन्न बिठुर आइएछ । हामी निकैबेर मन्दिरनेरको चउरमा पल्टियौं । अलि आराम भएपछि हामी फर्कनै पर्थ्यौं । बिठुर मन्दिरपरिसर शान्त र सुरम्य ठाउँ हो । कानपुरबाट निकै टाढाको गाउँ भए पनि कानपुरेहरू यहाँ मनगो आउजाउ गर्दा रहेछन् । कानपुरेहरू निजी सवारी साधन हुनेले निजी गाडीमा, नहुनेले रिजर्भ ट्याक्सीमा भए पनि आइरहने गर्दा रहेछन् । भारतीयहरू धार्मिक पर्यटनका लागि मरिहत्ते गर्छन् ।

बिठुरमा लवकुशले पढेको भनिएको पाठशाला अझै रहेछ । उक्त पाठशालामा लवकुशले वाल्मीकि ऋषिबाट शिक्षा पाएका थिए रे । पाठशालामा शिवजी, गणेश र सरस्वतीमाताका मूर्तिहरू राखिएका विभिन्न विशिष्ट कक्ष रहेछन् । पूजा र अनुजालाई त्यहाँका पण्डितहरूले देवीदेवताको दर्शन गर्न भने ।

उनीहरूले यसो भने- 'बिटिया ! यहाँ दर्शन करके देवीदेवता से ज्ञान मागो । यहाँ भित्री मन से फूल चढाओ और विद्या मागो । यहाँ आकर मागने से विद्या पाओगे और नेपाल में जाकर परीक्षा में प्रथम होंगे ।'

छोरीहरूले धेरै भक्तिका साथ भगवान्को दर्शन गरे । हामी त्यहाँका पुरातात्विक महत्त्वका भवनहरू र पर्खालहरू हेर्दै बाहिर निस्क्यौं । त्यहाँ मठको गुठी र राज्यप्रदत्त भत्ता खाएर अनेक शास्त्रज्ञ पण्डितहरू बस्ता रहेछन् । मैले एकछिन तिनका ज्ञानगुनका कुरा सुनें । तिनीहरू प्राचीन शास्त्रहरूका ज्ञाता मात्र होइन रहेछन्, आजका परिवर्तनहरूलाई आफ्ना दृष्टिले हेरिरहेका प्रखर हिन्दूवादी गुरुहरूसमेत रहेछन् । उनीहरू नेपालका घटनाक्रमसँग पनि परिचित थिए । उनीहरू पनि मैले कटिहारबाट बस चढ्दा भेटेको सहयात्रीकै विचारका रहेछन् । भारतीय सरकारमात्र होइन निकै भारतीय सर्वसाधारण पनि नेपालमा राजा रहनुमा सबैको हित देख्ता रहेछन् । धेरै हिन्दू भारतीयहरू नेपालमा राजा रहनुमा आफ्नो कल्याण देख्ता रहेछन् ।

भारतको इतिहास भनेको दासता र मुक्तिको लडाइँको इतिहास हो, परिचय-स्थापनाको लडाइँको कथा हो । भारतवासीको अठ्ठासी प्रतिशत सङ्ख्या हिन्दू छ तर त्यत्रो विशाल हिन्दू जनसङ्ख्या लामो समयदेखि परिचयविहीन भएर कहिले मुसलमानहरूबाट शासित छ त कहिले इसाईहरूबाट शोषित छ । स्वशासनको स्वाद पनि भारतीयहरूका लागि ठर्रो नै भइरहेको छ । विशाल भारत टुक्रेर पाकिस्तान र बङ्गलादेश त अलग भए नै, काश्मिर, नागाल्यान्ड र अन्य कतिपय राज्यहरूमा विभाजनको लडाइँ छिटपुट रूपमा चलिरहेकै छ । विशाल भारतवर्ष अर्थात् हिन्दूहरूको विशाल क्षेत्रका अफगानिस्तान, बर्मा, भुटान, तिब्बत र अन्य भूभागहरू हिन्दू सभ्यताको हातबाट फुत्किसके । थाईल्यान्ड, कम्बोडिया, भियतनाम, सिङ्गापुर, मलेसिया, इन्डोनेसिया र फिलिपिन्ससमेत कुनै समय सिङ्गो भारतवर्षका एक हिस्सा थिए, आज ती धेरै टाढा पुगिसकेका छन् । भारतवर्षको विशाल सभ्यता खुम्चंदैखुम्चंदै गएर आज भारत एकलैले विश्वका सामु प्रस्तुत गर्नुपरेको छ । नेपाल राजासहितको एक हिन्दू राज्य रहिरहे भारतीय हिन्दूहरूका लागि परिचयको सङ्कट (Identity Crisis) कम पर्ने हुन्छ ।

ती पण्डितहरूले मसँग माओवादीहरूका माग र तिनका विचारको वैज्ञानिकता, नेपाली जनताको अभिमत र शान्तिपूर्ण राजनीति गरिरहेका दलहरूका गतिविधि अनि वर्तमान परिस्थितिमाथिका दृष्टिकोण प्रस्तुत गर्न भने । नेपालमा राजा सक्रिय भएको बेला छ, मोबाइल फोनमा समेत प्रतिबन्ध लागेको समय छ र राजा एकलै हिँड्ने रहर गर्दै कस्सिएर आफ्ना दुईचार सय परम्परागत भक्तहरूको आडमा शासन गर्ने दुराशा पालेको बेला छ भने सम्पूर्ण नेपाल राजाका कामकारवाहीले बेचैन बनेको छ । दशकौँदेखि राजावादी रहेका पार्टीहरू समेत अब राजालाई टिकाउनु भनेको प्रजातन्त्रको विरुद्ध हुन्छ भन्ने मनोदशा भएको बेला छ, म स्कुले उमेरदेखिको गणतन्त्रवादी, म कसरी भारतीय पण्डितहरूसँग सहमत हुन सक्थेँ र !

एकजना पण्डितले भने- 'नेपालका राजा विष्णुका अवतार हुन् । भगवान् साईबाबा पनि राजालाई भगवान् मान्दछन् ।'

मैले भनेँ- 'तपाईंहरू नेपालका राजालाई सम्मान गर्नुहुन्छ । यो हाम्रा लागि खुसीको कुरा हो । यो एकप्रकारले नेपालका जनताको पनि सम्मान नै हो । तर अब नेपालका मानिस राजतन्त्रलाई निरन्तरता दिन चाहन्छन् । नेपालका राजा अत्याचारी, स्वार्थी र लोलुप छन् ।'

विश्व के इतिहास में कभीकभार ही राजाओं उदार, जनप्रिय और जनता के लिये मरमिटकर आदर्श बनकर काम करते है । भारत में कुल मिलाकर दो चार सौ राज्य थे । उन राज्यों में से कुछ ही राज्यों मे कुछ ही राजाओं ने इतिहास में समझने योग्य काम कर सके । इसीलिये भारतवर्ष के विद्वानों ने उन असल राजाओं को किताबों में चर्चा एवम् प्रशंसा की है ।' पण्डाको तर्कबाण मतिर हानियो ।

'त्यसैकारण त भारतवर्ष मात्र होइन संसारभरिबाट राजवंश उखेलिरहेका छन् । राजतन्त्र अब अप्रासङ्गिक भइसके ।'

'हिन्दू सभ्यतामा राजाहरूको स्थान उच्च छ । हाम्रो परिचय राजाविहीन देशबाट बन्दैन । राजासहितको देश नै हिन्दूहरूको देश हो । भारत अब हिन्दूहरूको देश रहेन । सानै भए पनि हामीलाई एउटा अलग्गै हिन्दू देश हुनुपर्छ ।'

'इतिहास पालेर वर्तमान जीवन चल्दैन । तैपनि तपाईंहरूलाई राजा चाहिएकै हो भने आफ्ना कुनै राजवंशबाट एक राजा छान्नु न ! नेपालका नागरिकले राजा राखुन् या नराखुन्, तपाईंहरूलाई के लिनुदिनु छ र ?'

भारतीयहरूको पहिचानका लागि हामी नेपालीले राजा पालिदिने ? उनीहरूलाई पूजा गर्न खोपीका देवता चाहिएको भए मैले बिहारीलाई भनेको 'हाम्रै राजा लगे हुन्छ' भन्ने तर्क फेरि दोहोर्याएँ ।

तर यी पण्डितहरू त्यति सजिलै हार्नेवाला थिएनन् । उनीहरूले भने- 'राष्ट्र अर्थात् जातिको सबैभन्दा ठूलो सङ्कट भनेको परिचयको सङ्कट हो । भारतीय राष्ट्र हिन्दू छ तर यसको पहिचान जुगौँदेखि हिन्दू बन्न सकेन । भएको एउटा छिमेकी देशले पनि हिन्दू पहिचान मेटाउन खोजेको हो कि भन्ने डर भइसक्यो । अब हिन्दूहरूको अलग परिचय केले दिने ? कि हामीले हरेक विचार, दर्शन, जीवनशैली, घर, गाउँ वा देश चलाउने तरिका पनि पश्चिमेलीहरूबाट पैंचो लिनुपर्ने ? हाम्रो कुनै नमुना छैन ? हेर्नोस् भाइ, देश मेटिए फेरि हामीले सीमा कोरेर आफ्नो देश खडा गर्न सक्नेछौँ, सम्पत्ति र उन्नति आज नभए भोलि जुटाउन सक्छौँ तर जीवनदर्शन र संस्कृति मेटियो भने त्यो जात समाप्त भयो भन्ने बुझ्ने हुन्छ । हिन्दू संस्कृतिमा राजाको स्थान अपरिहार्य छ । हामी भान्सा खान लाग्दा समेत अलिकति राजा, देवता र पितृलाई चढाएर मात्र खान्छौँ ।'

मैले भनेँ- हामी गरिब छौँ । हामीसँग राजा नामको सेतो हात्ती पाल्ने खर्च छैन । हामीलाई राजा नामको अत्याचारी खलकप्रति कुनै आदरभाव वा स्नेह पनि छैन । राजाको वंशले हामीलाई इतिहासभरि कहिल्यै अत्याचारवाहेक केही दिएन । तपाईं बाहिरियाहरूलाई त के छ र ! तर हामी आफूलाई रिनमा डुबाएर छिमेकीका लागि गहना किनिदिन सक्तेनौँ । रह्यो कुरा हिन्दू पहिचानको, नेपालका जनताले आफूलाई हिन्दू पहिचान दिन चाहन्छन् । नेपाल हिन्दू राज्य हो र हिन्दू राज्यका रूपमा नै यो रहनेछ अनि अधिकांश भारतीय जनता हिन्दू छँदै छन् र यिनले चाहे भारत पनि हिन्दू राज्य घोषित हुन सकिहाल्छ नि !'

मलाई नेपाल छिट्टै धर्मनिरपेक्ष राष्ट्र बन्न लागेको अनुमान भएन । साँच्चै भन्ने हो भने म पूर्ण नास्तिक हुँ तर यो देश हिन्दू राष्ट्र भएकै राम्रो मान्छु, नास्तिकका लागि हिन्दू धर्ममा बाहेक कुनै धर्ममा पनि स्थान छैन, यसै भएर हो वा किन हो मलाई थाहा छैन । तर अरू देशकाले मेरो देश यस्तो वा उस्तो हुनुपर्छ भनेर उपदेश दिएको मलाई पटक मन पर्दैन । गफ निकै लम्बिन्थ्यो होला तर समयले मलाई उनीहरूका कुरा सुन्ने वा तर्क गर्ने अधिकार दिएको थिएन । पण्डितहरू हृदयदेखि नै नेपालका राजाप्रति श्रद्धा राख्ता रहेछन् र नेपालका वर्तमान राजाले सङ्कटबाट देशलाई निकास दिने पनि विश्वास गर्दा रहेछन् ।

पण्डितहरूलाई मैले भनें- 'म नेपालमा केही पत्रिका र प्रकाशनगृहसँग सम्बद्ध छु । तपाईंहरू आफ्ना विचार लेखी पठाउनुहोस् म कसैलाई अनुवाद गराएर वा आफैं अनुवाद गरेरै भए पनि ती विचार पत्रिकामा छान्नेछु । त्यसबाट उत्पन्न पाठकीय प्रतिक्रिया म तपाईंका लागि हिन्दीमा अनुवाद गरेर पठाउँला । यहाँ म एउटालाई भनेर के हुन्छ, र, सिङ्गे नेपाल राजतन्त्रको विरोधमा उभिन लागेको छ अहिले ।'

मलाई भित्र कतै मनमा डर पनि लागिरहेको थियो यता कतै हाम्रो राजाका सुराकी रहेछन् भने त! माओवादी भएको अभियोगमा सहिद हुन पाइने पो हो कि, के ठेगान !

मैले हिँड्ने बेलामा ती भारतीयहरूलाई भनें- 'नेपालमा राजा रहने, नरहने माओवादीको तागतमा भर पर्छ, दलहरूले माओवादीलाई साथ दिए राजा ढल्छ । राजाको ढाल बनेर अमेरिका, भारत र शाही सेना उभिइरहे भने राजा जतिसुकै अत्याचारी भए पनि निकै लामो समयसम्म टिकिरहनेछ । तर मूर्तिचोरी, चेलीबेटी बेचबिखन, हत्या र तस्करीको अभियोग लागेको हाम्रो राजालाई विष्णुको अवतार नभनिदिनुहोला, यसबाट विष्णु भगवान्को त अपमान हुन्छ नै, तपाईंहरूको नियत पनि खोटो देखिनेछ !'

म गफ टुङ्ग्याएर सीता भएठाउँ पुगें । उनी अभै चौरमा पल्टिइरहेकी थिइन् । छोरीहरू यताउता उफिरहेका थिए ।

समयले बिठुरबाट हामीलाई बिदा माग्न लगायो । यो ठाउँ छाड्नुअघि यहाँको इनारको बारेमा एउटा कुराचाहिँ नभनी नहुने छ । ठाउँ त यो गङ्गाकिनारकै हो तर इनार किन हेटौँडाका जस्तै गहिरो ? मैले पूजालाई लवकुशहरूले प्रयोग गरेको इनार हेर्न भनें । पूजाले त्यो इनार हेर्दै भनी-

'बाफ रे ! कति गहिरो ! हेर्दै बेहोस भइन्छ कि क्या हो !'

अनुजा पनि त्यो गहिरो इनार हेर्न दौडेर गई । उसले इनार हेरेर ठूलो मुख बाई ।

बिठुर भन्ने गाउँ सानै भए पनि क्षेत्रफल ठूलो छ । यहाँ धार्मिक महत्त्वका कारण जताततै घरहरू बस्ने क्रम देखियो । खेतबारी त कतैकतै देखिने, खुल्ला चउर र कम्पाउन्ड बारेका ठूलाठूला चाक्लाहरू जताततै । बन्दै गरेका र बनिसकेका घर हेर्दाचाहिँ आवासीय जस्ता देखिन्थे । हरेक निर्माण ठूला र कुरूप लाग्ने । टेम्पोबाट एकाध घण्टा लाग्ने बाटाका दुवैतिर नाङ्गो ठाउँ मात्र । त्यो ठाउँ नाङ्गो हुनुको कारण उत्पादन नहुने भएर होइन, ठूलो सहरका छेउमा बडेबडे उद्योगपति र व्यापारीहरूले ओगटेकाले हो । कतै धार्मिक प्रयोजनका लागि, कतै औद्योगिक प्रयोजनका लागि त कतै त्यत्तिकै भविष्यमा राम्रो मूल्य पाइने आशाले जमिन ओगटेको देखिन्थ्यो । मानिसको बसोबास भने अत्यन्त पातलो । लाखौँ बिघा जमिन त्यत्तिकै खेर गइरहेको देख्दा नराम्रो लाग्ने ।

टेम्पो पक्रेर कानपुरतिर लाग्यौँ । हामीले टेम्पोवालालाई आफू जेके टेम्पल जाने बतायौँ । दिन निकै ढल्किसकेको थियो । अपेक्षा गरेभन्दा निकै ढिलो गरी टेम्पोले कानपुर सहरभित्र ल्याइपुऱ्यायो । जेके टेम्पल जान सजिलो पर्ने ठाउँमा ल्याइपुऱ्याएपछि टेम्पोले ओरालिदियो । टेम्पो-ड्राइभरले यहाँबाट रिक्साभाडा यति तिर्नू र यतायता जानू भनी सिकायो ।

बाटाका दुवैतिर देखिएसम्म सडकका दुवैतिर हेल्मेटका पसल थिए । हेल्मेट-हेल्मेट । रिक्सा कुद्दै गयो, हेल्मेटका अनगिन्ती दोकान पछाडि पर्दै गए । उत्तरप्रदेशमा स्कुटर वा मोटरसाइकलका चालक वा यात्रुले हेल्मेट लगाउनुपर्ने कुनै कानुनी बाध्यता छैन । तर हेल्मेटका पसलहरूको रमिता हेरेपछि भारतीयहरूको सडक-रक्षासम्बन्धी चेतनालाई सलाम गर्नेपर्छ ।

जेके टेम्पल अत्यन्त विशाल रहेछ । कुनै धनाढ्य उद्योगपतिले आफ्नो कम्पनीको प्रचारार्थ बनाएको रहेछ यो मन्दिर । भारतीय उद्योगपतिहरूको लहड पनि कहिलेकाहीँ अनौठै लाग्छ । विशाल फैलावटका बीच अत्यन्त अग्लो र सिङ्गमरमरले बनाइएको यो विष्णुमन्दिर हेरिरहुँ लाग्ने रहेछ । जलप्रपात र फूलबागहरू हेरिरहुँ लाग्ने । मानिसहरू यताउता टहलिरहेका । फराक चउरहरूमा बालबालिका र पुरुष-महिलाहरू रमाइरमाई खेलिरहेका । कानपुरभरिको सुख यहाँ फिँजिरहेको थियो, कानपुरे सुन्दरता यहाँ फकिरहेको थियो । मन्दिरको व्यवस्थापन, सुरक्षा र सरसफाइ पनि नमुना नै रहेछ । हामी त्यहाँ लगभग एक घण्टा बस्यौँ । भित्र विभिन्न देवीदेवताको पूजामा मानिसहरू मग्न थिए । हामीले त्यस मन्दिरमा सपरिवार सायंकालीन पूजामा भाग लिन पायौँ ।

मैले विष्णु-लक्ष्मीको मूर्तिअगाडि हात जोडेर तन्मयभावले 'न मन्त्रम् नो यन्त्रम्.....' ठूलो स्वरमा उच्चारण गरें । छोरीहरू र सीता पनि हात जोडेर सँगै उभिइरहे । आराधना सकियो । पूजामा शुद्ध मन्त्र उच्चारण गरेको सुनेर हुनुपर्छ, पछि एकजना भारतीय भलादमीले मलाई 'पण्डितजी ! भनेर सम्बोधन गर्‍यो !

हामी त्यसपछि रिक्सा सरर चढेर मोतीभिल गयौं । यसपल्ट हामी त्यसको खै कुन भागमा पुग्यौं कोनि, पोहोरपराहार म पुगेको मोतीभिलभन्दा यो भिन्नै हो कि जस्तो लागेर आयो । मानिसहरूका अनुसार यहाँ चारपाँचओटा विशाल पार्कहरू छन्, ती सबैको संयुक्त रूप नै मोतीभिल हो अरे । भारतीय स्वतन्त्रतासङ्ग्रामका वीर योद्धा मोतीलाल नेहरूको सम्झनामा बनाइएको यो पार्क स्वर्गको एक टुक्रो नै हो । टिकट काटी प्रवेश गर्नु र अलिकति बदाम किनेर खाँदै हामी पार्कमा यताउता घुम्नु । छोरीहरू पिडमा रमाएर खेलिरहेका थिए । यहाँको साँझ र भिलिमिली हेरिरहूँ लाग्दो हुन्छ । यो पार्क यति फराकिलो छ कि हजारौं मानिस एकसाथ पसे पनि यहाँ भीडभाड हुन्न । भारतका पूर्वप्रधानमन्त्री राजीव गान्धीको सम्झनामा बनाइएको पार्क पनि यहीँ छ । राजीव गान्धी तमिल आतङ्कवादीहरूद्वारा हत्या गरिएका थिए । हामी पार्कमा घुम्दै भएको बेला भारतको केन्द्रीय राजनीतिमा तिनै राजीवकी विधवा सोनिया गान्धीको वर्चस्व थियो । हाम्रा दुवै छोरीहरू राजीव गान्धीपार्कमा निकैबेर बेलुन आदि खेलेर रमाइरहे । हामीचाहिँ दिनभरको थकानले लस्त भएर त्यस सुन्दर पार्कको हरियो दुबोमाथि लम्पसार परेर आराम गरिरह्यौं । साँझको रङ्गीन बत्तीको उज्यालामा भारतीयहरूका बीच अत्यन्त रमणीय वातावरणमा हामी धेरैबेर रमायौं । आठ बजिसक्ता पनि हाम्रो मन पार्क छाड्न तयार भएन । अन्त्यमा हामी न्यानो र सुखद अनुभूति बटुल्दै पार्कबाहिर निस्केर हिँड्यौं ।

जताततै दुर्गापूजाको तयारी चलिरहेको थियो । सडकको एक छेउ मिचेर कानपुरहरूले बाँस र कपडाका मन्दिर बनाइरहेका थिए । ती हेर्दा स्थायी मन्दिरभन्ने देखिन्थे । हामी देवीभजन र सहरी भिलिमिली हेर्दै अघि बढिरह्यौं । रिक्सा चढेर सहरको रमिता हेर्दै बडेचौराहा जान मन लाग्यो, भाडा सोधेको त पच्चीस रुपियाँ पो भन्यो । हामी अलिक वरसम्म हिँडिहेयौं । हिँडेर कहाँ पुग्नु र ! अन्त्यमा एउटा रिक्सा चढेर नजिकको टेम्पो स्टेन्डसम्म पुग्यौं । टेम्पो चढेर लगभग आधा घण्टामा हामी फूलबाग आइपुग्यौं । कोठामा पुग्दा दस वज्न लागेको थियो । रिक्सामा आएको भए एघार बजे पनि नआइपुगिने रहेछ !

हाम्रो धर्मशालाअगाडिको होटलमा भीडभाड हेर्नलायक थियो । जतिसुकै व्यस्त भए पनि होटलका कर्मचारीहरू हाँसीहाँसी काम गरिरहेका थिए । उनीहरू यताउता दौडिँदै हरेक ग्राहकको आवश्यकता-पूर्तिमा दिलोज्यानले लागेका थिए । हामीले हिजो बेलुकाका भैँ तन्दुरी-रोटी मगायौं । दाल, अचार, तरकारी र दहीसँग हामीले मीठा तन्दुरीरोटी खायौं । सुत्नुअघि छोरीहरूले एकएक 'घैला' कानपुरे दूध पनि खाए । हामी बसेको धर्मशालाको आडैमा एउटा दूधपसल थियो । त्यसले दूध माटाका स-साना घैलामा बेच्छ्यो । घैला पनि के भन्नु, आकारमा घैलाजस्ता भए पनि ती लोहोटा थिए । त्यसले दूध चलाएको र सालखोल गरेको हेर्दा खुब मजा लाग्ने । ऊ एकदम माथिबाट एउटा लोहोटाबाट अर्को लोहोटामा दूध खन्याउँथ्यो तर त्यसो गर्दा एक थोपो पनि पोख्नेथ्यो । दिनभरिको गर्मी पखालपुखुल र नुहाइधुवाइ गरिसकेर सुत्न लाग्दा कानपुरेको दसैँको भिलिमिली र यात्रा हेर्ने बेला भएको रहेछ, हेर्न पाइयो । सहरका करोडपति व्यापारी, साहुमहाजन, तिनका घरेलु कामदार, रिक्सावाला सबै एकै लहरमा थिए । यात्रामा रामकथा मञ्चन हुँदो रहेछ । ट्रेक्टरको ट्रेलरमा मञ्च बनाई रामायणको नाटक मञ्चन हुँदो रहेछ । प्रकाश र लाउडस्पिकरका लागि जेनेरेटर थिए । ट्रेलर मानिसहरू मिलेर तान्थे । जुलुसको पहिलो मञ्चले रामायणकथाका अगिल्ला काण्डहरू मञ्चन गर्थ्यो भने पछिल्ला मञ्चहरूले क्रमशः पछिल्ला काण्डहरू मञ्चन गर्दा रहेछन् । एकडेढ घण्टासम्ममा पचाससाठी ट्रेलरमा बनाइएका मञ्चले सम्पूर्ण रामायणकथा मञ्चन गरिसक्ता रहेछन् । सम्पूर्ण सहरवासीहरू जुलुसमा निस्केभै लाग्थ्यो । लाउडस्पिकरको आवाजले सह्रै गुन्जायमान हुन्थ्यो ।

हामीकहाँ दसैँ भनेको घरघरमा खसी ढाल्ने, मासुचिउरा खाने र टीकादक्षिणामा सीमित छ । यता भारतीय सहरहरूमा सम्पूर्ण रामायण टोलटोलमा र गल्लीगल्लीमा प्रदर्शन हुन्छ, घरघरमा देवीको पूजा हुन्छ । दसैँको हामीकहाँ जस्तो कुरूप उत्सव न इलाहाबादमा देखियो न कानपुरमा । यो हेर्दा आफ्नो दसैँ मनाउने तरिका असभ्य लाग्ने । हुन त यिनीहरूसित अलिक बढी पैसा भएर पनि हो, तर पैसाले मात्र सभ्यता झल्कने होइन ।

हामी कानपुरको दसैँरमिता वरन्डाबाट हेर्दै बस्यौं । सीताले कानपुर र हाम्रा सहरकाहरूको अनुशासनको तुलना गरिन् । उनले भनिन्- 'नेपालीहरूसँग रिस छ । रिसमात्र छ । त्यो रिस पोख्ने ठाउँको खोजीमा भौँतारिइरहेको छ नेपाल । हरेक युवाको रगत रिसले उम्लिरहेको छ आज । त्यस रिसले आफैँलाई भस्म गर्दा पनि नेपालीको रिस मर्दैन । भस्मासुर र दुर्बासा मिलेपछि हामी बन्छौं ।' उनले कानपुर चिडियाखाना जाँदा फूल बेच्न शिरदेखि पैतालासम्म कालो कपडामा बेरिएर हिँडेकी एक मुसलमान महिलाको मृदु बोलीवचन र सौम्य व्यवहार सम्झँदै भनिन्-

'त्यो आइमाई कति कुरूपा थिई, तर त्यसको बोलीवचन...! पूजालाई 'आ बिटिया, आ, मेरी गोद में आ' भनेर बोलाई । नेपालीको मनमा त अरूलाई 'गोद में' होइन 'गोदने' मात्र हुन्छ । जतिसुकै भीडभाड र असजिलो भए पनि धेरै भारतीयहरू आफ्नो कारणले अरूलाई बाधा पुग्ला कि भनेर सजग र सतर्क हुन्छन्, कसरी अरूलाई मद्दत गर्न सकिन्छ भनेर सोचिरहन्छन् । यता हाम्राहरूलाई अर्कालाई दुःख दिन नसकिए पराजयबोध हुन्छ ।'

उनले पोहोरसाल घटेको पकली सुनसरीको घटना याद गराइन्- बिहेको कार्यक्रम चलिरहेको थियो । कार्यक्रमको भिडियो खिच्ने युवक यताबाट उता गर्दै भिडियो खिच्दै थियो । क्यामराको दृष्टिकोण बदल्न क्यामराम्यान यसो के चल्मलाएको, उसले अर्को युवकको खुट्टो कुल्चन पुगेछ । अब के चाहियो ? कुल्चाइ खाने युवकको रगत उम्लिइहाल्यो । नयाँ नेपालको नक्सा कोर्नका लागि त्यस्तो अत्याचारी क्यामराम्यान बाधक थियो । बिहेको अनावश्यक उत्सव रोकियो, 'महान् जनयुद्ध' सुरु भयो । धारिलो छुरीले त्यसको त्यहीँ सफाया गर्यो । दुईचार दिनपछि सुनियो- मर्ने 'महान् सहिद' घोषित भयो र मार्ने 'पार्टीको वीर योद्धा' । ऊ अझै 'राजबन्दी' होला । दुवैको जीवन खेर गएन !

२५. जीवनको महाविद्यालयबाट

२०६२ असोज २४ गते सोमवार हामी हाम्रो यात्राको सातौँ बिहान कानपुरबाट आगराका लागि बिदा भयौँ । धर्मशालामा दुई रात बिताए पनि त्यहाँको सहज वातावरणले त्यो ठाउँ आफ्नै जस्तो लाग्न थालिसकेको थियो । कानपुरबाट आगराका लागि ट्रेनको टिकट लिँदाचाहिँ हामीले पूजाका लागि बच्चाटिकट लिन बिर्सनौँ । फेरि कुन आपत् आइलाग्ने हो, के ठेगान !

साधारण यात्रुडिब्बामा अत्यन्त घुइँचो हुन्थ्यो । सैनिकडिब्बामा चाहिँ बस्न-सुत्न मनगो ठाउँ पाइने । हामी सैनिक डिब्बामा चढ्यौँ । कसैले रोकेन । अरू यात्री चढ्न खोज्थे, सैनिकहरू 'उतरो, उतरो' भनिहाल्थे । म सङ्कोचबेगर सरासर अधिकार पुगेभैँ चढ्यौँ । सायद उनीहरूले मलाई सैनिक सेवाको व्यक्तिजस्तो लागेर केही नभनेका होलान् । मेरो शारीरिक बनावट, डिब्बामा चढ्ने काइदा र सायद मेरो हाउभाउले पनि कसैले सैनिक होइन कि भनेर शङ्के नगरेका होलान् । वा हुन सक्छ, दयामाया लागेर भैगो नि त भनेर चढ्न दिएका हुन् । जे भए पनि भित्र पसिसकेपछि सिभिलियन हो भन्ने थाहा पाए पनि ओराल्नुचाहिँ कसैलाई ओराल्दा रहेनछन् । सोध्नेलाई मैले कहिल्यै सैनिक हुँ भन्न हुन्नथ्यो, भनिनँ ।

यसरी यात्रा गर्नेले बेलैमा रिजर्भसन टिकट काट्ने गर्छन् । आफू त हावाले जता उडाउँछ, पानीले जता बहाउँछ, उतै लाग्ने बानीको परियो । मेरो योजनारहित जीवनशैलीबाट मेरा जहानपरिवार त पीडित छन् नै, साथीभाइ र आफ्नाहरूले पनि मनगो दुःख पाएका छन् । समयको परिपालन मेरो बुताबाहिरको कुरा हो । इटहरीका एक राम्रा कलाकार विक्रमश्रीका शब्द पैँचौँ लिने हो भने समयले कलाकारलाई बाँध्न सक्तैन । निर्वन्धता कलाको विशेषता हो । कलामा यान्त्रिकता मिल्दैन । यान्त्रिकताले उत्पादन त गर्छ, तर सिर्जनालाई समाप्त पार्छ । उत्पादनबेगर जीवन चल्दैन तर सिर्जनावेगर जीवन जिउन लायक हुन्न । मेरो जीवन बाँच्ने तरिका कला हो कि के हो म जान्दिनँ, तर समयअनुसार चल्न म सक्तिनँ । यस सूत्रलाई हाम्रो यसपालिको यात्रासँग कसरी भिडाउन सकिन्छ, म भन्न सक्तिनँ । एउटा कुरा पक्कै हो, हामीले जहाँ पुगेर पनि बाटो बदल्न सक्थ्यौँ, जहाँ जति पनि बस्न पाउँथ्यौँ र ट्रेन छुट्ला वा समय नपुगेर चाहेको ठाउँमा चाहेजति समय दिन नपाइने होला भन्न पर्दैनथ्यो । हामी वास्तविक जीवनमा भैँ पलपल नयाँ निर्णय गर्नुपर्ने अवस्थामा हुन्थ्यौँ ।

गङ्गाकिनारको सहर कानपुरबाट हामी यमुनानदीकिनारतर्फ लागिरहेका थियौँ । बाटाका दुवैतर्फ विशाल समथर भूभाग फैलिएको हुन्थ्यो । अनेक नामका सानातिना बजार, गाउँ र सहर आउँथे, जान्थे । बाजराका बडाबडा खेतहरू आउँथे । स्थानीय मानिसहरू बाजरालाई 'बाजडी' भन्दा रहेछन् । बाजराको बोट हाम्रातिरका मकैको जत्रो र जुनेलाको बोटजस्तै हुँदो रहेछ । तर यसको फलचाहिँ मकैको धानचमर लाग्ने ठाउँमा कोसीकिनारका पटेर फुल्दाका भैँ घोगो देखिने रहेछ । बाजराको रोटी खाइँदो रहेछ । पछि हामीले बाजराको रोटी खाने रहर गरिहेथ्यौँ, तर निकैपटक प्रयत्न गरे पनि अपेक्षित अनुकूलता जुटाउन सकेनौँ । बाटाका छेउमा जुनेलो, कागुनो र बदामका खेतहरू पनि देखिन्थे । हामीलाई सबैभन्दा अनौठो लाग्ने कुराचाहिँ हाम्रातिर संसार जलमग्न भएका बेला यताचाहिँ हाम्रो चैतवैशाखका भैँ सुख्खा थियो । सडक र चउरमा सुकाउरो लागेर चैतमा भैँ झार मर्न लागेको थियो । पाकिसकेको बाजरा काटेर खाली भएको खेतमा ट्याक्टरले जोतिएको हुन्थ्यो र त्यो खेत यता चैतमा सनपाट छर्न ठीक पारिएको खेतभैँ देखिन्थ्यो । वरपर आँप, कटहर, केरा, लिची, बाँस आदि देखिँदैनथे । सायद गाउँघरका छेउछाउमा ती रूखबिरुवा लगाइन्छन् कि ! बेलाबेला अलि पानी भएको र धान रोपिएको जमिन आउँथ्यो तर धानको खेती यता हामीकहाँ चैते धान रोपेभैँ देखिन्थ्यो ।

हामी चढेको ट्रेनमा सैनिकहरूको सङ्ख्या निकै रहेछ । उनीहरूमध्ये हाम्रो छेउका सैनिकहरू मिजोरमको आइजालदेखि सरुवा भएर जम्मू गइरहेका थिए । लामो यात्रा भएकाले उनीहरू निस्फिक्री भएर यताउति लडिरहेका, गफगाफ

गरिरहेका, पत्रिका वा किताब पढिरहेका थिए । (हामीकहाँ भएका भए सैनिकहरू तास खेल्थे वा रक्सी-बियरका बोतल रंगेर बसिरहेका हुन्थे होलान्, मैले हाम्राहरूको फुर्सत काट्ने काइदा देखेको छु !) ती सैनिकहरूले हाम्रा छोरीहरूलाई बोलाए । खाजा खान लागेकाहरूले आफूसँग भएकोबाट नानीहरूलाई छुट्याएर दिए । केटाकेटी सबैका छोराछोरी हुन्छन् । सैनिकडिब्बा भएकाले छोरीहरूले मजाले सुत्ने ठाउँ पाए ।

राती एक बजेमात्र सुतिएकाले राम्ररी निद्रा पुगेको थिएन, म उँगन थालेंछु । म निदाउन खोजें भने सीता बिउँझाइहालिन् । 'रातभर सुत्नु छैन, सारा मानिस जागा भएको बेला सुत्ने हो ? चमेरो !'

उनलाई मेरो काइदा पटकक मन पर्दैन । घरमा पनि बेलुका उनलाई छिटो निद्रा लाग्छ, म बिहान अवेरसम्म सुत्छु । बेलुका छिटो सुत्ने उनको बानीलाई आक्रमण गर्दै म भन्छु- 'घाम पर्नेलिन थालिसके, खै ओछ्यानमा पुग्या ?' यात्रामा म गाडीमा निदाउँछु, उनी सडकमा बस देख्ता व्यङ्गबाण हान्छिन् - 'उ : बस....., खै उँधन थाल्नुभएको ?'

हाम्रो छेउका दुईतीन सैनिक घरायसी कुराकानी गरिरहेका थिए । केटाकेटी, स्वास्नी, शिक्षा, सरुवा, बाबुआमा आदि विषयमा यी मन खोलेर कुराकानी गरिरहेका थिए । म उनीहरूको गफमा होमा हो मिलाउन थालें । उनीहरूले मेरो कुरामा पनि रुचि देखाए । मैले हामी नेपाली भएको बताएपछि त भन्नु उनीहरू चासो दिएर कुरा सुन्न थाले । हामी नेपालका शिक्षकहरू हौं भनेकाले उनीहरूको गफगाफ पनि शिक्षाको विषयतिर मोडियो । एउटा सैनिक कति कुशल गफाडी रहेछ भने त्यसले हाम्रा दुईतीन घण्टा मजाले कटाइदियो । उसका कुरा सुनेर मलाई आफ्नो जीवनभोगाइ कति कम र अपूरो रहेछ भन्ने ज्ञान भयो ।

त्यो सैनिक पढेलेखेको थिएन, धनी बाबुको छोरो थिएन, संसार घुमेको पनि थिएन । गरिब किसानको छोरो भएर सामान्य साक्षरता हासिल गरेको उसले जीवनको विश्वविद्यालयमा अनन्त ज्ञान र डिग्री हासिल गरेको रहेछ । स्वास्नी, छोराछोरी, छोराछोरीको शिक्षा, बाबुआमा, रुपियाँपैसा र घरजग्गाप्रतिको उसको दृष्टिकोण सुनेर म अवाक् भइरहें ।

'हेर्नेस् सरजी, मैले जीवनको महाविद्यालयमा धेरै शिक्षा पाएको छु, एकदुई अमूल्य प्रमाणपत्र पनि पाएको छु ।' उसले आफ्नो पाइन्ट अलि मास्तिर सारेर घुँडामुन्तिरको खत देखायो । नलीहाडमा गहिरो खाडल र काटिएको ठूलो खत थियो । हतियार चलाउँदा साथीको लापरवाहीवश यस्तो भएको रे । उसले भन्यो-

'साथीको लापरवाहीले यस्तो घाउ भयो । छ महिना पटनाको हस्पिटलमा बसेँ । घाउ त हो, निको भइहाल्यो । कतिपय साथीले निको नहुने घाउ पारिदिन्छन् । असलाम भन्ने मेरो सबभन्दा मिल्ने साथी, उसकी श्रीमतीसँग एउटा अर्को अति मिल्ने साथी अनुचित सम्बन्ध राख्थे रहेछ । उसको घाउ कहिल्यै निको भएन, त्यही पीरले त्यो बहुलायो । अर्काकी श्रीमतीसँग रमाइलो गर्ने साथी पनि नोकरी छाडेर हिँड्यो । सरजी ! साथीबाट नै जीवनमा सबैभन्दा खतरा छ तर साथीबेगर जीवन सम्भव छैन ।' ऊ अविश्वासको धरातलमा उभिएको विश्वासी मानिस रहेछ । त्यसपछि उसले आफ्नो जीवनका रोमाञ्चक क्षणहरू बतायो । एउटा सैनिक अभ्यासको सिलसिलामा ऊ घाइते भएछ । उसले सर्त र भित्री गन्जी उच्चालेर पेटमा भएको डरलाग्दो खत देखायो । लगभग डेढ फिट लामो सेतोफुस्रो खत दाहिने काखीमुनिबाट घुमेर कम्मरको देब्रे भागसम्म तन्किएको थियो । सीता र म उसका रमाइला कुरा सुनेको सुन्यै भयौं, छोरीहरू मजाले निदाइरहे ।

इटावा पुगेपछि ट्रेन अलि निकैवेर रोकिने रहेछ । हामीले त्यहाँ खाजा खायौं । इटावा त्यति ठूलो सहर त होइन तर निकै पहिलेदेखि यसको नाम मैले सुनिआएको हो । इटावा इटहरीभन्दा खासै ठूलो जनसङ्ख्या भएको सहरचाहिँ होइन जस्तो लाग्छ, तर यसको इतिहास लामो अनि व्यापारिक महत्त्व बढी भएकाले यो चर्चित नै सहर हो ।

इटावा कटेपछि हामी ट्रेनको भ्यालबाट त्यहाँको प्राकृतिक वातावरण, वनस्पति र भू-बनोट हेरेर मुग्ध भइरह्यौं । यताको माटो अलिक खुकुलो हो र सिँचाइको समस्या यहाँको ठूलो समस्या हो । रेलमार्गका छेउछाउमा बाँझो जमिन त त्यति देखिएन तर लगाइएको वाली हेर्दा त्यति उब्जाउ पनि लाग्दैनथ्यो । रेलमार्गदेखि अलिक परपर एकखाले रूख देखिन्थे । ती रूख परबाट हेर्दा यतातिरका डुम्रीजस्ता लाग्थे । त्यस गफाडी सैनिकले त्यस रूखको नाम र उपयोगिताको बारेमा लामो विवरण दियो । आफू महाभुलक्कड भएकाले त्यस रूखको नाम सम्झन सकिन्नँ, महुआ हो कि जस्तो लाग्छ । यो रूख वर्षमा दुई फसल दिने रहेछ । एक वाली हिउँदमा र अर्को वाली गर्मीमा । गर्मीयाममा यसमा एकखाले फल लाग्ने रहेछ, जुन स्वादका साथ खाइने लोकप्रिय फल हो रहेछ भने अर्को समयमा त्यसमा एकखाले फूल फुल्ने रहेछ जुन रक्सी, अचार, तरकारी आदि बनाउन काम दिने रहेछ ।

'सरजी ! एकै फलबाट यसरी एक वर्षमा दुईखाले फसल दिने अर्को वृक्ष हुँदैन होला । मैलेचाहिँ त्यस्तो देखेको छैन अन्यत्र कतै ।' उसले भन्यो । सम्बोधन गर्दा ऊ मलाई 'सरजी' भन्थ्यो, आदरसूचक 'सर' शब्दमा 'जी' थप्ता कस्तो सुहाएको !

छोरीहरू निद्राबाट जागे । उनीहरूले पनि त्यस रूखको बारेमा थाहा पाए ।

मैले छोरीहरूलाई गीत गाउन उकासें । हिन्दी-भाषीहरूका बीच केही मीठा नेपाली गीत गाए । शब्द नबुझे पनि सैनिकहरूले चाख दिएर उनीहरूलाई गाउन हौस्याइरहे । छोरीहरूले गीत गाउनुअघि गीतको मर्म अलिकति भन्थे । उनीहरूले चार-पाँचवटा हिन्दी गीत पनि स्वर मिलाएर गाए । त्यसपछि दुईतीन अङ्ग्रेजी, दुईतीनओटा असमिया, एउटा मैथिली र एउटा भोजपुरी गीत गाए । दुईतीन सिपाही भोजपुरी रहेछन् । उनीहरू अत्यन्त खुसी देखिए । आसामतिर लामो समयसम्म बसेकाहरू उताको याद आएर उत्पातै रमाए ।

वातावरण नै सङ्गीतमय बन्यो । सैनिकहरूले पनि केही हिन्दी गीतमा स्वर थपे । छोरीहरूले यति धेरै भाषामा रुचि, प्रेम र दखल राखेको देखेर तिनले हामीलाई पनि आदरको दृष्टिले हेरे ।

अझ अघि बढ्दै जाँदा कतै पनि ठूला रूख देखिन छाडे । मसिना पोथ्रापोथ्रीमात्र देखिन्थे । खेतबारीहरू अझ सुख्खा र नाङ्गा देखिन थाले । बाटाकिनारमा जताततै जिलेबीका जस्ता एकखाले रूख थिए । अलि अघि हाम्रो घरमा जगन्नाथी नामको एक विरुवा फूलको रूपमा रोपिएको थियो । यहाँ देखिएको भाडी त्यही जगन्नाथीको बोट नै हो भन्ने मलाई लाग्छ । मलाई यस विरुवाको स्थानीय नाम थाहा नभएकाले यसलाई म 'जगन्नाथी' नै भन्छु । जगन्नाथी एकखाले काँटे वृक्ष हो । त्यसको फूल लज्जावती झारको जस्तो हुन्छ भने फलचाहिँ कडा दुर्गन्ध आउने छोटोछोटा कोसा हुन्छ । कोसा बकुलाका जत्तिका लामा र अलिक मोटा र बोक्रा अलिक कडा हुन्छन् । यस विरुवाका पात ढँचाका भैं मसिना हुन्छन् । यसको बोट पन्ध्रवीस फिट अग्लो र लामा सेता काँडा भएको, हाँगाँगा भएको चाम्रो हुन्छ ।

जमिन अगिभै सम्म देखिन छाडेको थियो, बाक्लै खाल्टाखुल्टी र खोल्साखोल्सीजस्तो, खोल्साखोल्सीजस्ता भए पनि बगर वा पानी छैन । केहीबेरमा परपर सहरको नजिक पुगेभै पातला घरहरू, बिजुलीका पावरहाउस र बाँझो छाडेको जमिन देखिन थाले । तर निकैबेर कुदे पनि रेल कुनै सहरमा आइपुगेन । दुईतीन स्टेसन काटे पनि सहरमा प्रवेश भएको थिएन । एक ठाउँमा ट्रेन निकैबेर रोकियो । अगाडि अर्को ट्रेनका लागि बाटो चाहिएकाले हामी चढेको ट्रेन रोकिनुपरेको रहेछ । यस ठाउँमा ठूलाठूला कारखाना देखिन थालेका थिए । निकैबेरपछि मात्र ट्रेन अघि बढ्यो । अब आगरा आउन अलिकति मात्र बाँकी भएकाले होला, यात्रुहरू उत्रन तयार देखिए ।

तर आगरा पुग्न अझै लगभग आधा घण्टाको बाटो बाँकी नै रहेछ । उत्तरपट्टि नजिकैबाट बसमार्ग लाग्थ्यो । त्यसमा भएको ट्राफिक भीडभाडले अगाडि निकै ठूलो सहर छ भन्ने अनुमान गर्न सकिन्थ्यो । बिजुलीका मोटामोटा तारहरू जताततै टाँगिएका थिए । अब झन् ठूलाठूला फ्याक्टरी र कलकारखानाहरू आउन थाले । कारखानाहरू हेर्दा भाडीको बीचमा जस्ता देखिन्थे । जताततै स्थानअनुसारका रूख रोपेर औद्योगिक प्रदूषणलाई कम गर्न प्रयत्न गरिएको रहेछ ।

हामी निकै चनाखा भइरहेका थियौं । मेरा आँखा ताजमहललाई खोजिरहेका थिए । केहीबेरमै ट्रेनको दक्षिणपट्टि एक उज्यालो, सेतो र विशाल भवनजस्तो देखियो । पहिलो पल्ट आफ्नै आँखाले ताजमहल देखेहरू चिच्याउन थाले । तर फोटोमा हेरेका हामीलाई ताजमहल चिन्न कुनै कठिनाई नपर्ने रहेछ । 'जगन्नाथी' र अरू त्यस्तै खालका विरुवाको जङ्गलका बीचमा यमुनापारि उच्च जमिनमा ताजमहल देखिएको थियो । ताजमहलवरिपरि त्यससँग सुहाउने अनेकौं भवनहरू थिए तर ती ताजमहल हेरी निकै साना देखिन्थे । ताजमहल मैले सोचेभन्दा कता हो कता ठूलो र भव्य रहेछ । हामी पाँच-छ किलोमिटर परबाट त्यसको भव्यता बिस्तारै कटिरहेको ट्रेनबाट आस्वादन गरिरहेका थियौं । ट्रेनबाट ताजमहलको दृश्य हेरिरहेको त्यो बेला मेरो जीवनको एक उत्कर्ष (Climex) थियो ।

मुख्य सहर हाम्रो दायोपट्टि अर्थात् ताजमहलको उत्तरपश्चिममा यमुनाको किनारमा रहेछ । सूर्यविनायकबाट भक्तपुरको दृश्य देखिएभै यमुनाको पूर्वपट्टिबाट आगरा सहर देखियो । घरहरू कच्चाकच्चाकुकुपरेका । एकदम बाक्लो गरी एकै ठाउँमा सबै घर किन उभ्याउनुपरेको होला ? यता यमुनावारि जमिन जति खाली थियो, यतै बनाएको भए खुल्ला ठाउँमा आरामसँग बस्न पाइन्थ्यो, किन सबैले झुम्मिएर एकै ठाउँमा थुप्रिनुपरेको होला ? सहरमा मानिस किन खुम्चिएर बस्न खोज्छन्, म कुरै बुझ्दिनँ ।

हामीलाई सैनिकहरूले आगरामा अकबरको लालकिल्ला र ताजमहल हेर्न भने । 'यी दुईवाहेक यहाँ नहेरी नहुने कुनै खास त्यस्तो ठाउँ छैन । आज तपाईंहरू आगरामा बस्नुभयो भने पनि भोलि त दिल्ली पुगिहाल्नुहुनेछ । दिल्लीचाहिँ अलि हतार नगरी हेर्नुहोला ।'

म उनीहरूका कुरा ध्यानपूर्वक सुन्दै यमुनाको निश्चल पानी हेरिरहेको थिएँ । पारिपट्टिका घरहरूको छाया यमुनाको शान्त पानीमा पनि हल्लिरहेको देखिन्थ्यो । उत्तरपट्टि मोटरहरूका लागि विशाल पुल छ, दक्षिणपट्टि यमुना नदी यसो घुमेको दृश्य छ । हेर्दाहेर्दै हामी चढेको ट्रेन यमुना तर्न थाल्यो । यमुनाको पुल आउनासाथ ट्रेनको गति धीमा हुन थालिहाल्यो । नजिकै आगरा फोर्ट स्टेसन रहेछ । हामी ट्रेनबाट सहयात्री सैनिकहरूको अगाडिको यात्रा सफल रहोस् भन्ने कामना अभिव्यक्त गर्दै ओर्लियौं । उनीहरूले पनि हाम्रो भ्रमण सुखद रहोस् भनेर शुभकामना दिए ।

प्लेटफार्मबाहिर निस्कँदा दिनको एक बज्न लागेको थियो । बिहानदेखि लगातार त्यत्रो समय ट्रेनमा बसेकाले थाकिएछ र भोक पनि लागेछ । हामीले स्टेसननेरको सानो होटलमा फटाफट रोटी-तरकारी खायौं ।

ताजमहल जाने टेम्पोहरूले जथाभावी भाडा माग्ने रहेछन् । यो ठाउँ पर्यटकीय महत्त्वको भएकाले टेम्पोवालाहरू यात्रुबाट पैसा असुल्न अत्यन्त सिपालु । हामी एउटा यात्रुटेम्पो चढेर अलि अगाडि आयौं । लालकिल्लाको उत्तरी छेउको भव्यता हेर्दै पूर्वी छेउमा आइपुगेकाले पर्यटक ठग्ने 'आटो'वालाहरू पछाडि छुटिसके भनेर हामी दुक्क थियौं । तर पनि भोला र नानीहरू देखेपछि यात्रु भनेर चिन्ने भएकाले 'आटो'वालाहरू जहाँ पनि आइहाल्ने रहेछन् । यमुनाकिनारको ठाउँ होचो भएकाले त्यहाँको सडक रेलमार्गमुनि भएर उत्तर लाग्थ्यो । भरे साँझ दसैँको भिलिमिलीका लागि बाटाका दुवैतिर टचुबलाइट ठड्याइएका थिए ।

त्यहाँको व्यस्तता, मोटरहरूको हँकाइ अनि सामुन्ने राता ढुङ्गाले बनेको विशाल लालकिल्ला हेर्न लायक छ । स्थानीय मानिसका अनुसार यस किल्लाको लम्बाइ पूर्वपश्चिम अढाई किलोमिटर र चौडाइ उत्तरदक्षिण लगभग डेढ किलोमिटर छ, कोहीकोही त यो चार किलोमिटर लामो र अढाई किलोमिटर चौडा छ भनेर समेत भन्थे ।

हामी भीडभाडयुक्त सडक पार गरी यमुनाकिनारपट्टि उभिएर कुनै सार्वजनिक बसको प्रतीक्षा गरिरहेका थियौं । बदाम, भुटेका मकै, चटपटे र पानीका बोतल बेच्ने केटाहरू बस रोकनासाथ तँछाड् र मछाड् गर्दै दौडिन्थे । बस दुईचार सेकेन्ड अडिएर अगि बढिहाल्यो । केटाहरूसँगै केही अधबैसे र बूढाहरू पनि कुदिहेथे ।

यात्रुले भरिएको एउटा बस त्यहाँ आउन लाग्दा गति कम गर्न थाल्यो । अगिअगिभै केटाहरू यात्रुहरूलाई आफूसँग भएका बदाम, भुटेका मकै, चटपटे र पानीको बोतल बेच्न बस भएतिर हुरिए । बस रोकन लागेजस्तो मात्र गरेर फेरि दौडिन थाल्यो । हामी हेरिरहेका थियौं, दुवै हातमा पानीका बोतल बोकेर एउटा केटो अरूका भैँ चिच्याउँदै बसमा जवर्जस्ती घुस्न खोज्यो । तर बसको गति तीव्र भइसकेको थियो, डन्डी पक्रने हात खाली नभएकाले केटो बसबाट सडकमा पछारियो ।

उसका खुट्टा बसको पछाडिको चक्कामुनि परे । अलिकति अगाडिसम्म चक्काले च्याप्दै पेलेर लगेपछि त्यस भयङ्कर बसका चक्का उसको खुट्टामाथि चढे । बस अलिकति मात्र अगिल्यो र अलिकति मात्र हल्लियो । बस कलिलो केटाको खुट्टो किचेर थिलिपथिली पारेर अगि बढिहाल्यो । थुप्रै मानिसहरूले देखिरहेका थिए । बस आफ्नै गतिमा अघि बढ्यो । अरू मोटरहरू घाइते केटालाई तर्काएर अघि बढे । कसैले त्यसतिर हेरेन । बटुवाहरू पनि आ-आफ्नो दिशामा बिनासङ्कोच अघि बढिरहे ।

हामी स्वाभाविक ग्रामीण परिवेशमा हुर्केका मानिस, एकदम चिच्यायौं । म त निकैबेर जोडजोडले खै केके बर्बराएँ । डाक्टरले मलाई स्वरयन्त्रको गडबडीका कारण ठूलो स्वरले नबोल्न भनेका छन्, स्वरै भासिएछ । केटो र हाम्रा बीच सडकका चार लेन हुनाले सडक पार गर्न निकैबेर पर्खनुपर्थ्यो । तर केहीबेरमा एउटा अधबैसे र दुईतीन केटा आएर उसलाई उठाए । तिनीहरूले त्यसलाई उभ्याउन खोजे । बिचराको आधा तिघ्रादेखि तल घुँडो र आधा नलीहाड भित्रभित्रै धूलोपिठो भइसकेको र हाडछाला पेलिएर एकदुई ठाउँबाट सेतो मासु निस्किरहेको थियो, कसरी उभियोस् !

रगतको धारो बग्नु थाल्यो । त्यस अधबैसेले आफ्नो गम्छाले रगत आएको ठाउँमा कसेर बाँध्यो । एकै छिनमा एउटी मैलीधैली आइमाई र दुईतीन भुन्टाभुन्टी आए । ती त्यस केटाका बाबुआमा र भाइबहिनी हुनुपर्छ । मलाई लाग्यो तिनीहरूसँग त्यस केटाको उपचार गर्ने पैसा थिएन । केटालाई 'आटो'मा हालेर अस्पताल पुर्याउने पनि तिनको हैसियत थिएन । तिनीहरूले केटालाई सडकको छेउमा लगे । अब तिनीहरूलाई रुने फुर्सत निस्क्यो । आइमाई र केटाकेटी रुन थाले । सडकको पारिपट्टि भएकाले तिनीहरू रोएको चाहिँ हामी भएठाउँबाट उति सुनिन्नथ्यो ।

सहर आफ्नै गतिमा गइरहेको थियो । न प्रहरी, न एम्बुलेन्स । न रमिते न स्वयम्सेवी । सहरी संवेदनशीलता !

हाम्रो काठमाडौँमा भएको भए रमितेहरूको ठूलो भीड लाग्ने थियो । अर्काको दुःखमा मात्र हाँस्न जान्ने काठमाडौँका मानिसहरू घाइतेको छटपटाहट हेर्न ठेलाठेल गर्ने थिए । बसहरू रोकिने थिए । दुर्घटना गराउने ड्राइभरले मरणान्त हुन्जेल कुटाइ खाने थियो र त्यस बसका सिसा फुटेर सडकभरि छरिने थिए । यातायात अवरुद्ध हुने थियो । सबैथोक हुने थियो तर त्यस केटाको उपचारचाहिँ बाबुआमा कमजोर भएमा अस्पताल पुर्याए पनि हुने थिएन ।

केही घण्टापछि पुलिस घटनास्थलमा आउने थियो र रमिता हेर्ने थियो । रात परेपछि सबै आ-आफ्ना घर लाग्ने थिए र भोलिपल्टदेखि सबै कुरा पुरानै तालमा चल्ने थियो । सबैले अधिल्लो दिनको त्यो घटना सपना विर्सैभैँ बिर्सने थिए ।

यही घटना मेरो इटहरीमा घटेको भए त्यो बस जल्ने थियो । विरामीलाई जुन गाडी पहिले आइपुग्छ त्यसलाई रोकेर स्थानीय युवाहरूले अस्पताल पठाउने थिए । सके डाइभर भाग्ने थियो, नसके पुलिसचौकीमा पसेर जोगिने थियो, त्यति पनि नसक्ने लाटो डाइभर परेछ भने टोलका युवाहरूको मुक्का अभ्यास गर्ने वस्तु बन्ने थियो । त्यसका दाँत भाँचिने, गाला पुरी फुलेभैँ फुल्ने र लुगा सय टुक्रा हुन्जेल च्यातिने थिए । पुलिस र स्थानीय मानिसहरूका बीच मारपिट चल्ने थियो, आठ-दस टायर बल्ने थिए, दुईचार बस वा ट्रक धुलिने थिए, टाढाटाढा जानुपर्ने यात्रु अलपत्र पर्ने थिए अनि रिक्सावालहरूले दुईचार सय कमाइ गर्ने थिए । मानिसहरू आफ्नो मनभित्र गुम्सिएर रहेको आगो र रिस-आवेग मानिस, गाडी र सडकमा पोखिसकेपछि थाकेर घर जाने थिए । तर घाइते अस्पतालमा जिउँदै पुग्यो भन्ने खबर आएमा उसको औषधिपानी हुने सम्भावना अवश्य हुन्थ्यो ।

तर यो आगरा थियो । यहाँ हामीकहाँ गरिने कुनै सडक-रीत र परम्पराको पालन हुँदो रहेनछ । यहाँ गरिब र घाइतेहरूको दुःखबाट मनोरञ्जन लिने मानिसको समेत अभाव भइसकेको रहेछ ।

प्रेम र सुन्दरताको महान् प्रतीक ताजमहलको आँगनमा मानवतालाई यन्त्रहरूले बाल्यकालमै किचेर समाप्त पार्ने रहेछन् । प्रेम र मानवता आगरामा समेत ताजमहलको मकबराभित्र पुरिइसकेको रहेछ ।

हामी नाटकको पटाक्षेप भएपछि एउटा 'आटो' रिजर्भ गर्‍यौँ । 'आटो' क्वारारारा गर्दै दक्षिण लाग्यो । पश्चिमपट्टि लालकिल्ला थियो । बाटो अत्यन्त फराक, सफा र व्यस्त । अलिक पर पुगेपछि अर्थात् लालकिल्लाभन्दा अघि बढेपछि लालकिल्लाको मूलगेटतिरबाट आउने बाटो हामी गइरहेको बाटामा आएर मिसियो । अब हामी क्रमशः ताजमहलतिर लाग्दै थियौँ ।

केहीबेरमा टेम्पो ताजमहलको प्रवेशद्वारमा पुगेर अडियो । त्यहाँ सानोतिनो बजार रहेछ । बजार त्यति व्यवस्थित नभए पनि फोहोर भने थिएन । हामी ताजमहलतिर लाग्यौँ । रिक्सावालहरू हामीतिर आए ।

२७. ताजमहल

'आ... ताजमहलको मूलगेटबाट त छिरिसकियो, अब केको रिक्सा ?' मैले भनेँ । हाम्रो टोली हिँडेरै जाने भयो । पैदल आउनेजानेहरू प्रशस्त थिए । तर बगैँचाको बाटो हिँड्दाहिँड्दा एक किलोमिटर पर पुगेपछि मात्र ताजमहलको चहलपहल भेटियो । अर्को बाटो आएर मिलेको ठाउँमा रिक्सा, टाँगा र उँटगाडीहरू यात्रुहरूलाई लिएर हिँड्न तम्तयार थिए । बाटाकिनारमा ठेलामा खानेकुरा, भेलपुरी, भुटेका बदाम र मकै बेच्नेहरू कुनै साधारण सहरबजारमा जस्तै गरी आफ्ना ग्राहकहरूलाई सामान दिन र पैसा लिनमा व्यस्त थिए ।

ताजमहलको त्यस गेटबाट डेढ किलोमिटरजति भित्र पसेपछि निकै भीडभाड भएको अर्को गेट आयो । यहाँ मानिसहरू लहरमा उभिएका थिए । पुलिस र स्वयम्सेवकहरू पनि यताउता गरिरहेका थिए । महिला र पुरुषका अलगअलग लहर थिए भने उनीहरू भित्र छिर्ने ठाउँ पनि अलगअलग थिए । टिकट काट्नुपर्ने र आफ्नो सरसामान राख्ने ठाउँमा लगेर भोला आदि सामान जिम्मा दिनुपर्ने नियम रहेछ । यो गेटचाहिँ ताजमहल छिर्ने मुख्य गेट रहेछ । टिकट काटेपछि सीता र छोरीहरू एकातिरको महिला लहरमा लागे भने म अर्कातिर पुरुषको लहरमा लागें । पतिपत्नीको सम्बन्धको महिमा विश्वभरि यहाँजति मीठो धुनमा केही गाइन्न तर यहीँ पतिपत्नीलाई अलगअलग बाटाबाट पस्नुपर्ने, विडम्बना ! महिलाको लहर छोटो थियो । मानिसहरू भित्र पस्नुअघि जीउ छामछुम पाउँदै सुरक्षाजाँच गरिँदो रहेछ । सीता र छोरीहरू भित्र पसिहाले, मैले केहीबेर रोकिनुपर्थ्यो । दसपन्ध्र मिनेटपछि हाम्रो परिवारको पुनर्मिलन भयो । हामी भित्रको सुन्दर हरियो दुबोको चौर, वरिपरिका सुन्दर सुरक्षाभवनहरू हेर्दै रमायौँ । विश्वमा प्रेम र सुन्दरताको अनुपम नमुना बनेर उभिएको यो ताजमहल विश्वका सात मानवनिर्मित आश्चर्यमध्ये एक हो ।

एकाउन्न सालमा म कानपुरबाट ताजमहलतिर आउन लागेको थिएँ । एउटा कानपुरसँग आफू ताजमहल जान लागेको र त्यहाँ जाँदा मैले थाहा पाइराख्नुपर्ने कुरा केके होलान् भनेर भनेँ । उसले मलाई अनौठा आँखाले हेर्‍यो—

'भाईजी, आप अकेले ताजमहल क्यों जा रहे हैं ? आप के अन्दर कोई गहरा घाव है क्या ?'

मैले भनेँ- 'यह दिल मेरा अपना है । मै उतना बेवकूफ नहीं कि कोई अन्दर घुसकर यह दिल टुकडे टुकडे करता रहे, मै देखता रहूँ और वो सही सलामत बाहर निकल पाये !'

मैले प्रेमस्रेमको फोस्रो धन्दामा लाग्न कहिल्यै भ्याइँनँ, अथवा चाहिनँ । अथवा अझ यसो भन्नु बेस होला : ममा त्यस्तो चमत्कारी गुण केही नभएकाले कुनै लोभलाग्दी केटीले प्रेमप्रस्ताव गम्भीरतापूर्वक राखेनन्, मैले पनि कसैलाई हुरक्क भएर चाहिनँ । एकदुई केटीहरूले हल्काफुल्का प्रेमप्रस्ताव नराखेका होइनन् र एकदुई 'राम्री' देखेर म पनि नलोभिएको चाहिँ होइन । तर त्यस्ता कुराले ममा खासै तरङ्ग पैदा गर्न सकेनन् ।

अहिले मसित आफू एकतीस वर्षको उमेर हुँदा मागी बिहे गरेकी श्रीमती छिन् । मैले उनीसँगको सम्बन्धलाई माया, आदर र भरोसा गर्नुपर्छ र यस सम्बन्धलाई नोक्सान पुऱ्याउन खोज्ने हरेक व्यक्ति, घटना र परिभाषालाई दुत्कार्नुपर्छ । हामी नेपालीहरू विवाहले दिएको प्रेमका पक्षपाती हौं ।

कानपुरेले त्यसवेला सोधेको थियो- 'तो आप क्यो तजमहल जा रहे है ?'

म छक्क परें । विश्वको त्यत्रो चर्चित सिर्जना हेर्न पनि कुनै विशिष्ट कारण चाहिन्छ र ? मैले उसतिर प्रश्नसूचक आँखा तेर्स्याँ ।

उसले भन्यो- 'आप अविवाहित है तो आगे जाना मत, विवाह के बाद अपनी पत्नी के साथ यहाँ आइएगा ।'

'क्यों?'

'अकेले तो टूटे हुए प्रेमी ही यहाँ आते हैं!'

मैले उसका कुरा बुझिहालें । मैले उसलाई आफू प्रेमस्रेमका फोस्रा धन्दामाथि विश्वास गर्दिनँ, अबको एकदुई वर्षभित्रमा बिहे गरेर शान्तिपूर्वक जीवन जिउने मन छ, भनँ । ऊ हाँस्यो ।

'भाइजी, प्रेममा धोका खान को चाहन्छ, र ? तर मायाप्रेम एक खतरनाक खेल पनि त हो, जो पनि फँस्नसक्छ । भैगो, छाडौं यस्ता कुरा, म फेरि बिन्ती गर्छु- तपाईं अहिलेलाई यहाँभन्दा अगाडि नजानुहोला । यो यात्रा पत्नी लिएर मात्र गर्नुहोला ।'

कानपुरेको सोचाइ मलाई राम्रो लाग्यो । उसको आग्रह मानेर आगराका लागि ट्रेनको टिकट काट्न लागेको मानिस म सोभै इलाहाबादतिर उछिट्टिएको थिएँ । त्यसै भएर आज यो आगरा मेरा लागि नयाँ रहिरहेको थियो ।

हामी ताजमहलको खास द्वारबाट जाँचपास भई भित्र पसिसकेका थियौं । यसपल्ट त्यस कानपुरेको आदेशअनुसार नै म सपत्नी ताजमहल आएको थिएँ । मानिसहरू यताउति गरिरहेका थिए । कोही चउरमा डड्ङ्ग पल्टिरहेका, कोही दुई-चारजनाको समूहमा आपसी कुराकानीमा मस्त । दिनको दुई बजेको थियो र आगरामा गर्मी प्रचण्ड थियो । तर हामीलाई त्यो गर्मी अनुभव गर्ने फुर्सत थिएन । अचम्मखाले शीतलताले हामी छोपिएका थियौं । जताततै हरियाली र शान्तिले हामीलाई लठ्ठाइरहेको थियो । विश्व यहाँ एउटा घर बनेको थियो । संसारका प्रेमीहरू यहाँ थुप्रिएका थिए । प्रेमको बलवान् तेज र मधुर मादकताले मानिसहरू मातेका थिए । सम्पूर्ण संसार साँगुरिएर प्रेमको कारागारमा थुनिन्छ यहाँ । प्रेमको यस राजधानीमा आइपुगेपछि मानिस मुक्त हुन्छ, ऊ प्रेमको पुजारी र भक्त हुन्छ । प्रेमको विश्वव्यापी रूप हेर्न ताजमहल पुग्नैपर्छ ।

हामी मानिसहरूको विचित्रको हूलमा थियौं । शान्ति नै यस राज्यको शक्ति थियो । राम्रासमा भारतीय युवायुवतीहरू सुन्दर पहिरनमा सजिएर आफ्नो प्रेम अर्कालाई सुम्पन पाई हल्का भएको महसुस गरिरहेका थिए । युरोप, अमेरिका, अफ्रिका र एसियाभरिका मानिसहरू थुप्रिएर आज आफ्नो जीवनभरिको सपना पूरा भएकामा अर्धपागलभै बर्बराइरहेका पनि भेटिए ।

अझै अगाडि अर्को गेट छिर्नु थियो । त्यहाँ पनि मानिसहरू लाइन लागेर भित्र पसिरहेका थिए । यो गेट पनि आफैँमा एउटा ताजमहल थियो । ताजमहलको सुन्दरताको अंश यसमा सर्वत्र पोलिएको थियो ।

गेटबाट भित्र पस्यौं । हाम्रो जीवनको चरमोत्कर्षको क्षण थियो त्यो । ताजमहल सम्पूर्ण रूपमा हाम्रा अगाडि स्पष्ट र ठिङ्ग उभिइरहेको थियो । विश्वका सम्पूर्ण सुन्दरताहरू यहाँ सोहोरिएका थिए । विश्वको सम्पूर्ण प्रेम यहीँबाट निःसृत हुन्थ्यो र विश्वका सम्पूर्ण कलाले यहाँ आएर पूर्णता पाएका थिए । मुमताजमहलको प्रेममा डुबेका शाहजहाँले बनाएको अमर कृति मेरा अगाडि थियो । न अब कसैले यस्तो अनुपम सृष्टि गर्नेछ, न इतिहासमा कहीं यसो गर्न कसैले सकेको थियो । माया-प्रेमको सर्वसुन्दर सर्वोत्कृष्ट अभिव्यक्ति हाम्रा अगाडि, मेरा अगाडि थियो । मलाई लाग्यो : अब समय यहीँ अडिए ! अब संसार यतिमै रोकिए !

तर हामी बिस्तारै सन्हालिदै गयौं । लगभग आधा घण्टा एकै ठाउँबाट निर्निमेष हेरिसकेपछि हाम्रो केही होस फिरेछ क्यारे, फोटो खिच्न थाल्यौं । भावातिरेकले नै हो, हामीले हाम्रा वरिपरिका मानिस के गर्दै छन् त्यतिबेरसम्म हेर्न भ्याएकै थिएनौं । मानिसहरू हाम्रा लागि यताउता चलमलाइरहने रङ्गीचङ्गी कपडाधारी गुडियाहरू मात्र भएका थिए, ती धमाधम समूहमा र एकल फोटो खिचिरहेका रहेछन् । हामीले पनि ताजमहललाई पछि पारेर परिवारको फोटो खिचिमाग्यौं । फोटो खिचिदिने एकजना भाइ थिए । उनी दिल्लीमा काम गर्ने एकजना नेपाली डाक्टरका छोरा रहेछन् ।

तर हामीसँग उनीहरूसँग चिनारी गरेर अल्मलिने समय थिएन, उनीहरू पनि उस्तै हतारमा थिए होलान् । सामान्य कुराकानी गरी हामी आ-आफ्ना धुनमा लाग्यौं । ताजमहल स्पर्श गर्न बाँकी नै थियो । अगाडिको सुन्दर बगैँचामा मन छर्दै हामी ताजमहलतर्फ बढ्यौं । रङ्गीचङ्गी लुगा लगाएका मानिसहरू महलअगाडिको बगैँचामा बिस्तारै डुलिरहेका थिए । संसारभरिका मानिसहरूसँग मिसिन पाएकामा म दङ्ग थिएँ भने सीता अवाक् भएर ताजमहलको अप्रतिम रूप हेरिरहेकी थिइन् । हामी बिस्तारै ताजमहलको अनुपम रूपको आस्वादन गर्दै फूलबारीका बीचैबीच बनेका सुन्दर मार्गहरू भएर अघि बढिरहेका थियौं । हाम्रा लागि सम्पूर्ण विश्वको केन्द्र यहीं भएको थियो, सम्पूर्ण सम्पूर्णताहरू यहीं जुटेका थिए र सम्पूर्ण उज्याला, न्याना र शीतल शक्तिहरूको मूल पनि यही थियो ।

संसारभरिबाट प्रेममेला भर्न आएकाहरूका बीचमा हुनुको स्वाद अर्कै हुँदो रहेछ । नाइजेरियाली, जोर्डानी, यहूदी, कोरियाली, जापानी, मलेसियाली, जर्मन, अमेरिकी, बेलाइती, चिनियाँ, भारतीय, रुसी, फ्रान्सेली, अस्ट्रेलियाली, ग्रीसेली, मिश्रवासी र अरू कहाँकहाँदेखि भेला भएकाहरूका बीचमा नेपाली भाषामा निर्धक्क कुराकानी गर्दै हिँडिरहनुको मजा अर्कै हुने रहेछ । विश्वको एक महान् आश्चर्य यो ताजमहल, तर यति नजिकैको यस विश्वतीर्थको दर्शन गर्न पनि मैले यति वर्षपछि मात्र चिताएँछु ।

केहीबेर वरपर हेर्‍यो । महलको सुन्दरता पिउँदै हामीले आफ्ना नजर वरपर दौडायौं । महलको बरन्डा निकै अग्लो भएकाले वरिपरि मजाले हेर्न पाइने । सबैतिर हरियाली, शान्ति र खुलापन । उत्तरपट्टिबाट शान्त यमुना नदी पूर्वतर्फ लागेको । दिल्लीलाई नुहाइदिएर, मथुरालाई धोएर अनि आगरालाई पखालेर यो नदी इलाहाबाद पुग्छ । इलाहाबादको कसरमसरसमेत बटुलेर अघि बढ्दै गङ्गाजीसँग मिलेर प्रयागमा समस्त हिन्दू जातिको शुद्धिका लागि युगयुगदेखि प्रयत्नरत छ । यमुना नदीको शान्त पानीमा पारिपट्टिका उपनगरीय क्षेत्रहरूको छाया टल्केर हेर्नलायक दृश्य बन्दछ । चारैतिर 'जगन्नाथी'का बुटामुटीले जङ्गलको अनुभूति दिने । परपरसम्म मुगल ढाँचाका अनेक मस्जिद, सैनिक भवन र घरहरू, आज ती सबै भवनहरू पुरातात्विक महत्त्व बोकेर संसारलाई भारतको महिमा बताइरहेका छन् । प्रेम त्यहाँको संविधान, सुन्दरता त्यहाँको कानून र शान्ति त्यहाँको धर्म !

असोजको चौबीस गते भइसकेको छ तर गर्मी बयान गरीनसक्नु छ । पानी खाएको खायै । हामी पसिनैपसिना भएका छौं ।

आगराको गर्मीमा ताजमहलमा नाङ्गै खुट्टा हिँड्नु कष्टकर अनि स्मरणयोग्य अभ्यास हुन्छ । त्यसो त त्यस तातोबाट बच्न विशेषखाले जुता भाडामा पाइने रहेछन् तर हामीले लाएनौं । आफ्ना जुताचप्पल लगाएर हिँड्न नपाइने, मुसलमानहरूको तीर्थस्थल भएर हुनुपर्छ ।

यमुनापारिका विशाल उद्योगधन्दाहरूबाट निस्कने दूषित पदार्थहरूले गर्दा ताजमहल क्रमशः क्षय हुँदै गएको र यसको रङ-परिवर्तन हुँदै गएको गुनासो निकै अघिदेखि मैले सुन्दैपढ्दै आएको थिएँ । पारिपट्टिका विशाल औद्योगिक प्रतिष्ठानहरूबाट उत्पन्न विकारबाट वातावरणीय हास आउन नदिन सरकारले विशेष प्रबन्ध गरेको छ भन्ने सुन्न पाइयो । तर यमुनाको त्यो शान्त पानी दिल्ली, मथुरा र आगराको समस्त फोहोर बटुलेर आएकाले दुर्गन्धपूर्ण छ । त्यत्रो नदीलाई नै बिटुल्याउन सक्ने हामी मानवजाति पनि शक्तिशाली नै रहेछौं !

हामी भित्र पसेर त्यसका भित्री सुन्दरता छाम्न खोज्दै थियौं, केही मानिसहरू भित्रको दक्षिणी खण्डबाट भुइँमुनि केही चिहाइरहेका थिए । सीताले पनि फलामे जालीबाट मुनितिर चिहाइन् । म पनि पुगें ।

छोरीहरूले सोधे- 'के छ त्यहाँ ?'

त्यहाँ बेगम मुमताजमहलको खास मकबरा अर्थात् चिहान थियो । त्यसै मकबराका छेउमा बादशाह शाहजहाँको मकबरा पनि थियो । हुन त त्यस्तै आकारको एक मकबरा बाहिरै पनि थियो । सिलिडबाट अनौठो आवाज आइरहेको सुनियो । चमेराहरू रहेछन् ।

ताजमहलको उत्तरपट्टि ताजमहलकै छायामा हामी एकछिन सुस्तायौं । भित्तामा कुँदिएका बहुमूल्य पत्थर र रङ्गबिरङ्गी सिङ्गरमरका बुट्टाहरूमा बिछट्टै रमाइने रहेछ । समय दगुदै थियो । छोरीहरू महलको उत्तरी पर्खालबाट नदीतिरै हेर्दै 'आम्मे ! कति अग्लो !' भनिरहेका थिए । उता पश्चिमपट्टिको भवनमा मुसलमानहरू नमाज पढ्न थालिसकेका थिए ।

बेलुकाको पाँच बजेको होला, म प्रायः घडी बाँध्दैनँ । बिस्तारै केही पोज फोटो खिँचेर हामी अब त्यस प्रेममहलबाट प्रेमधर्म अँगालेर हिँड्न लागेका थियौँ ।

ताजमहलको विशाल आँगनमा हामी बिस्तारै हिँड्न थाल्यौँ । हरेक पाइलाले हामीलाई त्यस प्रेममन्दिरबाट टाढा पारिरहेका थिए, त्यसको मोहकताको डोरीले हामीलाई कसेर उतै तानिरहन्थ्यो । हामी केहीबेर बगैँचामा बस्यौँ । गर्मीले जीउबाट तरतर पसिना बगिरहेकै थियो । उता मनमस्तिष्क प्रेमसागरमा नुहाएभैं भएको थियो । छाती प्रेमसागरमा डुबुल्की मारिरहेको थियो । जतिसुकै अनिच्छा भए पनि हामी ताजमहल छाड्न बाध्य थियौँ । जतिसुकै अनिच्छा भए पनि मृत्यु स्विकार्नुपरेभैं । आजको दिन हाम्रा लागि हाम्रा मनमा भएका प्रेमभावलाई सिँगार्ने, पूजा गर्ने र चिरञ्जीवी बनाउन वचनबद्ध हुने दिन थियो । हामी एक-एक हृदय प्रेम बटुली गर्दा मन बनाएर महलबाहिर निस्क्यौँ । टोकन बुझाएर आफ्ना भोला बुझ्नुपर्दा मृत्युपछि चित्रगुप्तलाई आफ्ना कर्मको टोकन बुझाएर नर्कातिर लाग्नुपरेभैं भइरह्यो ।

तर खेद धेरै थिएन, हामीले एउटा तीर्थ धाएर निकै धर्म कमाइसकेका थियौँ । पश्चिमपट्टि विशाल लालकिल्ला हामीलाई स्वागत गरिरहेको थियो । घोडागाडा, आटो र उँटगाडाहरू हामीलाई पर्खिरहेका थिए । लालकिल्लाको दृश्यपान गर्ने नयाँ लालसा मनभित्र पलाइसकेको थियो । यस्तै लालसाहरू, आशाहरूले त हो हामीलाई अघि बढ्ने तागत दिने । घाम पहेँलिइसकेका थिए । हामीले एउटा घोडागाडी पक्रेर लालकिल्ला पुग्ने विचार गर्नुपर्ने ।

आगराको लाल किल्ला दिल्लीकै लालकिल्लाकै आकारप्रकारमा बनेको छ भनेर मानिसहरूले भने । राजा अकबरले आफ्नो एउटा राजधानी दिल्लीलाई बनाएका थिए भने अर्को राजधानी यसै आगरा सहरलाई बनाएका थिए । हाम्रो घोडागाडी आगराको लालकिल्लाअगाडि आइसकेको थियो । बेलुका घाम अस्ताउन लागेका थिए, हाम्रातिरका हिसाबले भन्ने हो भने रात परिसकेको हो तर पर्यटकहरू किल्लाभित्र छिरिरहेका थिए । भित्र छिर्ने र बाहिर निस्कनेहरूको दोहोरीलत्ताका बीच सीता र छोरीहरूलाई अलि परबाट मैले फोटोभित्र च्यापें ।

२८. लालकिल्ला

अकबरले एकपल्ट दिल्लीमा छँदा आफ्ना अरू मूर्ख मन्त्रीहरूको उलामालामा लागेर विद्वान् मन्त्री वीरबललाई अप्ठेरामा पार्न खोजेछन् । उनले वीरबललाई दिल्लीमा कति काग छन् ठ्याक्क भन्न भनेछन् । वीरबल त औधि बाठा, उनले तत्काल बीस हजार सात सय पैतालीस या त्यस्तै एउटा सङ्ख्या भनेछन् ।

बादशाह तीनछक्क ! बादशाहले सोधेछन्- 'वीरबल ! तिमीले कसरी कागको सङ्ख्या ठ्याक्कै त्यति छ भनेर भन्न सक्यौ ?'

‘जहाँपनाह ! मेरो हिसाबमा विश्वास नलागे गन्न लगाउनुभए हुन्छ ?’

‘घटीबढी रहेछन् भने ?’

‘हे गरिवपरवर ! कागहरू आगरा गएका बेला दिल्लीमा कम हुनसक्छन् । यसैगरी आगराका काग पाहुना लाग्ने यता आएका रहेछन् भने गन्ती बढ्नसक्छ ।’ अकबरको दिल्ली र आगरा गरिरहने विलासी बानीप्रति गतिलो व्यङ्ग्य थियो वीरबलको यो । भारतीय हास्यवङ्ग्यकथाहरूका यी विचित्र पात्र नेपाली थिए भनेर कतिपय इतिहासकारको भनाइ छ ।

सीता लालकिल्लाको विशालतामाथि आँखा घुमाउँदै थिइन् । उनी छोरीहरूलाई केके देखाइरहेकी थिइन्, सायद किल्लाका बरन्डाहरू उनलाई अनौठा लागेका थिए । मैले छेउमा पुगेर सोधें-

‘के हेरेको एकोहोरिएर ?’

‘उ : हेर्नु न, गेट बन्द गर्ने कस्तो गजबको काइदा !’

गहिरो न गहिरो नहरजस्तो खाडल छ, पूरै किल्लाको वरिपरि । लिस्नोबेगर चढ्न र उक्लन कस्तैले पनि सक्तै नसक्ने गहिरो । मूलढोका भएको ठाउँमा एउटा गजबको पुल छ । मोटा फलामे साङ्गलाले बाँधेको त्यो मोटो न मोटो काठे पुल तान्दा उचालिएर मूलढोका बन्द गर्ने रहेछ । किल्लामाथि हमला गर्न खोज्नेले त्यस ढोकाबाट बाहेक अन्यत्र

कतैबाट पनि पस्न सक्ने देखिएन । किल्ला अत्यन्त सुरक्षित लाग्यो । हामी टिकट काट्ने र पोकापुन्तुरा जिम्मा लगाउने ठाउँ हुँदै रीतपूर्वक अधि बढ्यौं । मलाई लालकिल्लाबारे भन्नु केही थिएन । मेरा मुखबाट वाह ! वाफ रे ! या यस्तै आश्चर्य व्यक्त गर्ने ध्वनि वा शब्दसम्म निस्किएनन् । त्यति गर्न पनि मसित फुर्सत थिएन । भारत उस जमानामा पनि कति धनी र सैनिक रूपले सबल थियो भन्ने हेर्न यही भवन पर्याप्त थियो । मेरा आँखा अकबर र वीरबलले तर्क गरेका ठाउँ खोजिरहे । उनीहरूका बीच चल्ने शाब्दिक पौँठेजोरी यहीँ कतै हुनसक्थे ।

कान्छी छोरी पूर्वपट्टिको एउटा बरन्डामा पुगेपछि, अत्यन्त उँचाइमा पुगेको अनुभूतिले चिच्याउन थाली - 'यस्तो अग्लो बरन्डामा बसेर पनि वीरबल कसरी जोक गर्न सक्थे ? डर लाग्दैनथ्यो उनलाई ?'

'अकबर र वीरबलका यही किल्लामा बसेर अनेक ठट्टारमाइलो गर्थे । समय उड्यो, यमुनामा कति हो कति पानी बग्यो तर उनीहरूले यमुनाकिनारको यस विशाल किल्लामा गरेका ठट्टाचौलीहरू किंवदन्ती भएर घरघर डुलीरहेकै छन् । यसै किनारबाट अँधेरी रातमा उनीहरूले गनेका ताराहरू र उजेली रातमा हेरेकी चन्द्रमा उसै गरी घुमिरहेकै छन् । संसारले कला, साहित्य, विज्ञान, इन्जिनियरिङ, औषधिविज्ञान र अनेक क्षेत्रमा कति हो कति विकास गरिसक्यो तर उनीहरूले बनाएको यो लालकिल्ला अझै आश्चर्यजनक र मनमोहक लागि रहेकै छ ।' मैले लामो भाषण गरें ।

अनुजा खुट्टा मर्काउँदै यताउता हिँड्न थाली । सीता कराउन थालिन्- 'के गरी हिँडेकी ? लडौली नि !'

'राजा अकबर भएर हिँडेकी । उनले यस टाइलमा खुट्टा राखे होलान् अनि यस टाइलमा खुट्टा राखे होलान्, अनि यस टाइलमा पनि खुट्टा राखे होलान् ।' ऊ आफूलाई बादशाह अकबर ठान्दै नागबेली पाराले हिँडिरहेकी थिई ।

'ताजमहल बनाउने राजा पनि अकबरकै सन्तान हुन् । बादशाह शाहजहाँ भन्ने ठूला शासक भारतमा शासन गर्थे । ती राजाकी रानीको नाम बेगम मुमताजमहल थियो । फारसी भाषामा राजालाई बादशाह र रानीलाई बेगम भनिन्छ । बादशाहकी बेगमको अचानक मृत्यु भयो । आफ्नी बेगमको मृत्युले राजा हदै दुःखित भए । उनी बेगमको सम्झनामा रातोदिन पिरोलिन थाले । उनलाई कति हो कति पीर प्यो । राजा रानीकै सम्झनामा रातदिन भोक्राएर रहन थाले । अचानक उनले उठेर भने-

'म मेरी बेगमको मकबरा यस्तो खुबसुरत बनाउनेछु कि संसारमा न आजसम्म कुनै राजा-महाराजाले त्यस्तो बनाउन सकेको छ न भविष्यमा कसैले बनाउन सकोस् । मेरी बेगमको सम्झनालाई चिरस्थायी बनाएरै छाड्नेछु ।'

छोरीहरू पूर्वदक्षिणतर्फको विशालकाय ताजमहलतिर नियालिरहेका थिए । ताजमहल यहाँबाट सामुन्ने खडा थियो । पूजाले भनी-

'राजा शाहजहाँले त्यो ताजमहल आफ्नी रानीको मृत्युपछि चिहान बनाउनका लागि मात्र बनाउन लगाएका होलान् त ?'

'हो, उनले आफ्नी रानीको चिहान सकेसम्म कलापूर्ण पार्न अत्यन्त विशिष्ट इन्जिनियरहरू, विशिष्ट कलाकारहरू, हजारौं शिल्पी र कालिगडहरूलाई बसौं काममा लगाए । उनले बीस हजार मानिसहरूलाई सोह्र वर्षसम्म हरेक दिन काममा लगाएका थिए ।' म फेरि स्कुलको मास्टर भइसकेको थिएँ ।

'बीस हजार मानिसलाई हरेक दिन सोह्र वर्षसम्म ?'

'हो, बीस हजार मानिसले हरेक दिन सोह्र वर्षसम्म काम गर्नुपरेको थियो ताजमहल बनाउन ।'

'खै त्यति ठूलो त छैन त त्यत्रा धेरै मानिसहरूले बनाएको भने पनि ?'

'त्यसो त हो, तर त्यो ठूलो भएर चर्चामा आएको हैन । त्यो त सिङ्गरमरमा कुँदिएका अनुपम बुट्टा र बहुमूल्य पत्थरहरूका कारण प्रसिद्ध भएको हो । ताजमहलमा लगाइएका पत्थर र तिनमा कुँदिएका विचित्र चित्रकारीका कारण यो विश्वकै एक अद्वितीय मानवसिर्जना मानिन्छ ।'

'बाबा, ताजमहल बनाउने बादशाहले रानी मर्दा त्यत्रोविधि शोक गर्नुको कारण के थियो ?'

'मलाई शाहजहाँका बारेमा धेरै त थाहा छैन तैपनि जानेका कुरा यति हो : शाहजहाँ मुगल बादशाह जहाँगिरका साहिँला छोरा थिए । उनी चालीस वर्षजतिका छँदा सन् १६३१ मा उनका बाबुको मृत्यु भयो । उनी जन्मथलो लाहोरबाट राजधानी आगरा आए । उनले आफ्ना दाजुहरूको हत्या गरेर शासन आफ्नो हातमा पारे । शाहजहाँले दक्षिणी भारतका अनेक राजाहरूसँग युद्ध गरेर आफ्नो सिमाना पूर्वमा बङ्गाल र पश्चिममा अफगानिस्तानसम्म फैलाए । यसरी उनी आजका बङ्गलादेश, पाकिस्तान, अफगानिस्तान र भारतका लगभग सबै भूभागका एकछत्र शासक भए ।

उनका हरेक कदममा रानीले साथ दिन्थिन् । बादशाह तिनको प्रेममा पागल थिए । तर एउटा लडाइँमा उनकी रानी घाइते हुन पुगिन् र त्यसै कारणले मरिन् । शाहजहाँलाई पर्नु पीर पयो । जुन रानीको मन जित्नका लागि उनले संसारसँग युद्ध गरे, तिनकै मृत्यु भएपछि उनलाई आफ्नो जीवन निरर्थक लाग्न थाल्यो । उनले आफ्नी रानीको सम्झनामा सारा धनसम्पत्ति र सामर्थ्य खर्च गर्ने विचार गरे । यसकारण उनले सोह्रसत्र वर्ष बीसौँ हजार कालिगडको श्रम खर्च गरेर यसरी आफ्नी रानीप्रति श्रद्धाञ्जलि अर्पेका थिए । हामीले ताजमहलभित्र चिहाएर हेरेको चिहान उनकी तिनै रानी मुमताजमहलको हो । बादशाह किल्लाको यसै भागमा बसेर दिनहुँ ताजमहलतिर हेरिरहन्थे अरे ।’ हामी शाहजहाँले ताजमहलतिर हेर्ने गरेको बरन्डामा आइपुगेका थियौँ । केही पोज फोटो पनि खिच्यौँ यहाँबाट हामीले । अलिक अगाडि बढेपछि, हामी एउटा सुन्दर कोठाअगाडि पुग्यौँ । सिसैसिसाले घेरिएर बनेको त्यो सिसमहल देखेर अनुजाले सोधी-

‘बाबा ! यो सिसाको कोठामा चाहिँ को बस्थ्यो ?’

‘बादशाह शाहजहाँ केही वर्षपछि बिरामी परे । उनका छोरा औरङ्गजेबले बाबु बहुलाए भनेर उनलाई यसै कोठामा कैद गरेर शासनसत्ता हातमा लिए ।’

‘बाबुलाई कैद गरीगरी शासनसत्ता लिन के हतार एउटा छोरालाई ?’ सीताले सोधिन् ।

‘त्यो त उनै जानुन्, तर शासन हातमा आउनासाथ औरङ्गजेबले आफ्नो देशको सिमाना बढाए । दक्षिणी भारतका केही देशहरू बाबुका पालासम्म स्वतन्त्र रहिरहेका थिए । उनले बाबुले जित्न नसकेका दक्षिणी भारतका हिन्दू राजाहरूलाई हराएर ती भूभाग पनि आफ्नै देशमा गाभ्न सके । यसरी भारतको इतिहासमा औरङ्गजेबले सबैभन्दा ठूलो राज्यका राजाको रूपमा आफूलाई स्थापित गरे । बादशाह शाहजहाँ यसै कोठामा बसेर ताजमहलतर्फ एकोहोरो हेरिरहन्थे । ती पागल प्रेमी शाहजहाँ कैदी अवस्थामै मरे ।’

म इतिहासको शिक्षक भइरहेको थिएँ । हामी हतारहतार गर्दै लालकिल्लाका अन्य भागहरूतिर बढ्यौँ । तर समय हामीबाट झुन्झुन् भागिरहेको थियो । अबै पनि मानिसहरू किल्लाको भ्रमण गर्न भर्खर पस्दै पनि थिए । बत्तीको झिलिमिलीमा हामी बाहिर निस्क्यौँ । यता हाम्रातिर भएको भए सबै मानिस आ-आफ्ना घरघर पसिसकेका हुने थिए, त्यहाँ त भरखर घुम्न निस्कने बेला हुँदै थियो । शान्तिले दिने स्वतन्त्रताको यस्तो मीठो स्वाद कहिले चाख्ने होला हामी नेपालीले ?

२९. माग्नेसँग मोबाइल

घडी हेर्ने, रातको आठ बजेको रहेछ । अब दिल्ली जानु थियो । बस या ट्रेनमा त्यहाँ पुग्दा लगभग बाह्र बजे देखियो । नयाँ मान्छे, बाह्र बजेको समयमा दिल्ली पुगेर कहाँ वास खोज्ने ? नजिकै मथुरा थियो । जे भए पनि घुम्नैपर्ने ठाउँ, त्यत्रो तीर्थस्थल, बरु मथुरा जाऔँ भनेर सल्लाह गर्‍यो । बसमा मथुरा पुग्दा रातको दसमात्र बजे र वास पनि सहजै पाइने अनि भोलि बिहान मथुरा-वृन्दावन घुमी दिल्ली जानु व्यावहारिक देखी हामी एउटा रिक्सा पक्रेर नजिकैको बसस्टेन्ड पुग्यौँ ।

आगराबाट कोसेलीस्वरूप घर लाने एउटा परिकार पाइने रहेछ । भुइँकटहर र चिनीबाट बनाइने उक्त परिकारलाई पेठा भनिँदो रहेछ ।

मथुरा पुग्दा रातको दस बजे लागेको थियो । हामी एउटा धर्मशालामा वास माग्ने पुग्यौँ, कोठा त भरिइसकेका रहेछन् । धर्मशालाको मानिसले हामीलाई सल्लाह दियो- ‘यसो गर्नु न, अलि पर्तिर अर्को धर्मशाला छ, त्यहाँ कोठा पाउने सम्भावना छ । त्यहाँ पनि नपाइए लजहरूतिरै खोज्नुपर्ने हुन्छ ।’

उसले छेउको एउटा रिक्सा बोलाएर हामीलाई बिदा गरिहाल्यो । त्यस रिक्सावालाले हामीलाई सहरको अलिक व्यस्त भागको एउटा ठूलो घरअगाडि पुऱ्यायो । यो अर्को धर्मशाला रहेछ ।

हामी भित्र पस्यौँ । नभन्दै हामीलाई सातौँ रातका लागि मथुराको यस ठूलो धर्मशालामा कोठा मिल्यो । हामी तेस्रो तलाको एउटा साधारण कोठामा बस्ने भयौँ । धर्मशालाभवन चारतले विशाल र सुन्दर रहेछ । प्रत्येक तलामा सयौँ-

अलिक भीडभाड गरी बस्ने भए त हजारौं- मानिसलाई बास बस्न पुग्ने यस भवनका तलैपिच्छे सामूहिक स्नानघर, चर्पी र धाराको मनगो व्यवस्था गरिएको रहेछ । धर्मशालाको सुरक्षाकर्मीले हामीलाई हाम्रो कोठामा लिएर गयो ।

सीता मौका मिल्नासाथ लुगा धुन र नुहाउन तयार परिन् । मथुराको गर्मी, ननुहाइन्जेल सन्तोष हुँदैन । दुवै छोरीले नुहाएपछि हामी बाबुआमाको पालो आयो । रात छिप्पिए पनि गर्मी प्रचण्ड थियो । भारतीयहरू हामीजस्तै सामान्यतया बिहान नुहाइधुवाइ गर्छन्, तर यहाँ त गर्मी समयमा चौबीसै घण्टा नुहाउनेहरूको भीडभाड भइरहने रहेछ ।

दिनभरि बोतलकै पानी खाए पनि बिहानबेलुका हामी जहाँ पनि स्थानीय पानी खान खोज्यौं । त्यहाँको 'मीठा पानी' त स्वादका कारण खानै नसकिने । कान्छी छोरीले नाक थुनेर पानी पिई । नजिकैको होटलमा पसेर खाना खायौं । मथुराको दालभात पटक मीठो भएन । जे पनि असह्य नुनिलो । दहीमा मात्र खोर्सानी नपरेको !

राती सानी छोरीलाई जरो आयो । मलाई पनि रुघाखोकीले समात्यो । हेर्दाहेर्दै सानी छोरी त निकै बिरामी भई । सिटामोल औषधि खुवाएपछि जरो अलिक ओर्लियो । ढिलो गरी सुत्थ्यौं ।

पच्चीस गतेको बिहान, सबै उठेर छोरीलाई पुनः सिटामोल खुवाएर हामी मथुरा दर्शन गर्न लाग्यौं । रिक्साले पीठ लग्यो । हामी यमुनाकिनारमा एकछिन मग्न भएर हेरिरह्यौं । सूर्योदयको समय भएपछि हामीले सूर्यलाई यमुनाको पानी अर्घ चढायौं । यस यमुनाकिनारमा पनि पण्डाहरूले भन्फट दिने गर्दा रहेछन् । वरिपरि अवलोकन गर्न लायक धेरै कुरा रहेछन् । मनमा अनेक अनुभूतिहरू उत्पन्न हुन्थे । हामी पञ्चस्नानपछि घाटबाट सडकतिर जाँदै थियौं, कान्छी छोरीले मेरो पाइन्ट तानी । उसले मलाई खुसुक्क केही भनी । मैले कुरो बुझिनँ । अलिक पर गएपछि उसले भनी- 'माग्नेसँग पनि मोबाइल, हेर्नु न ! उ : कुरा गर्दै छ ।'

घाटदेखि सडकसम्म माग्नेहरूको लस्कर थियो । द्वारिकाका यी माग्नेहरू अन्यत्रका भैं अनेक रूपरङ्कका, अनेक उमेर, जात र स्वास्थ्य-अवस्थाका थिए । तर एउटा माग्ने सेलुलर मोबाइल फोनमा मजासँग कुरा गरिरहेको थियो । भारतका माग्नेहरूका हातमा समेत मोबाइल फोनको पहुँच देख्दा मलाई आफ्नो देशको कुशासन सम्भेर अत्यन्त नरमाइलो लाग्यो । हाम्रो देशमा चाहिँ भएका पनि राजाको शासनले बन्द गरिदिएको थियो । राजाले रक्षा गरिदिन लागेको प्रजातन्त्रलाई मोबाइल फोनबाट पनि खतरा थियो । मलाई कवि मोदनाथ प्रश्रितको अलिक पुरानो कविताको एक लाइन याद आयो-

बिरालाहरूले गर्जे मुसातन्त्र अमर रहोस् ।

हेर्दाहेर्दै अर्को माग्नेको मोबाइल फोन बज्न थाल्यो । त्यसले कम्मरमा घुसारेको मोबाइल सेट भिक्थ्यो । हामी जिब्रो टोक्दै हिँड्यौं । अमेरिकामा घरधन्दा गर्ने पेसाका मानिसहरू पनि कार चढ्छन् भनेको सुनेको थिएँ, भारतीय मगन्तेहरूसमेत मोबाइल फोन भिर्छन् भने त्यो त अमेरिका !

द्वारिका पीठाधीशको दर्शन गर्न दुई घण्टा लाइनमा कुनूप्यो । दर्शनपछि हामी मथुरामा कृष्ण-जन्मभूमि हेर्न गयौं । कृष्णजन्मभूमि भव्य र हेर्न निकै समय लाग्ने रहेछ । सुरक्षाव्यवस्था र जाँच पनि कडा । नहेरी नहुने नै रहेछ यो पनि । उस प्राचीन समयको सुरक्षाव्यवस्था, भवननिर्माणकला र संस्कृति अझै मथुरामा जीवित रहेछ ।

३०. अधुरो यात्रा जीवनको

दुर्गाजी- अर्थात् मेरा बालसखा दुर्गा गुरागाई, इटहरा मूल घर, तर हाल पश्चिमको धनगढीनिवासी- का देब्रे छातीमा अझै एउटा ठूलो खत छ । बालखकालमा राँगाले हानेकाले बसेको त्यो खत । अझै राँगाभैँसी वा गाईगोरुकै पनि लामा सिङ वा त्यस्तै लाम्चो आकारको कालो-कालो घुमैलो वस्तु देख्दा उनी भस्कन्छन् । मेरो त्यस्तै अव्यक्त भयको नाता

छ निमोनियासँग । मेरो दाजु जीवनको ठूलो छोरो डोलेश्वर सानो छँदै पापी निमोनियाले लग्यो । यसैकारण मलाई यस विमारदेखि सारै डर लाग्छ । अहिले पनि कुनै बालकलाई यो विमार लागेको देखेँ भने म आत्तिन्छु । पच्चीसछब्बीस वर्षको युवक देखेँपिच्छे, मेरो मन भाँडिन्छ, औषधिपानी समयमा गर्न सकेको भए मेरो भतिजो यत्रै हुने थियो नि जस्तो भएर आउँछ ।

सानी छोरीलाई बिहानको दस बजेदेखि निमोनियाले समात्यो । ऊ स्याँस्याँ-फ्याँफ्याँ अनि हप्पाकहप्पाक गर्न थाली । मेरो सातोपुत्तो उड्यो । यस परदेशमा छोरीलाई निमोनिया हुनु मलाई बिथोल्न पर्याप्त थियो । मथुराको धूलोले विरामीलाई झन् असर गर्ने देखियो । मेरो मनभित्रका यात्रासम्बन्धी सबै रहरहरू सन्त्रासमा अनुवाद भइसकेका थिए । त्यसै त म हडबडे, त्यसमाथि अनुजालाई निमोनिया, मन-धनुको आँट भन्ने ताँदो छिनिहाल्यो । श्रीमती मेरो घबराहट देखेर झन् लथालिङ्ग भइन् ।

मैले धेरै गाउँखाने कथा, लोकोक्ति र धार्मिक उत्सवहरूमा सुनिआएको 'बिन्द्रावन' निकै नजिक थियो । केही किलोमिटरमात्र बाँकी रहेछ, यहाँबाट सो तीर्थस्थल । तर वृन्दावनभ्रमणका लागि अझै मैले कति वर्ष पखिनुपर्ने हो, अधुरो सपना त्यहीँ बिसाएर घरै फिर्न तयार भएँ म । तीनपाङ्ग्रेहरू करर गर्दै वृन्दावनतर्फ गइरहेका थिए । अब ती हाम्रा लागि थिएनन् ।

कम्तीमा पनि छेवैको जयपुर र दिल्ली घुम्ने उत्कट इच्छा थियो । गुप्त साम्राज्यको भारतवर्षका प्रमुख कपिलवस्तु, पाटलीपुत्र, प्रयाग र मथुरा हेर्न पाएको म नालन्दा पनि पस्ने विचारमा थिएँ, तक्षशिला पाकिस्तानी भूमिभित्र भएर जान सजिलै नसकिने भए पनि नालन्दा त घर फिर्दा बाटैमा निस्के हुने थियो । मुगलकालका चर्चित पानीपत, वैशाली, अजन्ता र मन्दसौर अनि उज्जैन हेर्न कताकता मन छँदै थियो । जयपुरका हवा महल, सहरवरिपरिको पर्खाल र बगैँचा हेर्न बाँकी थियो । यी कुनै ठाउँ नपुगे पनि बिकानेर र जैसलमेर पाइलोमात्र राख्न भए पनि जाने मन थियो । देख्न बाँकी त सिङ्गो संसार नै थियो ।

मैले हिसाब गरें, अहिले परिस्थिति यात्राका लागि प्रतिकूल छ । अब भविष्यमा घरबाट भोला बोकेर यतातिरका यात्रामा निस्कन पाउँछु कि पाउँदिनँ, त्यो त म भन्न सक्तिनथेँ, तर यात्रा अधुरो रह्यो । सातै दिनमा यात्रा टुक्रियो ।

आफूलाई आपत् पदा भरसक विश्वासिलो व्यक्ति छान्नुपर्ने मद्दत माग्न । मथुराबाट सोझै कानपुर आयौँ । यात्राको आठौँ दिनको बेलुका उही पुरानो कनौडिया धर्मशालामा वास बस्न आइहाल्यौँ । यो धर्मशाला हाम्रा लागि अर्को घर थियो । धर्मशालाको म्यानेजर हाम्रै काकाबाबुजितिकै भर पर्न सकिने आफन्त लाग्न थालिसकेको थियो । छोरी पूर्णतया ठीक नहुन्जेल हामी यहीँ बस्ने भएका थियौँ ।

म्यानेजरले भन्यो- 'मास्टरजी, यो कानपुर पो हो त ! राम्राराम्रा डाक्टर छन् । छोरीलाई मथुराको डाक्टरले दिएको औषधिले काम गरेन भने डाक्टरकहाँ जाओँला न । मैले राम्ररी चिनेको एकजना जेनरल फिजिसियनको क्लिनिक यहीँ नजिकै छ । पैसाको समस्या छ भने पनि फिक्री नलिनुहोला । हामी छौँ ।'

तर अनुजाको निमोनिया मथुराको डाक्टरले दिएकै औषधिले छिटै अलिक सामान्य भयो । बिहानपख त ऊ लगभग सामान्य भइसकेकी थिई । मेरा छोरीहरूलाई निमोनिया भयो कि एन्टिबायोटिक खुवाउने पर्छ । डाक्टरहरू भन्छन्- एन्टिबायोटिकको निरन्तर प्रयोगले व्यक्तिको रक्तउत्पादन-क्षमतामा ह्रास ल्याउँछ । तर त्यो त भोलिको समस्या हो, मलाई आजको चिन्ता ज्यादा छ ।

हाम्रो यात्राको नवौँ दिन अर्थात् २०६२ सालको विजया दशमीको बिहान चारै बजे 'घरपट्टि'सँग विदावारी भएर रेलवे जङ्क्सन आयौँ । दिल्ली लाग्ने कि घर- म दोधारमा थिएँ ।

'दसैं सकिन लागिस्क्यो, घरतिरै फिरौँ, आघौँको दसैंविदामा दिल्ली र पश्चिमी भारत घुमौँला ।' सीता भन्न थालिन् ।

हामी लखनऊतिर लाग्यौँ । रेल अचम्मै लाग्ने गरी खाली थियो । बाटामा मैले छोरीहरूसँग नेपाली लोकगीतमा रेलको चर्चा हुने कुरा उठाएँ । उनीहरूलाई पनि केही रेलगीत आउने, मैले अरू एकदुई गीत गाउन सिकाएँ-

किन जान्छौ परदेशी हुनलाई

रेलको भ्यालमा बसेर रुनलाई

पानी तालैमा..... ।

रेलको भ्यालमा बसेर उनीहरूले निकैवटा रेलगीत स्वर खोलेर गाए । मैले छोरीहरूलाई भारतको इतिहास पनि निकै बताएँ । उनीहरूले भारतीय भूमिमा यात्रा गर्दा त्यही भारतको इतिहास निकै रुचिपूर्वक सुने । लखनऊमा आइपुग्दा छोरीहरू त लखनऊ घुमेरै मात्र घर लागौं भन्न थाले ।

विजया दशमीको दिन । गाउँघरमा मानिसहरू टीका र जमरामा सजिएर यताउता गर्दै होलान् । इटहरी, उर्लावारी र हाम्रा गाउँले सडकमा पनि रडबिरङ्गी लुगा लाएर मानिसहरू समूहसमूह बनाएर हिँड्दै होलान् । भुराभुरीहरू मावल जान हतारिरहेका होलान् । सडकमा लिङ्गे पिडमा रउसे ठिठाठिटीहरू चचहुई भन्दै रमाइरहेका होलान् । बसहरूमा चढीनसक्नु भीड होला । सुत्केरी र छोराछोरीका आमाहरू पनि नानी च्यापेर कनीकनी माइतीतिर लाग्दै होलान् । हाम्रो घरअगाडिको सडकमा दसैँका पाहुनाहरू यताबाट उता अनि उताबाट यता पैदल हिँड्दै गरेको दृश्य कति सुन्दर देखिँदो हो ! मोटरसाइकल हुनेहरू यता र उता घुमाउँदा हुन् । यदाकदा ट्याक्सी पनि हाम्रा गाउँमा छिर्छ, छिर्दो हो । हामी कतिखेर आइपुग्छौं भनेर आमा कहिले उत्तर त कहिले पश्चिमको बाटो हेर्नुहुँदो हो । सिर्जना भान्जी सानैदेखि मावलमा बसेर हुर्केकी, उनी आफ्नो सानो मामालाई 'उ : मामा-माइजू !' भनेर भुक्काइरहन्छिन् होला । हाम्रो अनुपस्थितिले भाइहरू बेचैन होलान् । हामी घर नपुगुन्जेल हाम्रो घरको दसैँ पूर्ण आकारमा आउने कुरै थिएन । उता ससुरालीमा पनि हाम्रो आगमनको प्रतीक्षा उस्तै थियो ।

हामीले चाहिँ छोरीहरूको आग्रह नाघ्न नसकेर लखनऊ घुम्ने नै विचार गर्थौं । हतारहतार गर्दै हामी रेजिडेन्सी, भुलभुलैया र बुद्धपार्क-हाथीपार्क घुम्थौं । हाथीपार्कमा छोरीहरू अत्यन्त रमाए । लखनऊको, त्यसमा पनि अझ भन्दा भुलभुलैयाको भ्रमण-अनुभवको बारेमा त मलाई एउटा छुट्टै निबन्ध लेख्न मन छ ।

विश्वको ध्यान एकोहोऱ्याउन सफल ताजमहल मेरो सहर इटहरीबाट मुस्किलले बाह्र सय किलोमिटर टाढा होला । विश्वप्रसिद्ध बनारस सहर, विश्वप्रसिद्ध लखनऊ र महान् गङ्गा-यमुनाहरू हामीबाट अत्यन्त नजिक छन् । भारतका सहर, त्यसमा पनि उत्तरी भारतका सहर हाम्रा लागि सस्ता र सुगम छन् । भाषिक र सांस्कृतिक हिसाबले सहजै घुम्न सकिने उत्तरी भारतका यी धेरै महत्त्वपूर्ण ठाउँहरू हामी राम्ररी घुम्न भ्याउँदैनौं । यी ठाउँहरू घुम्न भनेर विश्वभरिबाट मानिस आउँछन् तर हामी आम नेपाली त्यतातिर फर्केर हेर्नसम्म हेर्दैनौं ।

बेलुका रेलवे स्टेसन फर्क्यौं । दसैँको महापर्व छ, घुम्न हिँडेका हामी आधाबाटैबाट फिर्नुपरेको थियो । न ताकेको यात्रा गर्न पाइयो न दसैँ मात्र । दुवैतिरको बिस्मात् बोकेर हामी त्यसै साँझ फिर्न तयार भयौं ।

सैनिक डिब्बामा सिभिलियनले चढ्नु दण्डनीय अपराध हो भन्ने यात्राअवधिभर मलाई थाहा भएन । सैनिक डिब्बामा चढेकोमा हामी पक्राउ त परेनौं तर पछि थाहा भयो यसो गर्नु गम्भीर अपराध रहेछ । अहिले सम्झँदा पनि डर लाग्छ, कति निर्धक्क भएर हामी सैनिक डिब्बामा चढ्थ्यौं !

लखनऊबाट फिर्दा भने हामी साधारण डिब्बामै चढेर आयौं । नवौँ रात र भोलिपल्ट बाह्र बजेसम्म भीड न भीडको ट्रेनमै बित्यो, दसौँ रात हामी फारबेसगन्ज आई वास बस्थ्यौं । विहान जोगबनीमा किनमेल गरियो । घुम्न भनेर छुट्याएको पैसा बचेकाले तन्ना, सिरकका खोल, सारी, नानीहरूका लागि कपडा, मरमसला र स्टिलका केही भाँडाकुँडा किन्न पायौं ।

नेपालमा भारतसम्बन्धी नकारात्मक धारणा व्यापक छ । धेरै नेपालीका दृष्टिमा भारत दुष्ट, मिचाहा, ठग र ढाँट छिमेकी हो अनि आम भारतीय चोर, कामचोर, लोभी, ठग र फोहोरी । भारतीय शासकवर्गको नेपालमाथि भइरहने थिचोमिचोका कारण आम नेपाली भारतको बारेमा र नेपाल आउने भारतीयहरूको बारेमा समेत नकारात्मक दृष्टिकोण राख्छन् । उता गएर सानोतिनो रोजगारी गर्ने नेपालीहरू त्यहाँ अत्यन्त पीडित भएका कहानीले हामीलाई भारतविरोधी बनाउँछ । उता दक्षिण भारतको हैदराबादमा लामो समयदेखि बसोवास गर्दै आएको मेरी बहिनी होमा गुरागाईं भन्छिन्- 'हैदराबादमा सानोतिनो चोरी, ठगी र कूटपिट गर्नेमध्ये नब्बे प्रतिशत हिस्सा नेपालीको छ ।'

नेपालको नाकमा फोहोर दल्नेहरू जुनसुकै ठाउँमा पनि पुगेका हुँदा रहेछन् ।

सीताको अनुभवमा भारतीयहरू नेपालको बारेमा अत्यन्त सकारात्मक छन् । उनलाई लाग्छ, भारतीयहरू हामीभन्दा सहिष्णु, सहयोगी, विश्वासिला र सफासुधर छन् । सर्वसाधारण भारतीयहरू नेपाललाई शान्त र सुन्दर हिमाली देश तथा भरपर्दो छिमेकी मान्दा रहेछन् । नेपालमा बढिरहेको अशान्तिले उनीहरूलाई पनि नमीठो लागेको र नेपालको सुखशान्तिले भारतीयलाई पनि प्रत्यक्ष-अप्रत्यक्ष लाभ पुग्ने तिनीहरूको ठम्याइ रहेछ । सर्वसाधारण भारतीयहरू नेपालमा राजा रहिरहे नेपालको कल्याण देख्ता रहेछन् । माओवादीहरूलाई उनीहरू डरलाग्दा आतङ्ककारी देख्ता रहेछन् । हाम्रो देशभरि युद्ध दनदनी बलेको र हरेक नेपालीलाई माओवादीबाट खतरा छ भन्ने ठान्दा रहेछन् । नेपालका मुख्य समस्या माओवादीहरू हुन् र समाधान राजासित छ भन्ने उनीहरूलाई लाग्दो रहेछ । नेपालीहरू राजालाई

परमेश्वर ठान्छन् भन्ने पनि उनीहरूमा विश्वास रहेछ । भारतीयहरू नेपालको भूगोल, वर्तमान र इतिहासका बारेमा कम रुचि तथा जानकारी राख्ता रहेछन् ।

घरबाट हिँडेको एघारौँ दिन जब विराटनगर आइपुगेर माइक्रोबस चढ्यौँ, यात्रु र खलासीबीचको भाडाविवाद देखेर सीताले प्रतिक्रिया जनाइन्- 'फेरि उही कुहीगन्धे मुलुकमा आइपुगियो अब, आफ्नो भनेर के गर्नु !' भारतीय र नेपाली यात्रुको अनुशासनको तुलना गर्दा हामी कति छाडा छौँ, सीताको अभिव्यक्तिमा अर्थ खोजे पुग्छ । सर्वत्र छाडापन छ, सर्वत्र लथालिङ्ग छ, सर्वत्र अभाव छ, अतिव्यक्तिवादी सोचले सर्वत्र आक्रान्त पारेको समय छ, हामी अब हुल्याहा, नामर्द र पङ्गु भइसकेका छौँ । यस दुर्गतिबाट हामीले कहिले पार पाउने ? भारतका सबैभन्दा अव्यवस्थित भनिने बिहार र उत्तरप्रदेशका केही प्रमुख सहरहरूको व्यवस्था देखेर फर्केकी सीता विचारमग्न देखिइन् ।

३१. बिट

ars longa vita brevis. पाथीभरा माईको वरदान पाई जन्मेको म तातोपानी, भेरी, कावेली र बूढीमा नुहाएर चोखो भएँ । हलेश्वर महादेव, पशुपति र स्वयम्भूबाट संरक्षित म जनकपुर, दिङ्ला र गुल्मीको गर्व छातीमा बोकेर नुवाकोट, सिन्धुलीगढी, पाल्पा र गोरखा डुल्दा वीर भएँ अनि देवदह, तिलौराकोट र लुम्बिनी घुमेर बुद्ध भएँ । अब एकपल्ट सीता र छोरीहरूलाई लिएर म यो मेरो आफ्नै सुन्दर घरआँगन डुल्नेछु । सौराहा, बेनी, घोडेपानी र खुम्जुङ घुम्नेछु । दाङ, सुर्खेत, धनगढी र महेन्द्रनगर हेर्नेछु । महाकालीपारिका चाँदनी र दोधारामा बस्ने मेरा दाजुभाइ-दिदीबहिनीलाई भेट्नेछु । उदयपुरगढी हेर्ने भुजेल र मकवानपुर गढी रंगेर बसेका तामाङ छिमेकीका कुरा सुन्नेछु । पर्सा, परासी र देउखुरीमा बस्ने बा-आमाको दर्शन गरी टीकापुरमा वास बस्न पुग्नु छ । बडीमालिका, स्वर्गद्वारी, चन्दननाथ, खप्तड, मुक्तिनाथ, देवघाट र दोलखा भीमेश्वरको दर्शन गर्नु छ । मोहना, वाणगडुगा र सेतीको सुसेली सुनेर भोटेकोसीमा गुन्गुनाउन आइपुग्नु छ । बर्दियाको जङ्गलमा मयूर नाचेको हेरेर रमाएको मन राराको सूर्योदयमा फर्कनुपर्छ । सराङकोट, श्रीअन्तु, ट्याम्के र चन्द्रागिरि छामेर गोसाइँकुण्ड, दामोदरकुण्ड, दूधकुण्ड, दूधपोखरी र सभापोखरीमा डुबुल्की मार्नु छ । तिलानदी, लिखु र मादी तर्नु छ । सन्दकपुर र श्रीनगरको बिहान, सिमीकोट, दुनै र दुल्लुको दिन, खलङ्गा र साँफेबगरको साँझ साक्षात्कार गर्नु छ । कचनकवल र नाम्चेको फरक थाहा पाउनु छ । नेपालगन्जको गर्मी र ओलाङ्चुङ गोलाको जाडो भोग्नु छ । जिरी, चामे र टुकुचे टेकेपछि जलेश्वर, गढीमाई, उग्रतारा, बागेश्वरी, पलाञ्चोक भगवती र छिन्नमस्ता भगवतीको दर्शन गर्नु छ । सीता काँक्रेबिहारको एक ढुङ्गामाथि थकाइ मार्न बसेको हेर्नु छ । पूजा शुक्लाफाँटाका मृग दौडेको दृश्यमा रमाएको अनि अनुजा बर्दियाका हात्तीमा चढ्दा हड्बडाएको फोटो खिच्नु छ ।

सगरमाथा मेरो शिर हो । कञ्चनजङ्घा, चोयु, पुमोरी, गौतम, हिमचुली, नीलगिरि, धवलागिरि, माछापुच्छ्रे, अन्नपूर्ण, लाङटाङ र मकालु-मनास्लु दिनहुँ हेर्न पाउने यी आँखा कहिल्यै अन्धा हुनेछैनन् । मलाई थाहा छ, यी स्थानहरूमा उताका जति धेरै मानिस बसेका छैनन्, यी स्थानको चर्चा उति धेरै भएको छैन, त्यसैले सबैले साना भनेको । सानै सही, म निस्फिक्री नाच्न पाउँछु यस फराक आँगनमा । म निर्भय हाँस्न पाउँछु यस दलानमा । समस्याहरूका सगरमाथा ठडिएका छन्, गुनासाहरूका महासागर फैलिएका छन् । भाँडमैलो छ, फोहर छ । बढारकुँढारको जिम्मा मेरो हो । भयानक भद्रगोल भए पनि यो देश-परिवेश मेरो हो, जतिसुकै अध्यारो भए पनि मालिक हुँ म यसको । मैले नै यो कालोमैलो पुछ्नुपर्छ, मैले नै यो दुर्गन्ध हटाउनुपर्छ । अर्काकी आमा राम्री देखेर हुँदैन, आफ्नी आमाको अनुहारको मैलो धुनुपर्छ । मैले आमालाई माया गर्न सक्ँ भने यिनको काख न्यानो बन्छ : जोगबनी नाकाबाट घर छिरेपछिको मेरो आत्मविश्वासले यस्तै भनिरह्यो ।

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By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept

Paulo Coelho

English version of *Na margem do rio Piedra eu sentei e chorei*, the Portuguese original edition, published in Brazil in 1994.

English translation prepared by Alan R. Clarke.

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*For I. C. and S. B., whose loving communion made me see the feminine face of God;
for Monica Antunes, my companion from the beginning, who with her love and
enthusiasm spreads the fire all over the world;
for Paulo Rocco, for the joy of the battles we have fought together and for the dignity of
the battles we have fought between us;
and for Matthew Lore, for not having forgotten a sage quotation from the I Ching:
"Perseverance is favorable,"*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A Spanish missionary was visiting an island when he came across three Aztec priests.

"How do you pray?" the missionary asked.

"We have only one prayer," answered one of the Aztecs. "We say, 'God, you are three, we are three. Have pity on us.'"

"A beautiful prayer," said the missionary. "But it is not exactly the one that God heeds. I'm going to teach you one that's much better."

The padre taught them a Catholic prayer and then continued on his path of evangelism. Years later, when he was returning to Spain, his ship stopped again at the island. From the deck, the missionary saw the three priests on the shore and waved to them.

Just then, the three men began to walk across the water toward him.

"Padre! Padre!" one of them called, approaching the ship. "Teach us again that prayer that God heeds. We've forgotten how it goes."

"It doesn't matter," responded the missionary, witnessing the miracle. And he promptly asked God's forgiveness for failing to recognize that He speaks all languages.

This story illustrates just what this book is about. Rarely do we realize that we are in the midst of the extraordinary. Miracles occur all around us, signs from God show us the way, angels plead to be heard, but we pay little attention to them because we have been taught that we must follow certain formulas and rules if we want to find God. We do not recognize that God is wherever we allow Him/Her to enter.

Traditional religious practices are important: they allow us to share with others the communal experience of adoration and prayer. But we must never forget that spiritual experience is above all a *practical* experience of love. And with love, there are no rules. Some may try to control their emotions and develop strategies for their behavior; others may turn to reading books of advice from "experts" on relationships but this is all folly. The heart decides, and what it decides is all that really matters.

All of us have had this experience. At some point, we have each said through our tears, "I'm suffering for a love that's not worth it." We suffer because we feel we are giving

more than we receive. We suffer because our love is going unrecognized. We suffer because we are unable to impose our own rules.

But ultimately there is no good reason for our suffering, for in every love lies the seed of our growth. The more we love, the closer we come to spiritual experience. Those who are truly enlightened, those whose souls are illuminated by love, have been able to overcome all of the inhibitions and preconceptions of their era. They have been able to sing, to laugh, and to pray out loud; they have danced and shared what Saint Paul called "the madness of saintliness." They have been joyful—because those who love conquer the world and have no fear of loss. True love is an act of total surrender.

This book is about the importance of that surrender. Pilar and her companion are fictitious, but they represent the many conflicts that beset us in our search for love.

Sooner or later, we have to overcome our fears, because the spiritual path can only be traveled through the daily experience of love.

Thomas Merton once said that the spiritual life is essentially to love. One doesn't love in order to do what is good or to help or to protect someone. If we act that way, we are perceiving the other as a simple object, and we are seeing ourselves as wise and generous persons. This has nothing to do with love. To love is to be in communion with the other and to discover in that other the spark of God.

May Pilar's lament on the bank of the River Piedra guide us toward such communion.

But wisdom is justified by all her children.

Luke 7:35

By the river Piedra I sat down and wept. There is a legend that everything that falls into the waters of this river—leaves, insects, the feathers of birds—is transformed into the rocks that make the riverbed. If only I could tear out my heart and hurl it into the current, then my pain and longing would be over, and I could finally forget.

By the river Piedra I sat down and wept. The winter air chills the tears on my cheeks, and my tears fall into the cold waters that course past me. Somewhere, this river joins another, then another, until far from my heart and sight all of them merge with the sea.

May my tears run just as far, that my love might never know that one day I cried for him.

May my tears run just as far, that I might forget the River Piedra, the monastery, the church in the Pyrenees, the mists, and the paths we walked together.

I shall forget the roads, the mountains, and the fields of my dreamsthe dreams that will never come true.

I remember my "magic moment"that instant when a "yes" or a "no" can change one's life forever. It seems so long ago now. It is hard to believe that it was only last week that I had found my love once again, and then lost him.

I am writing this story on the bank of the River Piedra. My hands are freezing, my legs are numb, and every minute I want to stop.

"Seek to live. Remembrance is for the old," he said.

Perhaps love makes us old before our time or young, if youth has passed. But how can I not recall those moments? That is why I write to try to turn sadness into longing, solitude into remembrance. So that when I finish telling myself the story, I can toss it into the Piedra. That's what the woman who has given me shelter told me to do. Only then in the words of one of the saints will the water extinguish what the flames have written.

All love stories are the same.

We had been children together. Then he left, like so many young people who leave small towns. He said he was going to learn about the world, that his dreams lay beyond the fields of Soria.

Years passed with almost no news of him. Every now and then he would send me a letter, but he never returned to the paths and forests of our childhood.

When I finished school, I moved to Zaragoza, and there I found that he had been right. Soria *was* a small town, and as its only famous poet had said, roads are made to be traveled. I enrolled in the university and found a boyfriend. I began to study for a scholarship (I was working as a salesgirl to pay for my courses). But I lost the competition for the scholarship, and after that I left my boyfriend.

Then the letters from my childhood friend began to arrive more frequently and I was envious of the stamps from so many different places. He seemed to know everything; he had sprouted wings, and now he roamed the world. Meanwhile, I was simply trying to put down roots.

Some of his letters, all mailed from the same place in France, spoke of God. In one, he wrote about wanting to enter a seminary and dedicate his life to prayer. I wrote him back, asking him to wait a bit, urging him to experience more of his freedom before committing himself to something so serious.

But after I reread my letter, I tore it up. Who was I to speak about freedom or commitment? Compared to him, I knew nothing about such things.

One day I learned that he had begun to give lectures. This surprised me; I thought he was too young to be able to teach anything to anyone. And then he wrote to me that he was going to speak to a small group in Madrid and he asked me to come.

So I made the four-hour trip from Zaragoza to Madrid. I wanted to see him again; I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to sit with him in a cafe and remember the old days, when we had thought the world was far too large for anyone ever to know it truly.

Saturday, December 4, 1993

The place where the conference was held was more formal than I had imagined it, and there were more people there than I had expected. How had all this come about?

He must be famous. I thought. He'd said nothing about this in his letters. I wanted to go up to the people in the audience and ask them why they were there, but I didn't have the nerve.

I was even more surprised when I saw him enter the room. He was quite different from the boy I had known—but of course, it had been twelve years; people change. Tonight his eyes were shining—he looked wonderful.

"He's giving us back what was ours," said a woman seated next to me.

A strange thing to say.

"What is he giving back?" I asked.

"What was stolen from us. Religion."

"No, no, he's not giving us anything back," said a younger woman seated on my right.

"They can't return something that has always belonged to us."

"Well, then, what are you doing here?" the first woman asked, irritated.

"I want to listen to him. I want to see how they think; they've already burned us at the stake once, and they may want to do it again."

"He's just one voice," said the woman. "He's doing what he can."

The young woman smiled sarcastically and turned away, putting an end to the conversation.

"He's taking a courageous position for a seminarian," the other woman went on, looking to me for support.

I didn't understand any of this, and I said nothing. The woman finally gave up. The girl at my side winked at me, as if I were her ally.

But I was silent for a different reason. I was thinking, *Seminarian? It can't lie! He would have told me.*

When he started to speak, I couldn't concentrate. I was sure he had spotted me in the audience, and I was trying to guess what he was thinking. How did I look to him? How different was the woman of twenty-nine from the girl of seventeen?

I noticed that his voice hadn't changed. But his words certainly had.

You have to take risks, he said. We will only understand the miracle of life fully when we allow the unexpected to happen.

Every day, God gives us the sun—and also one moment in which we have the ability to change everything that makes us unhappy. Every day, we try to pretend that we haven't perceived that moment, that it doesn't exist—that today is the same as yesterday and will be the same as tomorrow. But if people really pay attention to their everyday lives, they will discover that magic moment. It may arrive in the instant when we are doing something mundane, like putting our front-door key in the lock; it may lie hidden in the quiet that follows the lunch hour or in the thousand and one things that all seem the same to us. But that moment exists—a moment when all the power of the stars becomes a part of us and enables us to perform miracles.

Joy is sometimes a blessing, but it is often a conquest. Our magic moment helps us to change and sends us off in search of our dreams. Yes, we are going to suffer, we will have difficult times, and we will experience many disappointments—but all of this is transitory; it leaves no permanent mark. And one day we will look back with pride and faith at the journey we have taken.

Pitiful is the person who is afraid of taking risks. Perhaps this person will never be disappointed or disillusioned; perhaps she won't suffer the way people do when they have a dream to follow. But when that person looks back—and at some point everyone looks back—she will hear her heart saying, "What have you done with the miracles that God planted in your days? What have you done with the talents God bestowed on you? You buried yourself in a cave because you were fearful of losing those talents. So this is your heritage: the certainty that you wasted your life"

Pitiful are the people who must realize this. Because when they are finally able to believe in miracles, their life's magic moments will have already passed them by.

After the lecture, members of the audience rushed up to him. I waited, worried about what his first impression of me would be after so many years. I felt like a child—insecure, tense because I knew none of his new friends, and jealous that he was paying more attention to the others than to me.

When he finally came up to me, he blushed. Suddenly he was no longer a man with important things to say but was once again the boy who had hidden with me at the hermitage of San Satúrio, telling me of his dream to travel the world (while our parents were calling the police, sure that we had drowned in the river).

"Pilar," he said.

I kissed him. I could have complimented him on his presentation. I could have said I was tired of being around so many people. I could have made some humorous remark about our childhood or commented on how proud I was to see him there, so admired by others. I could have explained that I had to run and catch the last bus back to Zaragoza.

I could have. What does this phrase mean? At any given moment in our lives, there are certain things that could have happened but didn't. The magic moments go unrecognized, and then suddenly, the hand of destiny changes everything.

That's what happened to me just then. In spite of all the things I could have done or said, I asked a question that has brought me, a week later, to this river and has caused me to write these very lines.

"Can we have coffee together?" I said.

And he, turning to me, accepted the hand offered by fate.

"I really need to talk to you. Tomorrow I have a lecture in Bilbao. I have a car. Come with me."

"I have to get back to Zaragoza," I answered, not realizing that this was my last chance. Then I surprised myself—perhaps because in seeing him, I had become a child again... or perhaps because we are not the ones who write the best moments of our lives. I said, "But they're about to celebrate the holiday of the Immaculate Conception in Bilbao. I can go there with you and then continue on to Zaragoza."

Just then, it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him about his being a "seminarian." He must have read my expression, because he said quickly, "Do you want to ask me something?"

"Yes. Before your lecture, a woman said that you were giving her back what had been hers. What did she mean?"

"Oh, that's nothing."

"But it's important to me. I don't know anything about your life; I'm even surprised to see so many people here."

He just laughed, and then he started to turn away to answer other people's questions.

"Wait," I said, grabbing his arm. "You didn't answer me."

"I don't think it would interest you, Pilar."

"I want to know anyway."

Taking a deep breath, he led me to a corner of the room. "All of the great religions—including Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam—are masculine. Men are in charge of the dogmas, men make the laws, and usually all the priests are men."

"Is that what the woman meant?"

He hesitated before he answered. "Yes. I have a different view of things: I believe in the feminine side of God."

I sighed with relief. The woman was mistaken; he couldn't be a seminarian because seminarians don't have such different views of things.

"You've explained it very well," I said.

The girl who had winked at me was waiting at the door.

"I know that we belong to the same tradition," she said. "My name is Brida."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do," she laughed.

She took my arm and led me out of the building before I could say anything more. It was a cold night, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do until we left for Bilbao the next morning.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the statue of the Goddess."

"But... I need to find an inexpensive hotel where I can stay for the night."

"I'll show you one later."

I wanted to go to some warm cafe where I could talk to her for a bit and learn as much as I could about him. But I didn't want to argue. While she guided me across the Paseo de Castellana, I looked around at Madrid; I hadn't been there in years.

In the middle of the avenue, she stopped and pointed to the sky. "There She is."

The moon shone brilliantly through the bare branches of the trees on either side of the road.

"Isn't that beautiful!" I exclaimed.

But she wasn't listening. She spread her arms in the form of a cross, turning her palms upward, and just stood there contemplating the moon.

What have I gotten myself into? I thought. I came here to attend a conference, and now I wind up in the Paseo de Castellana with this crazy girl. And tomorrow I'm going to Bilbao!

"O mirror of the Earth Goddess," Brida was saying, her eyes closed. "Teach us about our power and make men understand us. Rising, gleaming, waning, and reviving in the heavens, you show us the cycle of the seed and the fruit."

She stretched her arms toward the night sky and held this position for some time. Several passersby looked at her and laughed, but she paid no attention; I was the one who was dying of embarrassment, standing there beside her.

"I needed to do that," she said, after her long adoration of the moon, "so that the Goddess would protect us."

"What are you talking about?"

"The same thing that your friend was talking about, only with words that are true."

I was sorry now that I hadn't paid closer attention to the lecture.

"We know the feminine side of God," Brida continued as we started to walk on. "We, the women, understand and love the Great Mother. We have paid for our wisdom with persecution and burnings at the stake, but we have survived. And now we understand Her mysteries."

Burnings at the stake? She was talking about witches!

I looked more closely at the woman by my side. She was pretty, with hair that hung to the middle of her back.

"While men were going off to hunt, we remained in the caves, in the womb of the Mother, caring for our children. And it was there that the Great Mother taught us everything."

"Men lived through movement, while we remained close to the womb of the Mother. This allowed us to see that seeds are turned into plants, and we told this to the men. We made the first bread, and we fed our people. We shaped the first cup so that we could drink. And we came to understand the cycle of creation, because our bodies repeat the rhythm of the moon."

She stopped suddenly. "There She is!"

I looked. There in the middle of the *plaza*, surrounded on all sides by traffic, was a fountain portraying a woman in a carriage drawn by lions.

"This is the Plaza Cybele," I said, trying to show off my knowledge of Madrid. I had seen this fountain on dozens of postcards.

But the young woman wasn't listening. She was already in the middle of the street, trying to make her way through the traffic. "Come on! Let's go over there!" she shouted, waving to me from the midst of the cars.

I decided to try to follow her, if only to get the name of a hotel. Her craziness was wearing me out; I needed to get some sleep.

We made it to the fountain at almost the same time; my heart was pounding, but she had a smile on her lips. "Water!" she exclaimed. "Water is Her manifestation."

"Please, I need the name of an inexpensive hotel."

She plunged her hands into the water. "You should do this, too," she said to me. "Feel the water."

"No! But I don't want to spoil your experience. I'm going to look for a hotel."

"Just a minute."

Brida took a small flute from her bag and began to play. To my surprise, the music had a hypnotic effect; the sounds of the traffic receded, and my racing heart began to slow down. I sat on the edge of the fountain, listening to the noise of the water and the sound of the flute, my eyes on the full moon gleaming above us. Somehow I was sensing—although I couldn't quite understand it—that the moon was a reflection of my womanhood.

I don't know how long she continued to play. When she stopped, she turned to the fountain. "Cybele, manifestation of the Great Mother, who governs the harvests, sustains the cities, and returns to woman her role as priestess..."

"Who are you?" I asked. "Why did you ask me to come with you?"

She turned to me. "I am what you see me to be. I am a part of the religion of the earth."

"What do you want from me?"

"I can read your eyes. I can read your heart. You are going to fall in love. And suffer."

"I am?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I saw how he was looking at you. He loves you."

This woman was really nuts!

"That's why I asked you to come with me—because he is important. Even though he says some silly things, at least he recognizes the Great Mother. Don't let him lose his way.

Help him."

"You don't know what you're talking about. You're dreaming!" And I turned and rushed back into the traffic, swearing I'd forget everything she had said.

Sunday, December 5, 1993

We stopped for a cup of coffee.

"Yes, life teaches us many things," I said, trying to continue the conversation.

"It taught me that we can learn, and it taught me that we can change," he replied, "even when it seems impossible."

Clearly he wanted to drop the subject. We had hardly spoken during the two-hour drive that had brought us to this roadside cafe.

In the beginning, I had tried to reminisce about our childhood adventures, but he'd shown only a polite interest. In fact, he hadn't even really been listening to me; he kept asking me questions about things I had already told him.

Something was wrong. Had time and distance taken him away from my world forever?

After all, he talks about "magic moments," I reasoned. Why would he care about an old friend's career? He lives in a different universe, where Soria is only remote memory—a town frozen in time, his childhood friends still young boys and girls, the old folks still alive and doing the same things they'd been doing for so many years.

I was beginning to regret my decision to come with him. So when he changed the subject again, I resolved not to insist any further.

The last two hours of the drive to Bilbao were torture.

He was watching the road, I was looking out the window, and neither of us could hide the bad feelings that had arisen between us. The rental car didn't have a radio, so all we could do was endure the silence.

"Let's ask where the bus station is," I suggested as soon as we left the highway. "The buses leave from here regularly for Zaragoza."

It was the hour of siesta, and there were few people in the streets. We passed one gentleman and then a couple of teenagers, but he didn't stop to ask them. "Do you know where it is?" I spoke up, after some time had passed.

"Where what is?"

He still wasn't paying attention to what I said.

And then suddenly I understood what the silence was about. What did he have in common with a woman who had never ventured out into the world? How could he possibly be interested in spending time with someone who feared the unknown, who preferred a secure job and a conventional marriage to the life he led? Poor me, chattering away about friends from childhood and dusty memories of an insignificant village—those were the only things I could discuss.

When we seemed to have reached the center of town, I said, "You can let me off here." I was trying to sound casual, but I felt stupid, childish, and irritated.

He didn't stop the car.

"I have to catch the bus back to Zaragoza," I insisted.

"I've never been here before," he answered. "I have no idea where my hotel is, I don't know where the conference is being held, and I don't know where the bus station is."

"Don't worry, I'll be all right."

He slowed down but kept on driving.

"I'd really like to..." he began. He tried again but still couldn't finish his thought.

I could imagine what he would like to do: thank me for the company, send greetings to his old friends—maybe that would break the tension.

"I would really like it if you went with me to the conference tonight," he finally said.

I was shocked. Was he stalling for time so that he could make up for the awkward silence of our trip?

"I'd really like you to go with me," he repeated.

Now, maybe I'm a girl from the farm with no great stories to tell. Maybe I lack the sophistication of women from the big city. Life in the country may not make a woman

elegant or worldly, but it still teaches her how to listen to her heart and to trust her instincts.

To my surprise, my instincts told me that he meant what he said.

I sighed with relief. Of course I wasn't going to stay for any conference, but at least my friend seemed to be back. He was even inviting me along on his adventures, wanting to share his fears and triumphs with me.

"Thanks for the invitation," I said, "but I don't have enough money for a hotel, and I do need to get back to my studies."

"I have some money. You can stay in my room. We'll ask for two beds."

I noticed that he was beginning to perspire, despite the chill in the air. My heart sounded an alarm, and all the joy of the moment before turned into confusion.

Suddenly he stopped the car and looked directly into my eyes.

No one can lie, no one can hide anything, when he looks directly into someone's eyes.

And any woman with the least bit of sensitivity can read the eyes of a man in love.

I thought immediately of what that weird young woman at the fountain had said. It wasn't possible but it seemed to be true.

I had never dreamed that after all these years he would still remember. When we were children, we had walked through the world hand in hand. I had loved him—if a child can know what love means. But that was so many years ago—it was another life, a life whose innocence had opened my heart to all that was good.

And now we were responsible adults. We had put away childish things.

I looked into his eyes. I didn't want to—or wasn't able to—believe what I saw there.

"I just have this last conference, and then the holidays of the Immaculate Conception begin. I have to go up into the mountains; I want to show you something."

This brilliant man who was able to speak of magic moments was now here with me, acting as awkward as could be. He was moving too fast, he was unsure of himself; the things he was proposing were confused. It was painful for me to see him this way.

I opened the door and got out, then leaned against the fender, looking at the nearly deserted street. I lit a cigarette. I could try to hide my thoughts, pretend that I didn't understand what he was saying; I could try to convince myself that this was just a suggestion made by one childhood friend to another. Maybe he'd been on the road too long and was beginning to get confused.

Maybe I was exaggerating.

He jumped out of the car and came to my side.

"I'd really like you to stay for the conference tonight," he said again. "But if you can't, I'll understand."

There! The world made a complete turn and returned to where it belonged. It wasn't what I had been thinking; he was no longer insisting, he was ready to let me leave—a man in love doesn't act that way.

I felt both stupid and relieved. Yes, I could stay for at least one more day. We could have dinner together and get a little drunk—something we'd never done when we were younger. This would give me a chance to forget the stupid ideas I'd just had, and it would be a good opportunity to break the ice that had frozen us ever since we left Madrid.

One day wouldn't make any difference. And then at least I'd have a story to tell my friends.

"Separate beds," I said, joking. "And you pay for dinner, because I'm still a student. I'm broke."

We put our bags in the hotel room and came down to see where the conference was to be held. Since we were so early, we sat down in a cafe to wait.

"I want to give you something," he said, handing me a small red pouch.

I opened it and found inside an old rusty medal, with Our Lady of Grace on one side and the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the other.

"That was yours," he said, noticing my surprise. My heart began to sound the alarm again. "One day—it was autumn, just like it is now, and we must have been ten—I was sitting with you in the plaza where the great oak stood.

"I was going to tell you something, something I had rehearsed for weeks. But as soon as I began, you told me that you had lost your medal at the hermitage of San Saturio, and you asked me to see if I could find it there."

I remembered. Oh, God, I remembered!

"I did find it. But when I returned to the plaza, I no longer had the courage to say what I had rehearsed. So I promised myself that I would return the medal to you only when I was able to complete the sentence that I'd begun that day almost twenty years ago. For a long time, I've tried to forget it, but it's always there. I can't live with it any longer."

He put down his coffee, lit a cigarette, and looked at the ceiling for a long time. Then he turned to me. "It's a very simple sentence," he said. "I love you."

Sometimes an uncontrollable feeling of sadness grips us, he said. We recognize that the magic moment of the day has passed and that we've done nothing about it. Life begins to conceal its magic and its art.

We have to listen to the child we once were, the child who still exists inside us. That child understands magic moments. We can stifle its cries, but we cannot silence its voice.

The child we once were is still there. Blessed are the children, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

If we are not reborn—if we cannot learn to look at life with the innocence and the enthusiasm of childhood—it makes no sense to go on living.

There are many ways to commit suicide. Those who try to kill the body violate God's law. Those who try to kill the soul also violate God's law, even though their crime is less visible to others.

We have to pay attention to what the child in our heart tells us. We should not be embarrassed by this child. We must not allow this child to be scared because the child is alone and is almost never heard.

We must allow the child to take the reins of our lives. The child knows that each day is different from every other day.

We have to allow it to feel loved again. We must please this child—even if this means that we act in ways we are not used to, in ways that may seem foolish to others.

Remember that human wisdom is madness in the eyes of God. But if we listen to the child who lives in our soul, our eyes will grow bright. If we do not lose contact with that child, we will not lose contact with life.

The colors around me were growing vivid; I felt that I was speaking with more intensity and that my glass made a louder sound when I put it down on the table.

A group of about ten of us were having dinner together after the conference. Everyone was speaking at the same time, and I was smiling, for this night was special: it was the first night in many years that I had not planned.

What a joy!

When I'd decided to go to Madrid, I had been in control of my actions and my feelings. Now, suddenly, all that had changed. Here I was in a city where I'd never set foot before, even though it was only three hours from the place where I'd been born. I was sitting at a table where I knew only one person, and everyone was speaking to me as if they'd known me for years. I was amazed that I could enter into the conversation, that I could drink and enjoy myself with them.

I was there because suddenly life had presented me with Life. I felt no guilt, no fear, no embarrassment. As I listened to what he was saying—and felt myself growing closer to him—I was more and more convinced that he was right: there are moments when you have to take a risk, to do crazy things.

I spend day after day with my texts and notebooks, making this superhuman effort just to purchase my own servitude, I thought. *Why do I want that job? What does it offer me as a human being, as a woman?*

Nothing! I wasn't born to spend my life behind a desk, helping judges dispose of their cases.

No, I can't think that way about my life. I'm going to have to return to it this week. It must be the wine. After all, when all is said and done, if you don't work, you don't eat. This is all a dream. It's going to end.

But how long can I make the dream go on?

For the first time I considered going to the mountains with him for the next few days.

After all, a week of holidays was about to begin.

"Who are you?" a woman at our table asked me.

"A childhood friend," I answered.

"Was he doing these things when he was a child, too?"

"What things?"

The conversation at the table seemed to fade and then die out.

"You know: the miracles."

"He could always speak well." I didn't understand what she meant.

Everyone laughed, including him. I had no idea what was going on. But—maybe because of the wine—I felt relaxed, and for once I didn't feel like I had to be in control.

I looked around and then said something that I forgot the next moment. I was thinking about the upcoming holiday.

It was good to be here, meeting new people, talking about serious things but always with a touch of humor. I felt like I was really participating in the world. For at least this one night, I was no longer just seeing the real world through television or the newspapers.

When I returned to Zaragoza, I'd have stories to tell. If I accepted his invitation for the holidays, I'd have whole years of memories to live on.

He was so right not to pay any attention to my remarks about Soria, I thought. And I began to feel sorry for myself; for so many years, my drawer full of memories had held the same old stories.

"Have some more wine," a white-haired man said, filling my glass.

I drank it down. I kept thinking about how few things I would have had to tell my children and grandchildren if I hadn't come with him.

"I'm counting on our trip to France," he said to me so that only I could hear.

The wine had freed my tongue. "But only if you understand one thing."

"What's that?"

"It's about what you said before the conference. At the café."

"The medal?"

"No," I said, looking into his eyes and doing everything I could to appear sober. "What you said."

"We'll talk about it later," he said, quickly trying to change the subject.

He had said that he loved me. We hadn't had time to talk about it, but I knew I could convince him that it wasn't true.

"If you want me to take the trip with you, you have to listen to me," I said.

"I don't want to talk about it here. We're having a good time."

"You left Soria when you were very young," I went on. "I'm only a link to your past. I've reminded you of your roots, and that's what makes you think as you do. But that's all it is. There can't be any love involved."

He listened but didn't answer. Someone asked him his opinion about something, and our conversation was interrupted.

At least I've explained how I feel, I thought. The love he was talking about only exists in fairy tales.

In real life, love has to be possible. Even if it is not returned right away, love can only survive when the hope exists that you will be able to win over the person you desire.

Anything else is fantasy.

From the other side of the table, as if he had guessed what I was thinking, he raised his glass in a toast. "To love," he said.

I could tell that he, too, was a little drunk. So I decided to take advantage of the opening:

"To those wise enough to understand that sometimes love is nothing more than the foolishness of childhood," I said.

"The wise are wise only because they love. And the foolish are foolish only because they think they can understand love," he answered.

The others at the table heard him, and in a moment an animated discussion about love was in full swing. Everyone had a strong opinion and was defending their position tooth and nail; it took more wine to calm things down. Finally someone said it was getting late and that the owner of the restaurant wanted to close.

"We have five days of vacation," someone shouted from another table. "If the owner wants to close, it's just because you were getting too serious."

Everyone laughed—except me.

"Then where can we talk about serious things?" someone asked the drunk at the other table.

"In church!" said the drunk. And this time all of us laughed.

My friend stood up. I thought he was going to start a fight, because we were all acting like adolescents, and that's what adolescents do. Fighting is as much a part of being a teenager as the kisses, the secret embraces, the loud music, and the fast pace.

But instead he took my hand and moved toward the door. "We should go," he said. "It's getting late."

It was raining in Bilbao. Lovers need to know how to lose themselves and then how to find themselves again. He was able to do both well. Now he was happy, and as we returned to the hotel he sang:

Son los locos que inventaron el amor.

The song was right: it must have been the lunatics who invented love.

I was still feeling the effects of the wine, but I was struggling to think clearly. I had to stay in control of the situation if I wanted to make the trip with him.

But it will be easy to be in control because I'm not too emotional, I thought. *Anyone who can conquer her heart can conquer the world.*

Con un poema y un trombó

a develarte el corazón

To lose my heart to you with a poem and a trombone. I wish I didn't have to control my heart. If I could surrender, even if only for a weekend, this rain falling on my face would feel different. If love were easy, I would be embracing him now, and the words of his song would be our story. If Zaragoza weren't waiting for me after the holidays, I'd want to stay drunk and be free to kiss him, caress him, say the things and hear the things that lovers say and do to each other.

But no! I can't. I don't want to.

Salgamos a volar, querida mia, the song says.

Yes, let's fly away. But under my conditions.

He still didn't know that I was going to say yes to his invitation. Why did I want to take this risk?

Because I was drunk, because I was tired of days that were all the same.

But this weariness will pass. I'm going to want to get back to Zaragoza, where I have chosen to live. My studies are waiting for me. The husband I'm still looking for is waiting for me—a husband who won't be as difficult to find.

An easier life waits for me, with children and grandchildren, with a clear budget and a yearly vacation. I don't know what his fears are, but I know my own. I don't need new fears—my own are enough.

I was sure I could never fall in love with someone like him. I knew him too well, all his weaknesses and fears. I just couldn't admire him as the others seemed to.

But love is much like a dam: if you allow a tiny crack to form through which only a trickle of water can pass, that trickle will quickly bring down the whole structure, and soon no one will be able to control the force of the current.

For when those walls come down, then love takes over, and it no longer matters what is possible or impossible; it doesn't even matter whether we can keep the loved one at our side. To love is to lose control.

No, no, I cannot allow such a crack to form. No matter how small.

"Hey, hold up a minute!"

He stopped singing immediately. Quick steps echoed on the damp pavement behind us.

"Let's get out of here," he said, grabbing my arm.

"Wait!" a man shouted. "I need to talk to you!"

But he moved ahead even more rapidly. "This has nothing to do with us," he said. "Let's get to the hotel."

Yet it did have to do with us—there was no one else on the street. My heart was beating fast, and the effects of the wine disappeared altogether. I remembered that Bilbao was in Basque country and that terrorist attacks were common. The man's footsteps came closer. "Let's go," he said, hurrying along.

But it was too late. A man's figure, soaked from head to foot, stepped in front of us.

"Stop, please!" the man said. "For the love of God."

I was frightened. I looked around frantically for a means of escape, hoping that by some miracle a police car would appear. Instinctively, I clutched at his arm—but he pulled away.

"Please!" said the man. "I heard that you were in the city. I need your help. It's my son."

The man knelt on the pavement and began to weep. "Please," he said, "please!"

My friend gasped for breath; I watched as he lowered his head and closed his eyes. For a few minutes the silence was broken only by the sound of the rain and the sobs of the man kneeling on the sidewalk.

"Go to the hotel, Pilar," he said finally. "Get some sleep. I won't be back until dawn."

Monday, December 6, 1993

Love is a trap. When it appears, we see only its light, not its shadows.

"Look at the land around here!" he said. "Let's lie down on the ground and feel the planet's heart beating!"

"But I'll get my coat dirty, and it's the only one I have with me."

We were driving through hills of olive groves. After yesterday's rain in Bilbao, the morning sun made me sleepy. I hadn't brought sunglasses—I hadn't brought anything, since I'd expected to return to Zaragoza two days ago. I'd had to sleep in a shirt he loaned me, and I'd bought a T-shirt at a shop near the hotel in Bilbao so that at least I could wash the one I was wearing.

"You must be sick of seeing me in the same clothes every day," I said, trying to make a joke about something trivial to see if that would make all this seem real.

"I'm glad you're here."

He hadn't mentioned love again since he had given me the medal, but he had been in a good mood; he seemed to be eighteen again. Now he walked along beside me bathed in the clear morning light.

"What do you have to do over there?" I asked, pointing toward the peaks of the Pyrenees on the horizon.

"Beyond those mountains lies France," he answered with a smile.

"I know—I studied geography, too, you know. I'm just curious about why we have to go there."

He paused, smiling to himself. "So you can take a look at a house you might be interested in."

"If you're thinking about becoming a real estate agent, forget it. I don't have any money."

It didn't matter to me whether we visited a village in Navarra or went all the way to France. I just didn't want to spend the holidays in Zaragoza.

You see? I heard my brain say to my heart. *You're happy that you've accepted his invitation. You've changed—you just haven't recognized it yet.*

No, I hadn't changed at all. I was just relaxing a little.

"Look at the stones on the ground."

They were rounded, with no sharp edges. They looked like pebbles from the sea. But the sea had never been here in the fields of Navarra.

"The feet of laborers, pilgrims, and explorers smoothed these stones," he said. "The stones were changed—and the travelers were too."

"Has traveling taught you all the things you know?"

"No. I learned from the miracles of revelation."

I didn't understand, but I didn't pursue it. For now, I was content to bask in the beauty of the sun, the fields, and the mountains.

"Where are we going now?" I asked.

"Nowhere. Let's just enjoy the morning, the sun, and the countryside. We have a long trip ahead of us." He hesitated for a moment and then asked, "Do you still have the medal?"

"Sure, I've kept it," I said, and began to walk faster. I didn't want to talk about the medal—I didn't want to talk about anything that might ruin the happiness and freedom of our morning together.

A village appeared. Like most medieval cities, it was situated atop a mountain peak; even from a distance, I could see the tower of a church and the ruins of a castle.

"Let's drive to that village," I suggested.

Although he seemed reluctant, he agreed. I could see a chapel along the road, and I wanted to stop and go in. I didn't pray anymore, but the silence of churches always attracted me.

Don't feel guilty, I was saying to myself. *If he's in love, that's his problem*. He had asked about the medal. I knew that he was hoping we'd get back to our conversation at the cafe. But I was afraid of hearing something I didn't want to hear. *I won't get into it, I won't bring up the subject*.

But what if he really did love me? What if he thought that we could transform this love into something deeper?

Ridiculous, I thought to myself. *There's nothing deeper than love. In fairy tales, the princesses kiss the frogs, and the frogs become princes. In real life, the princesses kiss princes, and the princes turn into frogs*.

After driving for another half hour, we reached the chapel. An old man was seated on the steps. He was the first person we'd seen since our drive began.

It was the end of fall, and, in keeping with tradition, the fields had been returned once more to the Lord, who would fertilize the land with his blessings and allow human beings to harvest his sustenance by the sweat of their brows.

"Hello," he said to the man.

"How are you?"

"What is the name of this village?"

"San Martín de Unx."

"Unx?" I said. "It sounds like the name of a gnome."

The old man didn't understand the joke. Disappointed, I walked toward the entrance to the chapel.

"You can't go in," warned the old man. "It closed at noon. If you like, you can come back at four this afternoon."

The door was open and I could look inside, although it was so bright out that I couldn't see clearly.

"Just for a minute?" I asked. "I'd like to say a prayer."

"I'm very sorry. It's already closed."

He was listening to my conversation with the old man but didn't say anything.

"All right, then, let's leave," I said. "There's no point in arguing."

He continued to look at me, his gaze empty, distant. "Don't you want to see the chapel?" he asked.

I could see he didn't approve of my decision. *He thinks I'm weak, cowardly, unable to fight for what I want. Even without a kiss, the princess is transformed into a frog.*

"Remember yesterday?" I said. "You ended our conversation in the bar because you didn't want to argue with me. Now when I do the same thing, you criticize me."

The old man watched our discussion impassively. He was probably happy that something was actually happening, there in a place where all the mornings, all the afternoons, and all the nights were the same.

"The door to the church is open," he said, speaking to the old man. "If you want some money, we can give you some. But she wants to see the church."

"It's too late."

"Fine. We'll go in anyway." He took my arm and we went in.

My heart was pounding. The old man could get nasty, call the police, ruin the trip.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because you wanted to see the chapel."

I was so nervous I couldn't even focus on what was inside. The argument—and my attitude—had ruined our perfect morning.

I listened carefully for any sounds from outside. *The old man might call the village police, I thought. Trespassers in the chapel! Thieves! They're breaking the law! The old man had said the chapel was closed, that visiting hours were over. He's a poor old man, unable to keep us from going in. And the police will be tough on us because we offended a feeble old man.*

I stayed inside the chapel just long enough to show that I'd really wanted to see it. As soon as enough time had passed for an imaginary Ave Maria, I said, "Let's go."

"Don't be frightened, Pilar. Don't just fall into playing a role."

I didn't want my problem with the old man to become a problem with him, so I tried to stay calm. "I don't know what you mean by 'playing a role.'"

"Some people always have to be doing battle with someone, sometimes even with themselves, battling with their own lives. So they begin to create a kind of play in their head, and they write the script based on their frustrations."

"I know a lot of people like that. I know just what you mean."

"But the worst part is that they cannot present the play by themselves," he continued. "So they begin to invite other actors to join in."

"That's what that fellow outside was doing. He wanted revenge for something, and he chose us to play a part. If we had accepted his restrictions, we'd be regretting it. We would have been defeated. We would have agreed to participate in his miserable life and in his frustrations."

"The man's aggression was easy to see, so it was easy for us to refuse the role he wanted us to play. But other people also 'invite' us to behave like victims, when they complain about the unfairness of life, for example, and ask us to agree, to offer advice, to participate."

He looked into my eyes. "Be careful. When you join in that game, you always wind up losing."

He was right. But I still wasn't happy about being inside the chapel. "OK, but I've already said my prayer. I've done what I wanted to do. Let's go."

The contrast between the darkness inside the chapel and the strong sunlight blinded me for a few moments. When my eyes adjusted, I saw that the old man was no longer there. "Let's have some lunch," he said, walking in the direction of the village.

I drank two glasses of wine at lunch. I'd never done that in my life.

He was speaking to the waiter, who told him that there were several Roman ruins in the area. I was trying to listen to their conversation, but I was having trouble stifling my bad mood.

The princess had turned into a frog. So what? Who do I have to prove anything to? I wasn't looking for anything—not for a man and certainly not for love.

I knew it, I said to myself. I knew he was going to turn my world upside down. My brain warned me, but my heart didn't want to take its advice.

I've paid a considerable price for the little I have gained. I've been forced to deny myself many things I've wanted, to abandon so many roads that were open to me. I've sacrificed my dreams in the name of a larger dream—a peaceful soul. I didn't want to give up that peace.

"You're tense," he said, breaking off his conversation with the waiter.

"Yes, I am. I think that old man went for the police. I think this is a small place, and they know where we are. I think this boldness of yours about having lunch here could wind up ruining our holiday."

He twirled his glass of water. Surely he knew that this was not the problem—that I was actually ashamed. Why do we always do this? Why do we notice the speck in our eye but not the mountains, the fields, the olive groves?

"Listen, that's not going to happen," he said. "The old man has gone home and has already forgotten the whole thing. Trust me."

That's not why I'm so tense, you idiot.

"Listen to your heart more," he went on.

"That's just it! I *am* listening to it," I said. "And I feel that we should leave. I'm not enjoying this place."

"You shouldn't drink during the day. It doesn't help anything."

Up to that point, I'd controlled myself. Now it was time to say what I thought.

"You think you know everything," I said, "that you know all about magic moments, the inner child... I don't know what you're doing here with me."

He laughed. "I admire you. And I admire the battle you're waging with your heart."

"What battle?"

"Never mind," he said.

But I knew what he was talking about.

"Don't kid yourself," I said. "We can talk about it if you like. You're mistaken about my feelings."

He stopped fooling with his glass and looked at me. "No, I'm not mistaken. I know you don't love me."

This confused me even more.

"But I'm going to fight for your love," he continued. "There are some things in life that are worth fighting for to the end."

I was speechless.

"You are worth it," he said.

I turned away, trying to pretend that I was interested in the restaurant's decor. I had been feeling like a frog, and suddenly I was a princess again.

I want to believe what you're saying, I thought to myself. It won't change anything, but at least I won't feel so weak, so incapable.

"I apologize for my outburst," I said.

He smiled, signaled to the waiter, and paid the check.

On the way back to the car, I became confused again. Maybe it was the sun—but no, it was autumn, and the sun was weak. Perhaps the old man—but he disappeared a while ago.

All this was so new to me. Life takes us by surprise and orders us to move toward the unknown—even when we don't want to and when we think we don't need to.

I tried to concentrate on the scenery, but I couldn't focus on the olive groves, the village atop the mountain, the chapel with the old man at the gate. All of it was so unfamiliar.

I remembered how much I'd drunk the day before and the song he had sung:

Las tardecitas de Buenos Aires tienen este no sé...

¿Qué sé yo?

Viste, salí de tu casa, por Arenales...

Why sing of the nights of Buenos Aires, when we were in Bilbao? I didn't live on a street called Arenales. What had gotten into him?

"What was that song you were singing yesterday?" I asked.

"*Balada para un loco*" he said. "Why do you ask about it now?"

"I don't know."

But I had a reason: I knew he'd sung the song as a kind of snare. He'd made me memorize the words, just as I would memorize course work for an examination. He could have sung a song I was familiar with—but he'd chosen one I'd never heard before.

It was a trap. Later, if I heard the song played on the radio or at a club, I'd think of him, of Bilbao, and of a time in my life when autumn turned to spring. I'd recall the excitement, the adventure, and the child who was reborn out of God knows where.

That's what he was thinking. He was wise, experienced; he knew how to woo the woman he wanted.

I'm going crazy, I told myself. I must be an alcoholic, drinking so much two days in a row. He knows all the tricks. He's controlling me. leading me along with his sweetness.

"I admire the battle you are waging with your heart," he had said at the restaurant.

But he was wrong. Because I had fought with my heart and defeated it long ago. I was certainly not going to become passionate about something that was impossible. I knew my limits; I knew how much suffering I could bear.

"Say something," I demanded, as we walked back to the car.

"What?"

"Anything. Talk to me."

So he began to tell me about the visions of the Virgin Mary at Fátima. I don't know why he came up with that, but the story of the three shepherds who had spoken to the Virgin distracted me.

My heart relaxed. *Yes, I know my limits, and I know how to stay in control.*

We arrived at night in a fog so dense we could hardly see where we were. I could make out only a small plaza, a lamppost, some medieval houses barely illuminated by the yellow light, and a well.

"The fog!" he exclaimed.

I couldn't understand why he was so excited.

"We're in Saint-Savin," he explained.

The name meant nothing to me. But we were in France, and that in itself thrilled me.

"Why this place?" I asked.

"Because the house I want you to see is here," he answered, laughing. "Also, I promised that I would come back here on the day of the Immaculate Conception."

"Here?"

"Well, near here."

He stopped the car. When we stepped out, he took my hand, and we began to walk through the fog.

"This place became a part of my life quite unexpectedly," he said.

You too? I thought.

"When I first came here, I thought I was lost. But I wasn't—actually, I was just rediscovering it."

"You talk in riddles sometimes," I said.

"This is where I realized how much I needed you in my life."

I looked away; I couldn't understand him. "But what does that have to do with losing your way?"

"Let's find someone who'll rent us a room, because the two hotels in this village are only open during the summer. Then we'll have dinner at a good restaurant—no tension, no fear of the police, no need to think about running back to the car! And when the wine loosens our tongues, we'll talk about many things."

We both laughed. I already felt more relaxed. During the drive here, I had looked back over the wild things I'd been thinking. And as we crossed over the top of the mountains that separate France from Spain, I'd asked God to cleanse my soul of tension and fear. I was tired of playing the child and acting the way many of my friends did—the ones who are afraid that love is impossible without even knowing what love is. If I stayed like that, I would miss out on everything good that these few days with him might offer.

Careful, I thought. *Watch out for the break in the dam. If that break occurs, nothing in the world will be able to stop it.*

"May the Virgin protect us from here on," he said.

I remained silent.

"Why didn't you say 'amen'?" he asked.

"Because I don't think that's important anymore. There was a time when religion was a part of my life, but that time has passed."

He turned around and began to walk back to the car. "I still pray," I went on. "I prayed as we were crossing the Pyrenees. But it's something automatic, and I'm not even sure I still believe in it."

"Why?"

"Because I've suffered, and God didn't listen to my prayers. Because many times in my life I have tried to love with all my heart, and my love has wound up being trampled or betrayed. If God is love, he should have cared more about my feelings.

"God *is* love. But the one who understands this best is the Virgin."

I burst out laughing. When I turned to look at him, I saw that he was serious—this was not a joke.

"The Virgin understands the mystery of total surrender," he went on. "And having loved and suffered, she freed us from pain. In the same way that Jesus freed us from sin."

"Jesus was the son of God. They say that the Virgin was merely a woman who happened to receive him into her womb," I said. I was trying to make up for my laughter and let him know that I respected his faith.

He opened the car door and took out our bags. When I tried to take mine from his hand, he smiled. "Let me carry your bag." I said.

No one's done that for me in a long time, I thought.

We knocked on the door of the first house, but the woman said she didn't rent rooms. At the second door, no one answered. At the third, a kind old man greeted us—but when we looked at the room, there was only a double bed. I turned it down.

"Maybe we should head for a larger city," I suggested as we left.

"We'll find a room," he said. "Do you know the exercise of the Other? It's part of a story written a hundred years ago, whose author..."

"Forget the author, and tell me the story," I interrupted. We were once more walking along the only street in Saint-Savin.

A man runs into an old friend who had somehow never been able to make it in life. "I should give him some money," he thinks. But instead he learns that his old friend has grown rich and is actually seeking him out to repay the debts he had run up over the years.

They go to a bar they used to frequent together, and the friend buys drinks for everyone there. When they ask him how he became so successful, he answers that until only a few days ago, he had been living the role of the "Other."

"What is the Other?" they ask.

"The Other is the one who taught me what I should be like, but not what I am. The Other believes that it is our obligation to spend our entire life thinking about how to get our hands on as much money as possible so that we will not die of hunger when we are old. So we think so much about money and our plans for acquiring it that we discover we are alive only when our days on earth are practically done. And then it's too late."

"And you? Who are you?"

"I am just like everyone else who listens to their heart: a person who is enchanted by the mystery of life. Who is open to miracles, who experiences joy and enthusiasm for what they do. It's just that the Other, afraid of disappointment, kept me from taking action."

"But there is suffering in life," one of the listeners said.

"And there are defeats. No one can avoid them. But it's better to lose some of the battles in the struggle for your dreams than to be defeated without ever even knowing what you're fighting for."

"That's it?" another listener asked.

"Yes, that's it. When I learned this, I resolved to become the person I had always wanted to be. The Other stood there in the corner of my room, watching me, but I will never let the Other into myself again even though it has already tried to frighten me, warning me that it's risky not to think about the future.

"From the moment that I ousted the Other from my life, the Divine Energy began to perform its miracles."

In spite of the fact that my friend had long ago expelled the Other from his life, he still wasn't having much luck finding us lodging for the night. But I knew he hadn't told me that story for his own sake—he had told it for mine. He seemed to be talking about my fears, my insecurity, and my unwillingness to see what was wonderful because tomorrow it might disappear and then I would suffer.

The gods throw the dice, and they don't ask whether we want to be in the game or not. They don't care if when you go, you leave behind a lover, a home, a career, or a dream. The gods don't care whether you have it all, whether it seems that your every desire can be met through hard work and persistence. The gods don't want to know about your plans and your hopes. Somewhere they're throwing the dice—and you are chosen. From then on, winning or losing is only a question of luck.

The gods throw the dice, freeing love from its cage. And love can create or destroy—depending on the direction of the wind when it is set free.

For the moment, the wind was blowing in his favor. But the wind is as capricious as the gods—and deep inside myself, I had begun to feel some gusts.

At last, as if fate wanted to show me that the story of the Other was true—and the universe always conspires to help the dreamer—we found a house to stay in, with a room with separate beds. My first move was to bathe, wash my clothes, and put on the shirt I had bought. I felt refreshed, and this made me feel more secure.

After having dinner with the couple who owned the house—the restaurants were also closed during the autumn and winter—he asked for a bottle of wine, promising to replace it the next day. We put on our coats, borrowed two glasses, and went out.

"Let's sit on the edge of the well," I suggested.

And there we sat, drinking to keep the cold and the tension away.

"It looks like the Other has gotten to you," I joked. "Your good mood seems to have disappeared."

He laughed. "I knew we were going to find a room, and we did. The universe always helps us fight for our dreams, no matter how foolish they may be. Our dreams are our own, and only we can know the effort required to keep them alive."

In the fog, which hung yellow under the glow of the street lamp, we couldn't see even as far as the other side of the plaza.

I took a deep breath. We couldn't avoid the subject any longer.

"We have to talk about love," I said. "You know how I've been these last few days. If it had been up to me, the subject would never have come up. But ever since you brought it up, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it."

"It's risky, falling in love."

"I know that," I answered. "I've been in love before. It's like a narcotic. At first it brings the euphoria of complete surrender. The next day, you want more. You're not addicted yet, but you like the sensation, and you think you can still control things. You think about the person you love for two minutes, and forget them for three hours.

"But then you get used to that person, and you begin to be completely dependent on them. Now you think about him for three hours and forget him for two minutes. If he's not there, you feel like an addict who can't get a fix. And just as addicts steal and humiliate themselves to get what they need, you're willing to do anything for love."

"What a horrible way to put it," he said.

It really was a horrible way to put it; my analogy didn't go with the romance of the evening—the wine, the well, and the medieval houses in the plaza. But it was true. If he was going to base so many of his actions on love, he needed to know what the risks were.

"So we should love only those who can stay near us," I said.

He looked out at the fog. Now he no longer seemed interested in whether we negotiated the dangerous waters of a conversation about love. I was being tough, but there was no other way.

Subject closed, I thought. Our being together for these three days has been enough to change his mind. My pride was a bit wounded, but my heart was relieved. *Do I really want this?* I asked myself. I realized that I was already beginning to sense the storms brought on by the winds of love. I had already begun to feel the break in the dam.

We drank for some time without bringing up anything serious. We talked about the couple who owned the house and the saint for whom the town had been named. He told me some of the legends about the church across the square, which I could barely see in the fog.

"You're upset," he said at one point.

Yes, my mind was wandering. I wished I were there with someone who could bring peace to my heart someone with whom I could spend a little time without being afraid that I would lose him the next day. With that reassurance, the time would pass more slowly. We could be silent for a while because we'd know we had the rest of our lives together for conversation. I wouldn't have to worry about serious matters, about difficult decisions and hard words.

We sat there in silence—and that in itself was a sign. For the first time, we had nothing to say, although I only noticed this when he stood up to go find us another bottle of wine.

Silence. Then I heard the sound of his footsteps returning to the well where we'd been sitting for more than an hour, drinking and staring at the fog.

This was the first time we'd been silent for so long. It was not the awkward silence of the trip from Madrid to Bilbao. And not the silence of my fearful heart when we were in the chapel near San Martin de Unx.

This was a silence that spoke for itself. A silence that said we no longer needed to explain things to each other.

The sound of his footsteps halted. He was looking at me—and what he saw must have been beautiful: a woman seated on the edge of a well, on a foggy night, in the light of the street lamp.

The ancient houses, the eleventh-century church, and the silence.

The second bottle of wine was half empty when I decided to speak.

"This morning, I convinced myself that I was an alcoholic. I've been drinking from morning to night. In these past three days, I've drunk more than in the entire past year."

He reached out and stroked my hair without saying anything. I absorbed his touch without trying to pull away.

"Tell me about your life since I last saw you," I asked.

"There are no great mysteries to tell. My path is always there, and I do everything I can to follow it in a dignified way."

"What is your path?"

"The path of someone seeking love."

He hesitated for a moment, fiddling with the near-empty bottle.

"And love's path is really complicated," he concluded.

"Because on that path we can go either to heaven or to hell?" I wasn't sure whether he was referring to us or not.

He didn't respond. Perhaps he was still deep in the ocean of silence, but the wine had loosened my tongue again, and I had to speak.

"You said that something here in this city altered your course."

"Yes, I think it did. I'm still not absolutely sure, and that's why I wanted to bring you here."

"Is this some kind of test?"

"No. It's a surrender. So that She will help me to make the right decision."

"Who will?"

"The Virgin."

The Virgin! I should have known. I was surprised that all his years of travel, of learning, of new horizons hadn't freed him from the Catholicism of his childhood. In at least this respect, my friends and I had come a long way—we no longer lived under the weight of guilt and sin.

"I'm surprised that after all you've been through, you still keep the faith."

"I haven't kept it. I lost it and recovered it."

"But a faith in virgins? In impossible things and in fantasies? Haven't you had an active sex life?"

"Well, normal. I've been in love with many women."

To my surprise, I felt a stab of jealousy. But my inner battle seemed already to have subsided, and I didn't want to start it up again.

"Why is she 'The Virgin'? Why isn't She presented to us as a normal woman, like any other?"

He drained the few drops remaining in the bottle and asked if I wanted him to go for another. I said no.

"What I want is an answer from you. Every time we start to speak about certain things, you try to talk about something else."

"She *was* normal. She had already had other children. The Bible tells us that Jesus had two brothers. Virginity, as it relates to Jesus, is based on a different thing: Mary initiated a new generation of grace. A new era began. She is the cosmic bride, Earth, which opens to the heavens and allows itself to be fertilized.

"Because of the courage She showed in accepting her destiny, She allowed God to come down to earth and She was transformed into the Great Mother."

I didn't understand exactly what he was telling me, and he could see that.

"She is the feminine face of God. She has her own divinity."

He spoke with great emotion; in fact, his words almost sounded forced, as if he felt he was committing a sin.

"A goddess?" I asked.

I waited for him to explain, but he couldn't say anything more. I thought about his Catholicism and about how what he had just said seemed blasphemous.

"Who is the Virgin? What is the Goddess?"

"It's not easy to explain," he said, clearly growing more and more uncomfortable. "I have some written material with me. If you want, you can read it."

"I don't want to read right now; I want you to explain it to me," I insisted.

He looked around for the wine bottle, but it was empty. Neither of us could remember why we had come to the well in the first place. Something important was in the air—as if what he was saying were part of a miracle.

"Go on," I urged him.

"Her symbol is water—like the fog all around us. The Goddess uses water as the means to manifest Herself."

The mist suddenly seemed to take on a life of its own, becoming sacred—even though I still didn't understand what he was trying to say.

"I don't want to talk to you about history. If you want to learn about the history, you can read the books I brought with me. But you should know that this woman—the Goddess, the Virgin Mary, the Shechinah, the Great Mother, Isis, Sofia, slave and mistress—is present in every religion on the face of the earth. She has been forgotten, prohibited, and disguised, but Her cult has continued from millennium to millennium and continues to survive today.

"One of the faces of God is the face of a woman."

I studied his face. His eyes were gleaming, and he was staring into the fog that enveloped us. I could see that I no longer needed to prompt him.

"She is present in the first chapter of the Bible—when the spirit of God hovered over the waters, and He placed them below and above the stars. It was the mystic marriage of earth and heaven. She is present in the final chapter of the Bible, when

the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"

And let him who hears say, "Come!"

And let him who thirsts come.

Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

"Why is water the symbol of the feminine face of God?"

"I don't know. But She normally chooses that medium to manifest Herself. Maybe because She is the source of life; we are generated in water, and for nine months we live in it. Water is the symbol of the power of woman, the power that no man—no matter how enlightened or perfect he may be—can capture."

He paused for a moment and then began again.

"In every religion and in every tradition, She manifests Herself in one form or another—She always manifests Herself. Since I am a Catholic, I perceive Her as the Virgin Mary."

He took me by the hand, and in less than five minutes, we had walked out of Saint-Savin. We passed a column by the side of the road that had something strange at the top: it was a cross with an image of the Virgin in the place where Jesus ought to have been. Now the darkness and the mist completely enveloped us. I began to imagine I was immersed in water, in the maternal womb—where time and thought do not exist. Everything he had been saying to me was beginning to make sense. I remembered the woman at the conference, And then I thought of the girl who had led me to the plaza. She too had said that water was the symbol of the Goddess.

"Twenty kilometers from here there's a grotto," he was telling me. "On the eleventh of February, 1858, a young girl was baling hay near the grotto with two other children. She was a fragile, asthmatic girl who lived in miserable poverty. On that winter's day, she was afraid of crossing a small stream, because if she got wet she might fall ill. And her parents needed the little money she made as a shepherd.

"A woman dressed in white, with two golden roses on her feet, appeared. The woman treated the child as if she were a princess, asked if she might return to that place a certain number of times, and then vanished. The two other girls, who were entranced by what had happened, quickly spread the story.

"This brought on a long ordeal for the girl. She was imprisoned, and the authorities demanded that she deny the whole story. Others offered her money to get her to ask the apparition for special favors. Within days, her family began to be insulted in the plaza by people who thought that the girl had invented the story in order to get attention.

"The girl, whose name was Bernadette, had no understanding of what she had seen. She referred to the lady who had appeared as 'That,' and her parents, concerned as they were, went to the village priest for assistance. The priest suggested that when the apparition next appeared, Bernadette should ask the woman's name.

"Bernadette did as she was asked, but received only a smile in response. 'That' appeared before her a total of eighteen times and, for the most part, said nothing. During one of her appearances, though, she asked the girl to kiss the ground. Without understanding why, Bernadette did as she was asked. During another visitation, she asked the girl to dig a hole in the floor of the grotto. Bernadette obeyed, and there immediately appeared a hole filled with filthy water, because swine were kept there.

" 'Drink the water,' the woman said.

"The water was so dirty that although Bernadette cupped it in her hands, she threw it away three times, afraid to bring it to her mouth. Finally she did, despite her repugnance. In the place where she had dug, more water began to come forth. A man who was blind in one eye applied several drops of the water to his face and recovered his vision. A woman, desperate because her newborn child appeared to be dying, dipped the child in the spring—on a day when the temperature had fallen below zero. And the child was cured.

"Little by little, the word spread, and thousands of people began to come to the place. The girl repeatedly asked the woman her name, but the woman merely smiled.

"Until one day, 'That' turned to Bernadette, and said, 'I am the Immaculate Conception.'

"Satisfied at last, the girl ran to tell the parish priest.

" 'That cannot be,' he said. 'No one can be the tree and the fruit at the same time, my child. Go there, and throw holy water on her.'

"As far as the priest was concerned, only God could have existed from the very beginning—and God, as far as anyone could tell, was a man."

He paused for a long time.

"Bernadette threw holy water on 'That,' and the apparition smiled tenderly, nothing more.

"On the sixteenth of July, the woman appeared for the last time. Shortly after, Bernadette entered a convent, not knowing that she had changed forever the destiny of that small village near the grotto. The spring continued to flow, and miracles followed, one after the other.

"The story spread, first throughout France and later the world. The city grew and was transformed. Businesses sprang up everywhere. Hotels opened. Bernadette died and was buried in a place far from there, never knowing what had occurred.

"Some people who wanted to put the church in a bad light—and who knew that the Vatican was now acknowledging apparitions—began to invent false miracles that were later unmasked. The church reacted strongly: from a certain date on, it would accept as miracles only those phenomena that passed a rigorous series of examinations performed by medical and scientific commissions.

"But the water still flows, and the cures continue."

I heard something nearby; it frightened me, but he didn't seem to notice. The fog now had a life and a story of its own. I was thinking about everything he had told me, and I wondered how he knew all of this.

I thought about the feminine face of God. The man at my side had a soul filled with conflict. A short time ago, he had written to me that he wanted to enter a Catholic seminary, yet now he was thinking that God has a feminine face.

He was silent. I still felt as if I were in the womb of the Earth Mother, beyond time and place.

"There were two important things that Bernadette didn't know," he finally said. "The first was that prior to the arrival of the Christian religion in these parts, these mountains were inhabited by Celts—and the Goddess was their principal object of devotion. Generations and generations had understood the feminine face of God and shared in Her love and Her glory."

"And the second thing?"

"The second was that a short time before Bernadette experienced her visions, the authorities at the Vatican had met in secret. Virtually no one knew what had occurred at those meetings—and there's no question but that the priest in the small village didn't have the slightest idea. The highest council of the Catholic Church was deciding whether they should ratify the dogma regarding the Immaculate Conception.

"The dogma wound up being ratified, through the papal bull known as *Ineffabilis Deus*. But the general public never knew exactly what this meant."

"And what do you have to do with all this?" I asked.

"I am Her disciple. I have learned through Her." He seemed to be saying that She was the source of all his knowledge.

"You have seen Her?"

"Yes."

We returned to the plaza and walked toward the church. I saw the well in the lamplight, with the bottle of wine and two glasses on its wall. *A couple of sweethearts must have been here, I think. Silent, allowing their hearts to speak to each other. And after their hearts had said all they had to say, they began to share the great mysteries.*

I felt that I was facing something quite serious and that I needed to learn everything I could from my experiences. For a few moments, I thought about my studies, about Zaragoza, and about the man I was hoping to find in my life but all that seemed far away, clouded by the mists over Saint-Savin.

"Why did you tell me the story of Bernadette?" I asked.

"I don't know why exactly," he answered, without looking at me directly. "Maybe because we're not too far from Lourdes. Maybe because the day after tomorrow is the day of the Immaculate Conception. Or maybe it was because I wanted to show you that my world is not so solitary and mad as it may appear. There are others who are part of that world, and they believe in what they say."

"I never said that your world is mad. Maybe it's mine that's crazy. I mean, here I am, spending the most crucial time of my life concentrating on textbooks and courses that won't help me at all to escape from the place I already know too well."

I sensed that he was relieved that I understood him. I expected him to say something more about the Goddess, but instead he turned to me and said, "Let's get some sleep. We've had a lot to drink."

Tuesday, December 7, 1993

He went straight to sleep, but I was awake for a long time, thinking about the fog, the wine, and our conversation. I read the manuscript he gave me, and what was in it thrilled me: God—if God really existed—was both Father and Mother.

Later, I turned out the light and lay there thinking. When we were quiet with each other, I was able to see how close I felt to him.

Neither of us had said anything. Love doesn't need to be discussed; it has its own voice and speaks for itself. That night, by the well, the silence had allowed our hearts to approach each other and get to know each other better. My heart had listened closely to what his had said, and now it was content.

Before I fell asleep, I decided I would do what he called the "exercise of the Other."

I am here in this room, I thought, far from everything familiar to me, talking about things that have never interested me and sleeping in a city where I've never set foot before. I can pretend—at least for a few minutes—that I am different.

I began to imagine how I would like to be living right at that moment. I wanted to be happy, curious, joyful—living every moment intensely, drinking the water of life thirstily. Believing again in my dreams. Able to fight for what I wanted.

Loving a man who loved me.

Yes, that was the woman I wanted to be—the woman who was suddenly presenting herself and becoming me.

I felt that my soul was bathed in the light of a god—or of a goddess—in whom I had lost faith. And I felt that at that moment, the Other left my body and was standing in the corner of that small room.

I observed the woman I had been up until then: weak but trying to give the impression of strength. Fearful of everything but telling herself it wasn't fear—it was the wisdom of

someone who knew what reality was. Putting up shutters in front of windows to keep the joy of the sun from entering—just so the sun's rays wouldn't fade my old furniture.

I looked at the Other, there in the corner of the room—fragile, exhausted, disillusioned. Controlling and enslaving what should really be free: her emotions. Trying to judge her future loves by the rules of her past suffering.

But love is always new. Regardless of whether we love once, twice, or a dozen times in our life, we always face a brand-new situation. Love can consign us to hell or to paradise, but it always takes us somewhere. We simply have to accept it, because it is what nourishes our existence. If we reject it, we die of hunger, because we lack the courage to stretch out a hand and pluck the fruit from the branches of the tree of life. We have to take love where we find it, even if that means hours, days, weeks of disappointment and sadness.

The moment we begin to seek love, love begins to seek us.

And to save us.

When the Other left me, my heart once again began to speak to me. It told me that the breach in the dike had allowed the waters to pour through, that the wind was blowing in all directions at once, and that it was happy because I was once again willing to listen to what it had to say.

My heart told me that I was in love. And I fell asleep with a smile on my lips.

When I awoke, the window was open and he was gazing at the mountains in the distance.

I watched him without saying anything, ready to close my eyes if he turned toward me.

As if he knew, he turned and looked at me.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning. Close the window—it's so cold."

The Other had appeared with no warning. It was still trying to change the direction of the wind, to detect shortcomings, to say, No, that's impossible. But it knew it was too late.

"I have to get dressed," I said.

"I'll wait for you downstairs."

I got up, banished the Other from my thoughts, opened the window again, and let the sun in. Its light bathed everything—the mountains with their snow-covered peaks, the ground blanketed in dry leaves, and the river, which I could hear but not see.

The sun shone on me, warming my nude body. I was no longer cold—I was consumed by a heat, the heat of a spark becoming a flame, the flame becoming a bonfire, the bonfire becoming an inferno, I knew.

I wanted this.

I also knew that from this moment on I was going to experience heaven and hell, joy and pain, dreams and hopelessness; that I would no longer be capable of containing the winds that blew from the hidden corners of my soul. I knew that from this moment on love would be my guide—and that it had waited to lead me ever since childhood, when I had felt love for the first time. The truth is, I had never forgotten love, even when it had deemed me unworthy of fighting for it. But love had been difficult, and I had been reluctant to cross its frontiers.

I recalled the plaza in Soria and the moment when I had asked him to find the medal I had lost. I had known what he was going to tell me, and I hadn't wanted to hear it, because he was the type who would someday go off in search of wealth, adventure, and dreams. I needed a love that was possible.

I realized that I had known nothing of love before. When I saw him at the conference and accepted his invitation, I'd thought that I, as a mature woman, would be able to control the heart of the girl who had been looking for so long for her prince. Then he had spoken about the child in all of us—and I'd heard again the voice of the child I had been, of the princess who was fearful of loving and losing.

For four days, I had tried to ignore my heart's voice, but it had grown louder and louder, and the Other had become desperate. In the furthest corner of my soul, my true self still existed, and I still believed in my dreams. Before the Other could say a word, I had accepted the ride with him. I had accepted the invitation to travel with him and to take the risks involved.

And because of that—because of that small part of me that had survived—love had finally found me, after it had looked for me everywhere. Love had found me, despite the barricade that the Other had built across a quiet street in Zaragoza, a barricade of preconceived ideas, stubborn opinions, and textbooks.

I opened the window and my heart. The sun flooded the room, and love inundated my soul.

We wandered for hours, through the snow and along the roads. We breakfasted in a village whose name I never found out but in whose central plaza a dramatic fountain sculpture displayed a serpent and a dove combined into a single fabulous creature. He smiled when he saw it. "It's a sign—masculine and feminine joined in a single figure."

"I'd never thought before about what you told me yesterday," I said. "But it makes sense."

" 'And God created man and woman,'" he quoted from Genesis, "because that was his image and simulacrum: man and woman."

I noted a new gleam in his eye. He was happy and laughed at every silly thing. He fell into easy conversation with the few people we met along the way—workers dressed in gray on their way to the fields, adventurers in colorful gear, preparing to climb a mountain peak. I said little—my French is awful—but my soul rejoiced at seeing him this way.

His joy made everyone who spoke with him smile. Perhaps his heart had spoken to him, and now he knew that I loved him—even though I was still behaving like just an old friend.

"You seem happier," I said at one point.

"Because I've always dreamed of being here with you, walking through these mountains and harvesting the 'golden fruits of the sun.'"

The golden fruits of the sun—a verse written ages ago, repeated by him now, at just the right moment.

"There's another reason you're happy," I said, as we left the small village with the strange statue.

"What's that?"

"You know that I'm happy. You're responsible for my being here today, climbing the mountains of truth, far from my mountains of notebooks and texts. You're making me happy. And happiness is something that multiplies when it is divided."

"Did you do the exercise of the Other?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because you've changed too. And because we always learn that exercise at the right time."

The Other pursued me all through the morning. Every minute, though, its voice grew fainter, and its image seemed to dissolve. It reminded me of those vampire films where the monster crumbles into dust.

We passed another column with an image of the Virgin on the cross.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked me.

"About vampires. Those creatures of the night, locked inside themselves, desperately seeking company. Incapable of loving."

"That's why legend has it that only a stake through the heart can kill them; when that happens, the heart bursts, freeing the energy of love and destroying the evil."

"I never thought of that before. But it makes sense."

I had succeeded in burying the stake. My heart, freed of all its curses, was aware of everything. The Other no longer had a place to call its own.

A thousand times I wanted to take his hand, and a thousand times I stopped myself. I was still confused—I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I didn't know how to begin.

We talked about the mountains and the rivers. We were lost in a forest for almost an hour, but eventually we found the path again. We ate sandwiches and drank melted snow. When the sun began to set, we decided to return to Saint-Savin.

The sound of our footsteps echoed from the stone walls. At the entrance to the church, I instinctively dipped my hand in the font of holy water and made the sign of the cross. I recalled that water was the symbol of the Goddess.

"Let's go in," he suggested.

We walked through the dark, empty building. Saint Savin, a hermit who had lived at the start of the first millennium, was buried below the main altar. The walls of the place were crumbling and had clearly been reconstructed several times.

Some places are like that: they can suffer through wars, persecutions, and indifference, but they still remain sacred. Finally someone comes along, senses that something is missing, and rebuilds them.

I noticed an image of the crucified Christ that gave me a funny feeling—I had the impression that his head was moving, following me.

"Let's stop here."

We were before an altar of Our Lady.

"Look at the image."

Mary, with her son in her lap. The infant Jesus pointing to the heavens.

"Look more carefully," he said.

I studied the details of the wooden carving: the gilt paint, the pedestal, the perfection with which the artist had traced the folds of the robe. But it was when I focused on the finger of the child Jesus that I understood what he meant.

Although Mary held him in her arms, it was Jesus who was supporting her. The child's arm, raised to the sky, appeared to be lifting the Virgin toward heaven, back to the place of Her Groom's abode.

"The artist who created this more than six hundred years ago knew what he wanted to convey," he commented.

Footsteps sounded on the wooden floor. A woman entered and lit a candle in front of the main altar.

We remained silent for a while, respecting her moment of prayer.

Love never comes just a little at a time, I thought, as I watched him, absorbed in contemplation of the Virgin. The previous day, the world had made sense, even without love's presence. But now we needed each other in order to see the true brilliance of things.

When the woman had gone, he spoke again. "The artist knew the Great Mother, the Goddess, and the sympathetic face of God. You've asked me a question that up until now I haven't been able to answer directly. It was 'Where did you learn all this?'"

Yes, I had asked him that, and he had already answered me. But I didn't say so.

"Well, I learned in the same way that this artist did: I accepted love from on high. I allowed myself to be guided," he went on. "You must remember the letter I wrote you, when I spoke of wanting to enter a monastery. I never told you, but I did in fact do that." I immediately remembered the conversation we'd had before the conference in Bilbao. My heart began to beat faster, and I tried to fix my gaze on the Virgin. She was smiling. *It can't be*, I thought. *You entered and then you left. Phase, tell me that you left the monastery.*

"I had already lived some pretty wild years," he said, not guessing my thoughts this time.

"I got to see other peoples and other lands. I had already looked for God in the four corners of the earth. I had fallen in love with other women and worked in a number of different jobs."

Another stab. I would have to be careful that the Other didn't return. I kept my gaze on the Virgin's smile.

"The mysteries of life fascinated me, and I wanted to understand them better. I looked for signs that would tell me that someone knew something. I went to India and to Egypt. I sat with masters of magic and of meditation. And finally I discovered what I was looking for: that truth resides where there is faith."

Truth resides where there is faith! I looked around again at the interior of the church—the worn stones, fallen and replaced so many times. What had made human beings so insistent? What had caused them to work so hard at rebuilding this small temple in such a remote spot, hidden in the mountains?

Faith.

"The Buddhists were right, the Hindus were right, the Muslims were right, and so were the Jews. Whenever someone follows the path to faith—sincerely follows it—he or she is able to unite with God and to perform miracles.

"But it wasn't enough simply to know that you have to make a choice. I chose the Catholic Church because I was raised in it, and my childhood had been impregnated with its mysteries. If I had been born Jewish, I would have chosen Judaism. God is the same, even though He has a thousand names; it is up to us to select a name for Him."

Once again, steps sounded in the church.

A man approached and stared at us. Then he turned to the center altar and reached for the two candelabra. He must have been the one responsible for guarding the church.

I remembered the watchman at the other chapel, the man who wouldn't allow us to enter. But this man said nothing.

"I have a meeting tonight," he said when the man left.

"Please, go on with what you were saying. Don't change the subject."

"I entered a monastery close to here. For four years, I studied everything I could. During that time, I made contact with the Clarifieds and the Charismatics, the sects that have been trying to open doors that have been closed for so long to certain spiritual experiences. I discovered that God was not the ogre that had frightened me as a child. There was a movement afoot for a return to the original innocence of Christianity."

"You mean that after two thousand years, they finally understood that it was time to allow Jesus to become a part of the church?" I said with some sarcasm.

"You may think you're joking, but that was exactly it. I began to study with one of the superiors at the monastery. He taught me that we have to accept the fire of revelation, the Holy Spirit."

The Virgin continued to smile, and the infant Jesus kept his joyful expression, but my heart stopped when he said that. I too had believed in that once—but time, age, and the feeling that I was a logical and practical person had distanced me from religion. I realized how much I wanted to recover my childhood faith, when I had believed in angels and miracles. But I couldn't possibly bring it back simply through an act of will.

"The superior told me that if I believed that I knew, then I would in fact eventually know," he continued. "I began to talk to myself when I was in my cell. I prayed that the Holy Spirit would manifest itself and teach me what I needed to know. Little by little, I discovered that as I talked to myself, a wiser voice was saying things for me."

"That's happened to me, too," I interrupted him. He waited for me to go on. But I couldn't say anything else.

"I'm listening," he said.

Something had stopped my tongue. He was speaking so beautifully, and I couldn't express myself nearly as well.

"The Other wants to come back," he said, as if he had guessed what I was thinking. "The Other is always afraid of saying something that might sound silly."

"Yes," I said, struggling to overcome my fear. "OK, sometimes when I'm talking with someone and get excited about what I'm saying, I find myself saying things I've never said before. It seems almost as if I'm 'channeling' an intelligence that isn't mine—one that understands life much better than me. But this is rare. In most conversations I prefer to listen. I always feel as if I'm learning something new, even though I wind up forgetting it all."

"We are our own greatest surprise," he said. "Faith as tiny as a grain of sand allows us to move mountains. That's what I've learned. And now, my own words sometimes surprise me."

"The apostles were fishermen, illiterate and ignorant. But they accepted the flame that fell from the heavens. They were not ashamed of their own ignorance; they had faith in the Holy Spirit. This gift is there for anyone who will accept it. One has only to believe, accept, and be willing to make mistakes."

The Virgin smiled down on me. She had every reason to cry—but She was joyful.

"Go on."

"That's all," he answered. "Accept the gift. And then the gift manifests itself."

"It doesn't work that way."

"Didn't you understand me?"

"I understand. But I'm like everyone else: I'm scared. It might work for you or for my neighbor, but never for me."

"That will change someday—when you begin to see that we are really just like that child there."

"But until then, we'll all go on thinking we've come close to the light, when actually we can't even light our own flame."

He didn't answer.

"You didn't finish your story about the seminary," I said.

"I'm still there."

Before I could react, he stood up and walked to the center of the church.

I stayed where I was. My head was spinning. *Still in the seminary?*

Better not to think about it. Love had flooded my soul, and there was no way I could control it. There was only one recourse: the Other, with whom I had been harsh because I was weak, and cold because I was afraid—but I no longer wanted the Other. I could no longer look at life through its eyes.

A sharp, sustained sound like that of an immense flute interrupted my thoughts. My heart jumped.

The sound came again. And again. I looked behind me and saw a wooden staircase that led up to a crude platform, which didn't seem to fit with the frozen beauty of the church. On the platform was an ancient organ.

And there he was. I couldn't see his face because the lighting was bad but I knew he was up there.

I stood up, and he called to me.

"Pilar!" he said, his voice full of emotion. "Stay where you are."

I obeyed.

"May the Great Mother inspire me," he said. "May this music be my prayer for the day."

And he began to play the Ave Maria. It must have been about six in the evening, time for the Angelus—a time when light and darkness merge. The sound of the organ echoed through the empty church, blending in my mind with the stones and the images laden with history and with faith. I closed my eyes and let the music flow through me, cleansing my soul of all fear and sin and reminding me that I am always better than I think and stronger than I believe.

For the first time since I had abandoned the path of faith, I felt a strong desire to pray. Although I was seated in a pew, my soul was kneeling at the feet of the Lady before me, the woman who had said,

"Yes,"

when She could have said "no." The angel would have sought out someone else, and there would have been no sin in the eyes of the Lord, because God knows His children's weakness.

But She had said,

"Thy will be done,"

even though She sensed that She was receiving, along with the words of the angel, all the pain and suffering of Her destiny; even though Her heart's eyes could see Her beloved son leaving the house, could see the people who would follow Him and then deny Him; but

"Thy will be done,"

even when, at the most sacred moment in a woman's life, She had to lie down with the animals in a stable to give birth, because that was what the Scriptures required;

"Thy will be done,"

even when, in agony, She looked through the streets for Her son and found Him at the temple. And He asked that She not interfere because He had other obligations and tasks to perform;

"Thy will be done,"

even when She knew that She would search for Him for the rest of Her days, Her heart filled with pain, fearing every moment for His life, knowing that He was being persecuted and threatened;

"Thy will be done,"

even when, finding Him in the crowd, She was unable to draw near Him;

"Thy will be done,"

even when She asked someone to tell Him that She was there and the son sent back the response, "My mother and my brothers are those who are here with me";

"Thy will be done,"

even when at the end, after everyone had fled, only She, another woman, and one of them stood at the foot of the cross, bearing the laughter of His enemies and the cowardice of His friends;

"Thy will be done."

Thy will be done, my Lord. Because you know the weakness in the heart of your children, and you assign each of them only the burden they can bear. May you understand my love—because it is the only thing I have that is really mine, the only thing that I will be able to take with me into the next life. Please allow it to be courageous and pure; please make it capable of surviving the snares of the world.

The organ stopped, and the sun went into hiding behind the mountains—as if both were ruled by the same Hand. The music had been his prayer, and his prayer had been heard. I opened my eyes and found the church in complete darkness, except for the solitary candle that illuminated the image of the Virgin.

I heard his footsteps again, returning to where I sat. The light of that single candle gleamed on my tears, and my smile—a smile that wasn't perhaps as beautiful as the Virgins—showed that my heart was alive.

He looked at me, and I at him. My hand reached out for his and found it. Now it was his heart that was beating faster—I could almost hear it in the silence.

But my soul was serene, and my heart at peace.

I held his hand, and he embraced me. We stood there at the feet of the Virgin for I don't know how long. Time had stopped.

She looked down at us. The adolescent girl who had said "yes" to her destiny. The woman who had agreed to carry the son of God in Her womb and the love of God in Her heart. She understood.

I didn't want to ask for anything. That afternoon in the church had made the entire journey worthwhile. Those four days with him had made up for an entire year in which so little had happened.

We left the church hand in hand and walked back toward our room. My head was spinning—seminary, Great Mother, the meeting he had later that night.

I realized then that we both wanted to unite our souls under one destiny—but the seminary and Zaragoza stood in the way. My heart felt squeezed. I looked around at the medieval homes and the well where we had sat the previous night. I recalled the silence and the sadness of the Other, the woman I had once been.

God, I am trying to recover my faith. Please don't abandon me in the middle of this adventure, I prayed, pushing my fears aside.

He slept a little, but I stayed awake, looking out the darkened window. Later, we got up and dined with the family—they never spoke at the table. He asked for a key to the house.

"We'll be home late tonight," he said to the woman.

"Young people should enjoy themselves," she answered, "and take advantage of the holidays as best they can."

"I have to ask you something," I said, when we were back in the car. "I've been trying to avoid it, but I have to ask."

"The seminary," he said.

That's right. I don't understand. Even though it's no longer important, I thought.

"I have always loved you," he began. "I kept the medal, thinking that someday I would give it to you and that I'd have the courage to tell you that I love you. Every road I traveled led back to you. I wrote the letters to you and opened every letter of yours afraid that you would tell me you had found someone.

"Then I was called to the spiritual life. Or rather, I accepted the call, because it had been with me since childhood—just as it was for you. I discovered that God was extremely important to my life and that I couldn't be happy if I didn't accept my vocation. The face of Christ was there in the face of every poor soul I met on my travels, and I couldn't deny it."

He paused, and I decided not to push him.

Twenty minutes later, he stopped the car and we got out.

"This is Lourdes," he said. "You should see it during the summer."

What I saw now were deserted streets, closed shops, and hotels with bars across their entrances.

"Six million people come here in the summer," he went on enthusiastically.

"It looks like a ghost town to me."

We crossed a bridge and arrived at an enormous iron gate with angels on either side. One side of the gate was standing open, and we passed through it.

"Go on with what you were saying," I said, in spite of my decision not to pursue it. "Tell me about the face of Christ on the people you met."

I could see that he didn't want to continue the conversation. Perhaps this wasn't the right time or place. But having begun, he had to complete it.

We were walking down a broad avenue, bordered on both sides by snow-covered fields. At its end, I could see the silhouette of a cathedral.

"Go on," I repeated.

"You already know. I entered the seminary. During the first year, I asked that God help me to transform my love for you into a love for all people. In the second year, I sensed that God had heard me. By the third year, even though my longing for you was still strong, I became certain that my love was turning toward charity, prayer, and helping the needy."

"Then why did you seek me out? Why rekindle the flame in me? Why did you tell me about the exercise of the Other and force me to see how shallow my life is?" I sounded confused and tremulous. From one minute to the next, I could see him drawing closer to the seminary and further from me. "Why did you come back? Why wait until today to tell me this story, when you can see that I am beginning to love you?"

He did not answer immediately. Then he said, "You'll think it's stupid."

"I won't. I'm not worried anymore about seeming ridiculous. You've taught me that."

"Two months ago, my superior asked me to accompany him to the house of a woman who had died and left all her wealth to the seminary. She lived in Saint-Savin, and my superior had to prepare an inventory of what was there."

We were approaching the cathedral at the end of the avenue. My intuition told me that as soon as we reached it, any conversation we were having would be interrupted.

"Don't stop," I said. "I deserve an explanation."

"I remember the moment I stepped into that house. The windows looked out on the Pyrenees, and the whole scene was filled with the brightness of the sun, intensified by the snow's glare. I began to make a list of the things in the house, but after just a few minutes, I had to stop.

"I had discovered that the woman's taste was exactly the same as mine. She owned records that I would have purchased, the same music that I would have enjoyed listening to as I looked out on that beautiful landscape. Her bookshelves were filled with books I had already read and others that I would have loved to read. Looking at the furnishings, the paintings, and all her other possessions, I felt as if I had chosen them myself.

"From that day on, I couldn't forget that house. Every time I went to the chapel to pray, I realized that my renunciation had not been total. I imagined myself there with you, looking out at the snow on the mountaintops, a fire blazing in the hearth. I pictured our children running around the house and playing in the fields around Saint-Savin."

Although I had never been near the house, I knew exactly what it looked like. And I hoped he'd say nothing else so that I could fantasize.

But he went on.

"For the past two weeks, I haven't been able to stand the sadness in my soul. I went to my superior and told him what was happening to me. I told him about my love for you and what had begun when we were taking the inventory."

A light rain began to fall. I bowed my head and gathered the front of my coat. I suddenly didn't want to hear the rest of the story.

"So my superior said, 'There are many ways to serve our Lord. If you feel that's your destiny, go in search of it. Only a man who is happy can create happiness in others.'

" 'I don't know if that's my destiny,' I told my superior. 'Peace came into my heart when I entered this seminary.'

" 'Well, then, go there and resolve any doubts you may have,' he said. 'Remain out there in the world, or come back to the seminary. But you have to be committed to the place you choose. A divided kingdom cannot defend itself from its adversaries. A divided person cannot face life in a dignified way.'"

He pulled something from his pocket and handed it to me. It was a key.

"The superior loaned me the key to the house. He said that he would hold off for a while on selling the possessions. I know that he wants me to return to the seminary. But he was the one who arranged the presentation in Madrid—so that we could meet."

I looked at the key in my hand and smiled. In my heart, bells were ringing, and the heavens had opened to me. He could serve God in a different way—by my side. Because I was going to fight for that to happen.

I put the key in my bag.

The basilica loomed in front of us. Before I could say anything, someone spotted him and came toward us. The light rain continued, and I had no idea how long we would be there; I couldn't forget that I had only one set of clothes, and I didn't want them to get soaked. I concentrated on that problem. I didn't want to think about the house—that was a matter suspended between heaven and earth, awaiting the hand of destiny.

He introduced me to several people who had gathered around. They asked where we were staying, and when he said Saint-Savin, one of them told us the story of the hermit saint who was buried there. It was Saint Savin who had discovered the well in the middle of the plaza—and the original mission of the village had been to create a refuge for religious persons who had left the city and come to the mountains in search of God.

"They are still living there," another said.

I didn't know if the story was true, nor did I have any idea who "they" were.

Other people began to arrive, and the group began to move toward the entrance of the grotto. An older man tried to tell me something in French. When he saw that I didn't understand, he switched to an awkward Spanish.

"You are with a very special man," he said. "A man who performs miracles."

I said nothing but remembered that night in Bilbao when a desperate man had come looking for him. He had told me nothing about where he had gone, and I hadn't asked. Right now, I preferred to think about the house, which I could picture perfectly—its books, its records, its view, its furniture.

Somewhere in the world, a home awaited us. A place where we could care for daughters or sons who would come home from school, fill the house with joy, and never pick up after themselves.

We walked in silence through the rain until finally we reached the place where the visions of Mary had occurred. It was exactly as I had imagined: the grotto, the statue of Our Lady, and the fountain—protected by glass—where the miracle of the water had taken place. Some pilgrims were praying; others were seated silently inside the grotto, their eyes closed. A river ran past the entrance, and the sound of the water made me feel at peace. As soon as I saw the image, I said a quick prayer, asking the Virgin to help me—my heart needed no more suffering.

If pain must come, may it come quickly. Because I have a life to live, and I need to live it in the best way possible. If he has to make a choice, may he make it now. Then I will either wait for him or forget him.

Waiting is painful. Forgetting is painful. But not knowing which to do is the worst kind of suffering.

In some corner of my heart, I felt that she had heard my plea.

Wednesday, December 8, 1993

By the time the cathedral's clock struck midnight, the group around us had grown considerably. We were almost a hundred people—some of them priests and nuns—standing in the rain, gazing at the statue.

"Hail, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception," someone close to me said, as soon as the tolling of the bells ceased.

"Hail," everyone answered, with some applause.

A guard immediately came forward and asked that we be quiet. We were bothering the other pilgrims.

"But we've come a long way," said one of the men in our group.

"So have they," answered the guard, pointing to the others who were praying in the rain.

"And they are praying silently."

I wanted to be alone with him, far from this place, holding his hand and telling him how I felt. We needed to talk more about the house, about our plans, about love. I wanted to reassure him, to make clear how strong my feelings were, and to let him know that his dream could come true—because I would be at his side, helping him.

The guard retreated, and one of the priests began to recite the rosary in a low voice.

When we reached the creed that closes the series of prayers, everyone remained silent, their eyes closed.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"Charismatics," he answered.

I had heard of them before but didn't know exactly what their name meant. He could see that I didn't understand.

"These are people who accept the fire of the Holy Spirit," he said, "the fire that Jesus left but that is used by so few people to light their candles. These people are very close to the original truth of Christianity, when everyone was capable of performing miracles.

"They are guided by the Woman Dressed by the Sun," he said, pointing with his eyes to the Virgin.

The group began to chant quietly, as if in response to an invisible command.

"You're shivering from the cold. You don't have to take part in this," he said.

"Are you going to stay?"

"Yes. This is my life."

"Then I'm going to participate," I answered, even though I would have preferred to be far from there. "If this is your world, I want to learn to be a part of it."

The group continued to sing. I closed my eyes and tried to follow the words, even though I couldn't speak French. I repeated the words without understanding them. But their sound helped the time to pass more quickly.

It would end soon. And we could return to Saint-Savin, just the two of us.

I went on singing mechanically—but little by little, I began to feel the music taking hold of me, as if it had a life of its own. It was hypnotizing. The cold seemed less bitter, and

the rain no longer bothered me. The music made me feel better. It transported me back to a time when God had felt closer to me and had helped me.

Just as I was about to surrender completely to the music, it stopped.

I opened my eyes. This time, instead of a guard, there was a priest. He approached one of the other priests in our group. They whispered to one another for a few moments, and the padre left.

Our priest turned to us. "We have to say our prayers on the other side of the river," he said.

Silently we walked across the bridge directly in front of the grotto and moved to the other bank. It was a prettier place, on the bank of the river, surrounded by trees and an open field. The river now separated us from the grotto. From there, we could clearly see the illuminated image, and we could sing loudly without disturbing others' prayers.

The people around me began to sing louder, raising their faces to the sky and smiling as the raindrops coursed down their cheeks. Some raised their arms, and soon everyone joined in, waving their arms from side to side in rhythm to the music.

I wanted to give in to the moment, but at the same time I wanted to pay close attention to what they were doing. One priest near me was singing in Spanish, and I tried to repeat the words. They were invocations to the Holy Spirit and the Virgin, requesting their presence and asking that they rain down their blessings and their powers on each of us.

"May the gift of tongues befall us," said another priest, repeating the phrase in Spanish, Italian, and French.

What happened next was incomprehensible. Each of the many people present began to speak a language that was different from any I had ever heard. It was more sound than speech, with words that seemed to come straight from the soul, making no sense at all. I recalled our conversation in the church, when he had spoken about revelations, saying that all wisdom was the result of listening to one's own soul. *Perhaps this is the language of the angels*, I thought, trying to mimic what they were doing—and feeling ridiculous. Everyone was looking at the statue of the Virgin on the other side of the river; they all seemed to be in a trance. I looked around for him and found him standing at some distance from me. His hands were raised to the heavens and he was speaking rapidly, as if in conversation with Her. He was smiling and nodding his head as if in agreement; occasionally he looked surprised.

This is his world, I thought.

The whole scene began to scare me. The man I wanted at my side was telling me that God is also female, he was speaking an incomprehensible language, he was in a trance, and he seemed closer to the angels than to me. The house in the mountains began to seem less real, as if it were part of a world that he had already left behind.

All of our days together—starting with the conference in Madrid—seemed to be part of a dream, a voyage beyond the space and time of my life. At the same time, though, the dream had the flavor of the world, of romance, and of new adventures. I had tried to resist; now I knew how easily love could set fire to the heart. I had tried to stay unreceptive to all of this in the beginning; now I felt that since I had loved before, I would know how to handle it.

I looked around again, and it dawned on me that this was not the Catholicism I had been taught at school. And this was not the way I had pictured the man in my life.

A man in my life! How strange! I said to myself, surprised at the thought.

There on the bank of the river, looking across at the grotto, I felt both fear and jealousy. Fear because it was all new to me, and what is new has always scared me. Jealousy because, bit by bit, I could see that his love was greater than I'd thought and spread over places where I'd never set foot.

Forgive me, Our Lady. Forgive me if I'm being selfish or small-minded, competing with you for this man's love.

But what if his vocation wasn't to be with me but was to retreat from the world, locking himself in a seminary and conversing with angels? How long would he resist before he fled from our house to return to his true path? Or even if he never went back to the seminary, what price would I have to pay to keep him from returning to that path?

Everyone there, except me, seemed to be concentrating on what they were doing. I was staring at him, and he was speaking the language of the angels.

Suddenly, fear and jealousy were replaced by calm and solitude. The angels had someone to talk with, and I was alone.

I had no idea what pushed me into trying to speak that strange language. Perhaps it was my strong need to connect with him, to tell him what I was feeling. Perhaps I needed to let my soul speak to my heart that had so many doubts and needed so many answers.

I didn't know exactly what to do, and I felt ridiculous. But all around me were men and women of all ages, priests and laypeople, novices and nuns, students and old-timers.

They gave me the courage to ask the Holy Spirit for the strength to overcome my fear.

Try, I said to myself. All you have to do is open your mouth and have the courage to say things you don't understand. Try!

I prayed that this night—the night following a day that had been so long that I couldn't even remember how it had begun—would be an epiphany. A new beginning for me.

God must have heard me. The words began to come more easily—and little by little they lost their everyday meanings. My embarrassment diminished, my confidence grew, and the words began to flow freely. Although I understood nothing of what I was saying, it all made sense to my soul.

Simply having the courage to say senseless things made me euphoric. I was free, with no need to seek or to give explanations for what I was doing. This freedom lifted me to the heavens—where a greater love, one that forgives everything and never allows you to feel abandoned, once again enveloped me.

It feels as if my faith is coming back, I thought, surprised at the miracles that love can perform. I sensed that the Virgin was holding me in her lap, covering me and warming me with her mantle. The strange words flew more rapidly from my lips.

Without realizing it, I began to cry. Joy flooded my heart—a joy that overpowered my fears and was stronger than my attempts to control every second of my life.

I realized that my tears were a gift; at school, the sisters had taught me that the saints wept with ecstasy. I opened my eyes, gazed at the darkness of the heavens, and felt my tears blending with the raindrops. The earth was alive and the drops from above brought the miracles of heaven with them. We were all a part of that same miracle.

How wonderful that God may be a woman, I said to myself, as the others continued to chant. *If that's true, then it was certainly God's feminine face that taught us how to love.*

"Let us pray in tents of eight," said the priest in Spanish, Italian, and French.

Once again, I was confused. What was happening? Someone came over to me and put his arm around my shoulders. Another person did the same on my other side. We formed a circle of eight people, arms around each other's shoulders. Then we leaned forward, our heads touching.

We looked like a human tent. The rain fell harder, but no one cared. The position we had taken concentrated all our energies and heat.

"May the Immaculate Conception help my child find his way," said the man embracing me from the right. "Please, let's say an Ave Maria for my child."

"Amen," everyone said. And we eight prayed an Ave Maria.

"May the Immaculate Conception enlighten me and arouse in me the gift of curing," said a woman from our circle. "Let us say an Ave Maria."

Again, all of us said "Amen" and we prayed. Each person made a petition, and everyone participated in the prayers. I was surprised at myself, because I was praying like a child—and like a child, I believed that our prayers would be answered.

The group fell silent for a fraction of a second. I realized that it was my turn to make a petition. Under any other circumstances, I would have died of embarrassment and been unable to say a word. But I felt a presence, and that presence gave me confidence.

"May the Immaculate Conception teach me to love as she loves," I finally said. "May that love grow in me and in the man to whom it is dedicated. Let us say an Ave Maria."

We prayed together, and again I felt a sense of freedom. For years, I had fought against my heart, because I was afraid of sadness, suffering, and abandonment. But now I knew that true love was above all that and that it would be better to die than to fail to love.

I had thought that only others had the courage to love. But now I discovered that I too was capable of loving. Even if loving meant leaving, or solitude, or sorrow, love was worth every penny of its price.

I have to stop thinking of these things. I have to concentrate on the ritual.

The priest leading the group asked that we disband the tents and pray for the sick.

Everyone continued to pray, sing, and dance in the rain, adoring God and the Virgin Mary. Now and then, people went back to speaking strange languages, waving their arms, and pointing to the sky.

"Someone here... someone who has a sick daughter-in-law... must know that she is being cured," cried one woman.

The prayers resumed, along with chants of joy. From time to time, we would hear the voice of this woman again.

"Someone in this group who lost her mother recently must have faith and know that she is in the glory of heaven."

Later, he would tell me that she had the gift of prophecy, that certain individuals can sense what is happening at some distant place or what will happen in the future.

Secretly, I too believed in the power of that voice that was speaking of miracles. I hoped that voice would speak of the love between two of those present. I hoped to hear that voice proclaim that this love was blessed by all the angels and saints—and by God and by the Goddess.

I'm not sure how long the ritual lasted. People continued to speak in tongues and to chant; they danced with their arms held up to the sky, prayed for the people around them, and petitioned for miracles.

Finally, the priest who was conducting the ceremony said, "Let us chant a prayer for all of those here who are participating for the first time in a Charismatic renewal."

Apparently I was not the only one. That made me feel better.

Everyone chanted a prayer. This time I just listened, asking that favors be granted to me. I needed many.

"Let us receive the blessing," said the priest.

The crowd turned toward the illuminated grotto across the river. The priest said several prayers and blessed us all. Then everyone kissed, wished each other a "Happy Day of the Immaculate Conception," and went their separate ways.

He came to me. His expression was happier than usual.

"You're soaked," he said.

"So are you!" I laughed.

We walked back to the car and drove to Saint-Savin. I'd been so eager for this moment to arrive—but now that it was here, I didn't know what to say. I couldn't even bring myself to talk about the house in the mountains, the ritual, the strange languages, or the tent prayers.

He was living in two worlds. Somewhere, those two worlds intersected and I had to find where that was.

But at that moment, words were useless. Love can only be found through the act of loving.

"I've only got one sweater left," he said when we reached the room. "You can have it. I'll buy another for myself tomorrow."

"We'll put our wet things on the heater. They'll be dry by tomorrow. Anyway, I've got the blouse that I washed yesterday."

Neither of us said anything for a few minutes.

Clothing. Nakedness. Cold.

Finally, he took another shirt out of his bag. "You can sleep in this," he said.

"Great," I answered.

I turned out the light. In the dark, I took off my wet clothes, spread them over the heater, and turned it to high.

By the light from the lamppost outside the window, he must have been able to make out my silhouette and known that I was naked. I slipped the shirt on and crawled under the covers.

"I love you," I heard him say.

"I'm learning how to love you."

He lit a cigarette. "Do you think the right moment will come?" he asked.

I knew what he meant. I got up and sat on the edge of his bed.

The light from his cigarette illuminated our faces. He took my hand and we sat there for some time. I ran my fingers through his hair.

"You shouldn't have asked," I said. "Love doesn't ask many questions, because if we stop to think we become fearful. It's an inexplicable fear; it's difficult even to describe it.

Maybe it's the fear of being scorned, of not being accepted, or of breaking the spell. It's ridiculous, but that's the way it is. That's why you don't ask—you act. As you've said many times, you have to take risks."

"I know. I've never asked before."

"You already have my heart," I told him. "Tomorrow you may go away, but we will always remember the miracle of these few days. I think that God, in Her infinite wisdom, conceals hell in the midst of paradise—so that we will always be alert, so that we won't forget the pain as we experience the joy of compassion."

He took my face in his hands. "You learn quickly," he said.

I had surprised myself. But sometimes if you think you know something, you do wind up understanding it.

"I hope you won't think I'm being difficult," I said. "I have been with many men. I've made love to some I've barely known."

"Same here," he said.

He was trying to sound natural, but from his touch, I could tell that he hadn't wanted to hear this from me.

"But since this morning, I feel as if I'm rediscovering love. Don't try to understand it, because only a woman would know what I mean. And it takes time."

He caressed my face. Then I kissed him lightly on the lips and returned to my bed.

I wasn't sure why I did. Was I trying to bind him even closer to me, or was I trying to set him free? In any case, it had been a long day, and I was too tired to think about it.

For me, that was a night of great peace. At one point, I seemed to be awake even though I was still sleeping. A feminine presence cradled me in Her lap; I felt as if I had known Her a long time. I felt protected and loved.

I woke at seven, dying of the heat. I remembered having turned the heater to high in order to dry my clothes. It was still dark, and I tried to get up without making a sound so that I wouldn't disturb him.

But as soon as I stood, I could see that he wasn't there.

I started to panic. The Other immediately awoke and said to me, "See? You agreed, and he disappeared. Like all men do."

My panic was increasing by the minute, but I didn't want to lose control. "I'm still here," the Other said. "You allowed the wind to change direction. You opened the door, and now love is flooding your life. If we act quickly, we'll be able to regain control."

I had to be practical, to take precautions.

"He's gone," said the Other. "You have to get away from this place in the middle of nowhere. Your life in Zaragoza is still intact; get back there quickly—before you lose everything you've worked so hard to gain."

He must have had some good reason, I thought.

"Men always have their reasons," said the Other. "But the fact is that they always wind up leaving."

Well, then, I had to figure out how to get back to Spain. I had to keep my wits about me.

"Let's start with the practical problem: money," the Other said.

I didn't have a cent. I would have to go downstairs, call my parents collect, and wait for them to wire me the money for a ticket home.

But it was a holiday, and the money wouldn't arrive until the next day. How would I eat? How would I explain to the owners of the house that they would have to wait for several days for their payment? "Better not to say anything," said the Other.

Right, she was the experienced one. She knew how to handle situations like this. She wasn't the impassioned girl who loses control of herself. She was the woman who always

knew what she wanted in life. I should simply stay on there, as if he were expected to return. And when the money arrived, I would pay the bill and leave.

"Very good," said the Other. "You're getting back to how you were before. Don't be sad. One of these days, you'll find another man—one you can love without taking so many risks."

I gathered my clothes from the heater. They were dry. I needed to find out which of the surrounding villages had a bank, make a phone call, take steps. If I thought carefully about all of that, there wouldn't be time for crying or regrets.

Then I saw his note:

I've gone to the seminary. Pack up your things, because we're going back to Spain tonight. I'll be back by late afternoon. I love you.

I clutched the note to my breast, feeling miserable and relieved at the same time. I noticed that the Other had retreated.

I loved him. With every minute that passed, my love was growing and transforming me. I once again had faith in the future, and little by little, I was recovering my faith in God. All because of love.

I will not talk to my own darkness anymore, I promised myself, closing the door on the Other. A jail from the third floor hurts as much as a fall from the hundredth.

If I have to fall, may it be from a high place.

"Don't go out hungry again," said the woman.

"I didn't realize you spoke Spanish," I answered, surprised.

"The border isn't far from here. Tourists come to Lourdes in the summer. If I couldn't speak Spanish, I couldn't rent rooms."

She made me some toast and coffee. I was already trying to prepare myself to make it through the day—each hour was going to seem like a year. I hoped that this snack would distract me for a while.

"How long have you two been married?" she asked.

"He was the first person I ever loved," I said. That was enough.

"Do you see those peaks out there?" the woman continued. "The first love of my life died up in those mountains."

"But you found someone else."

"Yes, I did. And I found happiness again. Fate is strange: almost no one I know married the first love of their lives. Those who did are always telling me that they missed something important, that they didn't experience all that they might have."

She stopped talking suddenly. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not offended."

"I always look at that well there in the plaza. And I think to myself that before, no one knew where there was water. Then Saint Savin decided to dig and found it. If he hadn't done that, this village would be down there by the river."

"But what does that have to do with love?" I asked.

"That well brought many people here, with their hopes and dreams and conflicts. Someone dared to look for water, water was found, and people gathered where it flowed. I think that when we look for love courageously, it reveals itself, and we wind up attracting even more love. If one person really wants us, everyone does. But if we're alone, we become even more alone. Life is strange."

"Have you ever heard of the book called the *I Ching*?" I asked her.

"No, I haven't."

"It says that a city can be moved but not a well. It's around the well that lovers find each other, satisfy their thirst, build their homes, and raise their children. But if one of them decides to leave, the well cannot go with them. Love remains there, abandoned—even though it is filled with the same pure water as before."

"You speak like a mature woman who has already suffered a great deal, my dear," she said.

"No. I've always been frightened. I've never dug a well. But I'm trying to do that now, and I don't want to forget what the risks are."

I felt something in the pocket of my bag pressing at me. When I realized what it was, my heart went cold. I quickly finished my coffee.

The key. I had the key.

"There was a woman in this city who died and left everything to the seminary at Tarbes," I said. "Do you know where her house is?"

The woman opened the door and showed me. It was one of the medieval houses on the plaza. The back of the house looked out over the valley toward the mountains in the distance.

"Two priests went through the house about two months ago," she said. "And..." She stopped, looking at me doubtfully. "And one of them looked a lot like your husband."

"It was," I answered. The woman stood in her doorway, puzzled, as I quickly left. I felt a burst of energy, happy that I had allowed the child in me to pull a prank.

I soon stood in front of the house, not knowing what to do. The mist was everywhere, and I felt as if I were in a gray dream where strange figures might appear and take me away to places even more peculiar.

I toyed nervously with the key.

With the mist as thick as it was, it would be impossible to see the mountains from the window. The house would be dark; there would be no sun shining through the curtains. The house would seem sad without him at my side.

I looked at my watch. Nine in the morning.

I had to do something—something that would make the time pass, that would help me wait.

Wait. This was the first lesson I had learned about love. The day drags along, you make thousands of plans, you imagine every possible conversation, you promise to change your behavior in certain ways—and you feel more and more anxious until your loved one arrives. But by then, you don't know what to say. The hours of waiting have been transformed into tension, the tension has become fear, and the fear makes you embarrassed about showing affection.

I didn't know whether I should go in. I remembered our conversation of the previous day—the house was the symbol of a dream.

But I couldn't spend the whole day just standing there. I gathered up my courage, grasped the key firmly, and walked to the door.

"Pilar!"

The voice, with a strong French accent, came from the midst of the fog. I was more surprised than frightened. I thought it might be the owner of the house where we had rented the room—although I didn't recall having told him my name.

"Pilar!" I heard again, nearer this time.

I looked back at the plaza shrouded in mist. A figure was approaching, walking hurriedly. Perhaps the ghosts that I had imagined in the fog were becoming a reality.

"Wait," the figure said. "I want to talk to you."

When he had come closer, I could see that it was a priest. He looked like a caricature of the country padre: short, on the heavy side, with sparse white hair on a nearly bald head.

"Hola," he said, holding out his hand and smiling.

I answered him, a bit astonished.

"Too bad the fog is hiding everything," he said, looking toward the house. "Since Saint-Savin is in the mountains, the view from this house is beautiful; you can see the valley down below and the snow-covered peaks. But you probably already knew that."

I decided that this must be the superior from the monastery.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "And how do you know my name?"

"Do you want to go in?" he said, trying to change the subject.

"No! I'd like you to answer my questions."

Rubbing his hands together to warm them, he sat down on the curb. I sat down next to him. The fog was growing thicker by the minute. The church was already hidden from sight, and it was only sixty feet away from us.

All I could see was the well. I remembered what the young woman in Madrid had said.

"She is present," I said.

"Who?"

"The Goddess," I answered. "She is this mist."

"So, he must have talked to you about that," he laughed. "Well, I prefer to refer to Her as the Virgin Mary. That's what I'm used to."

"What are you doing here? How do you know my name?" I repeated.

"I came here because I wanted to see you two. A member of the Charismatic group last night told me you were both staying in Saint-Savin. And it's a small place.

"He went to the seminary."

The padre's smile disappeared, and he shook his head. "Too bad," he said, as if speaking to himself.

"You mean, too bad he went to the seminary?"

"No, he's not there. I've just come from the seminary."

For a moment, I couldn't say anything. I thought back to the feeling I'd had when I woke up: the money, the arrangements I needed to make, the call to my parents, the ticket. But I'd made a vow, and I wasn't going to break it.

A priest was sitting beside me. As a child, I used to tell everything to our priest.

"I'm exhausted," I said, breaking the silence. "Less than a week ago, I finally learned who I am and what I want in life. Now I feel like I've been caught in a storm that's tossing me around, and I can't seem to do anything about it."

"Resist your doubts," the padre said. "It's important."

His advice surprised me.

"Don't be frightened," he continued, as if he knew what I was feeling. "I know that the church is in need of new priests, and he would be an excellent one. But the price he would have to pay would be very high."

"Where is he? Did he leave me here to return to Spain?"

"To Spain? There's nothing for him to do in Spain," said the priest. "His home is at the monastery, only a few kilometers from here. He's not there. But I know where we can find him."

His words brought back some of my joy and courage—at least he hadn't gone away.

But the priest was no longer smiling. "Don't let that encourage you," he went on, again reading my mind. "It would be better if he *had* gone back to Spain."

He stood and asked me to go with him. We could see only a few yards in front of us, but he seemed to know where he was going. We left Saint-Savin by the same road along which, two nights before or could it have been five years before?—I had heard the story of Bernadette.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To find him," he answered.

"Padre, you've confused me," I said, as we walked along together. "You seemed sad when you said he wasn't at the seminary."

"Tell me what you know about the religious life, my child."

"Very little. Only that the priests take a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience." I wondered whether I should go on and decided that I would. "And that they judge the sins of others, even though they may commit the same sins themselves. That they know all there is to know about marriage and love, but they never marry. That they threaten us with the fires of hell for mistakes that they themselves make. And they present God to us as a vengeful being who blames man for the death of His only Son."

The padre laughed. "You've had an excellent Catholic education," he said. "But I'm not asking you about Catholicism. I'm asking about the spiritual life."

I didn't respond for a moment. "I'm not sure. There are people who leave everything behind and go in search of God."

"And do they find Him?"

"Well, you would know the answer to that, Padre. I have no idea."

The padre noticed that I was beginning to gasp with exertion, and he slowed his pace.

"You had that wrong," he said. "A person who goes in search of God is wasting his time."

He can walk a thousand roads and join many religions and sects—but he'll never find God that way.

"God is here, right now, at our side. We can see Him in this mist, in the ground we're walking on, even in my shoes. His angels keep watch while we sleep and help us in our work. In order to find God, you have only to look around."

"But meeting Him is not easy. The more God asks us to participate in His mysteries, the more disoriented we become, because He asks us constantly to follow our dreams and our hearts. And that's difficult to do when we're used to living in a different way."

"Finally we discover, to our surprise, that God wants us to be happy, because He is the father."

"And the mother," I said.

The fog was beginning to clear. I could see a small farmhouse where a woman was gathering hay.

"Yes, and the mother," he said. "In order to have a spiritual life, you need not enter a seminary, or fast, or abstain, or take a vow of chastity. All you have to do is have faith and accept God. From then on, each of us becomes a part of His path. We become a vehicle for His miracles."

"He has already told me about you," I interrupted, "and he has taught me these ideas."

"I hope that you accept God's gifts," he answered. "Because it hasn't always been that way, as history teaches us. Osiris was drawn and quartered in Egypt. The Greek gods battled because of the mortals on earth. The Aztecs expelled Quetzalcoatl. The Viking gods witnessed the burning of Valhalla because of a woman. Jesus was crucified. Why?" I didn't have an answer.

"Because God came to earth to demonstrate His power to us. We are a part of His dream, and He wants His dream to be a happy one. Thus, if we acknowledge that God created us for happiness, then we have to assume that everything that leads to sadness and defeat is our own doing. That's the reason we always kill God, whether on the cross, by fire, through exile, or simply in our hearts."

"But those who understand Him..."

"They are the ones who transform the world—while making great sacrifices."

The woman carrying the hay saw the priest and came running in our direction. "Padre, thank you!" she said, kissing his hands. "The young man cured my husband."

"It was the Virgin who cured your husband," he said. "The lad is only an instrument."

"It was he. Come in, please."

I recalled the previous night. When we arrived at the cathedral, a man had told me I was with a man who performed miracles.

"We're in a hurry," the padre said.

"No! No, we're not," I said, in my halting French. "I'm cold, and I'd like some coffee."

The woman took me by the hand, and we entered the house. It was simple but comfortable: stone walls, wood floors, and bare rafters. Seated in front of the fireplace was a man of about sixty. As soon as he saw the padre, he stood to kiss his hand.

"Don't get up," said the priest. "You still need to convalesce a bit."

"I've already gained twenty-five pounds," he answered. "But I'm still not able to be of much help to my wife."

"Not to worry. Before long, you'll be better than ever."

"Where is the young man?" the husband asked.

"I saw him heading toward where he always goes," the wife said. "Only today, he went by car."

The padre eyed me but didn't say anything.

"Give us your blessing, Père," the woman asked. "His power..."

"The Virgin's power," the priest corrected.

"The Virgin Mother's power is also your power, Père. It was you who brought it here."

This time, he didn't look my way.

"Pray for my husband, Père," the woman insisted.

The priest took a deep breath. "Stand in front of me," he said to the man.

The old man did as he was told. The padre closed his eyes and said an Ave Maria. Then he invoked the Holy Spirit, asking that it be present and help the man.

He suddenly began to speak rapidly. It sounded like a prayer of exorcism, although I couldn't understand what he was saying. His hands touched the man's shoulders and then slid down his arms to his fingertips. He repeated this gesture several times.

The fire began to crackle loudly in the fireplace. This may have been a coincidence, yet it seemed that the priest was entering into territory I knew nothing about—and that he was affecting the very elements.

Every snap of the fire startled the woman and me, but the padre paid no attention to it; he was completely involved in his task of an instrument of the Virgin, as he had said. He was speaking a strange language, and the words came forth at great speed. He was no longer moving his hands; they simply rested on the man's shoulders.

The ritual stopped as quickly as it had started. The padre turned and gave a conventional blessing, making the sign of the cross with his right hand. "May God be ever here in this house," he said.

And turning to me, he asked that we continue our walk.

"But you haven't had coffee," the woman said, as she saw that we were about to leave.

"If I have coffee now, I won't be able to sleep," the padre answered.

The woman laughed and murmured something like "It's still morning." But we were already on our way.

"Padre, the woman spoke of a young man who cured her husband. Was it he?"

"Yes, it was."

I began to feel uneasy. I remembered the day before, and Bilbao, and the conference in Madrid, and people speaking of miracles, and the presence that I had sensed as we embraced and prayed.

I was in love with a man who was capable of performing cures. A man who could help others, bring relief to suffering, give health to the sick and hope to their loved ones. Was I distracting him from his mission just because it was at odds with my image of a house with white curtains, cherished records, and favorite books?

"Don't blame yourself, my child," the padre said.

"You're reading my mind."

"Yes, I am," the padre said. "I have that gift too, and I try to be worthy of it. The Virgin taught me to penetrate the turmoil of human emotions in order to control them as well as possible."

"Do you perform miracles, too?"

"I am not able to cure. But I have one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

"So you can read my heart, Padre. And you know I love him, with a love that is growing every minute. We discovered the world together, and together we remain in it. He has been present every day of my life—whether I wanted him there or not."

What could I say to this priest who was walking beside me? He would never understand that I had had other men, that I had been in love, and that if I had married, I would be happy. Even as a child, I had found and forgotten love in the plaza of Soria.

But the way things looked now, I hadn't forgotten that first love very well. It had taken only three days for all of it to come rushing back.

"I have a right to be happy, Padre. I've recovered what was lost, and I don't want to lose it again. I'm going to fight for my happiness. If I give up the fight, I will also be renouncing

my spiritual life. As you said, I would be putting God aside, along with my power and my strength as a woman. I'm going to fight for him, Padre."

I knew what that little man was doing here. He had come to convince me to leave him, because he had a more important mission to accomplish.

No, I couldn't believe that the padre walking at my side wanted us to marry and live in a house like the one in Saint-Savin. The priest had said that to trick me. He wanted me to lower my defenses and then—with a smile—he would convince me of the opposite. He read my thoughts without saying a word. Or perhaps he was trying to fool me. Maybe he didn't know what others were thinking. The fog was dissipating rapidly, and I could now see the path, the mountain peak, the fields, and the snow-covered trees. My emotions were becoming clearer, as well.

Damn! If it's true that he can read someone's thoughts, then let him read mine and know everything! Let him know that yesterday he wanted to make love to me—that I refused and that now I regret it.

Yesterday I had thought that if he had to leave, I would still at least have the memory of my childhood friend. But that was nonsense. Even though he hadn't entered me, something even more profound had, and it had touched my heart.

"Padre, I love him," I repeated.

"So do I. And love always causes stupidity. In my case, it requires that I try to keep him from his destiny."

"That won't be easy, Padre. And it won't be easy in my case, either. Yesterday, during the prayers at the grotto, I discovered that I too can bring forth these gifts that you were talking about. And I'm going to use them to keep him with me."

"Good luck," said the padre, with a smile. "I hope you can."

He stopped and took a rosary from his pocket. Holding it, he looked into my eyes. "Jesus said that we should not take oaths, and I am not doing so. But I'm telling you, in the presence of all that is sacred to me, that I would not like him to adopt the conventional religious life. I would not like to see him ordained a priest. He can serve God in other ways at your side."

It was hard for me to believe that he was telling me the truth. But he was.

"He's up there," the padre said.

I turned. I could see a car parked a bit further ahead—the same car we had driven from Spain.

"He always comes on foot," he said, smiling. "This time he wanted to give us the impression that he'd traveled a long way."

The snow was soaking my sneakers. But the padre was wearing only open sandals with woolen socks. I decided not to complain—if he could stand it, so could I. We began to hike toward the top of the mountains.

"How long will it take us?"

"Half an hour at the most."

"Where are we going?"

"To meet with him. And others."

I could see that he didn't want to say any more. Maybe he needed all of his energy for climbing. We walked along in silence the fog had by now disappeared almost completely, and the yellow disk of the sun was coming into view.

For the first time I had a view of the entire valley; there was a river running through it, some scattered villages, and Saint-Savin, looking as though it were pasted against the slope of the mountain. I could make out the tower of the church, a cemetery I had not noticed before, and the medieval houses looking down on the river.

A bit below us, at a point we had already passed, a shepherd was tending his flock of sheep.

"I'm tired," the padre said. "Let's stop for a while."

We brushed the snow from the top of a boulder and rested against it. He was perspiring—and his feet must have been frozen.

"May Santiago preserve my strength, because I still want to walk his path one more time," said the padre, turning to me.

I didn't understand his comment, so I decided to change the subject. "There are footsteps in the snow."

"Some are those of hunters. Others are of men and women who want to relive a tradition."

"Which tradition?"

"The same as that of Saint Savin. Retreat from the world, come to these mountains, and contemplate the glory of God."

"Padre, there's something I need to understand. Until yesterday, I was with a man who couldn't choose between the religious life and marriage. Today, I learn that this same man performs miracles."

"We all perform miracles," he said. "Jesus said, 'If our faith is the size of a mustard seed, we will say to the mountain, "Move!" And it will move.'"

"I don't want a lesson in religion, Padre. I'm in love with a man, and I want to know more about him, understand him, help him. I don't care what everyone else can do or can't do."

The padre took a deep breath. He hesitated for a moment and then said, "A scientist who studied monkeys on an island in Indonesia was able to teach a certain one to wash bananas in the river before eating them. Cleansed of sand and dirt, the food was more flavorful. The scientist—who did this only because he was studying the learning capacity of monkeys—did not imagine what would eventually happen. So he was surprised to see that the other monkeys on the island began to imitate the first one.

"And then, one day, when a certain number of monkeys had learned to wash their bananas, the monkeys on all of the other islands in the archipelago began to do the same thing. What was most surprising, though, was that the other monkeys learned to do so without having had any contact with the island where the experiment had been conducted."

He stopped. "Do you understand?"

"No," I answered.

"There are several similar scientific studies. The most common explanation is that when a certain number of people evolve, the entire human race begins to evolve. We don't know how many people are needed—but we know that's how it works."

"Like the story of the Immaculate Conception," I said. "The vision appeared for the wise men at the Vatican and for the simple farmer."

"The world itself has a soul, and at a certain moment, that soul acts on everyone and everything at the same time."

"A feminine soul."

He laughed, without saying just what he was laughing about.

"By the way, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not just a Vatican matter," he said. "Eight million people signed a petition to the pope, asking that it be recognized. The signatures came from all over the world."

"Is that the first step, Padre?"

"What do you mean?"

"The first step toward having Our Lady recognized as the incarnation of the feminine face of God? After all, we already accept the fact that Jesus was the incarnation of His masculine side."

"And so...?"

"How much time must pass before we accept a Holy Trinity that includes a woman? The Trinity of the Holy Spirit, the Mother, and the Son?"

"Let's move on. It's too cold for us to stand here," he said. "A little while ago, you noticed my sandals."

"Have you been reading my mind?" I asked.

"I'm going to tell you part of the story of the founding of our religious order," he said.

"We are barefoot Carmelites, according to the rules established by Saint Teresa of Avila. The sandals are a part of the story, for if one can dominate the body, one can dominate the spirit."

"Teresa was a beautiful woman, placed by her father in a convent so that she would receive a pure education. One day, when she was walking along a corridor, she began to speak with Jesus. Her ecstasies were so strong and deep that she surrendered totally to them, and in a short time, her life had been completely changed. She felt that the Carmelite convents had become nothing more than marriage brokerages, and she decided to create an order that would once again follow the original teachings of Christ and the Carmelites."

"Saint Teresa had to conquer herself, and she had to confront the great powers of her day—the church and the state. But she was determined to press on, because she was convinced that she had a mission to perform."

"One day—just when Teresa felt her soul to be weakening—a woman in tattered clothing appeared at the house where she was staying. The woman wanted to speak with Teresa, no matter what. The owner of the house offered the woman some alms, but the woman refused them; she would not go away until she had spoken with Teresa."

"For three days, the woman waited outside the house, without eating or drinking. Finally Teresa, out of sympathy, bade the woman come in."

"'No,' said the owner of the house. 'The woman is mad.'"

"'If I were to listen to everyone, I'd wind up thinking that I'm the crazy one,' Teresa answered. 'It may be that this woman has the same kind of madness as I: that of Christ on the cross.'"

"Saint Teresa spoke with Christ," I said.

"Yes," he answered. "But to get back to our story: the woman was brought to Teresa. She said that her name was María de Jesus Yepes and that she was from Granada. She was a

Carmelite novice, and the Virgin had appeared and asked that she found a convent that followed the primitive rules of the order."

Like Saint Teresa, I thought.

"María de Jesus left the convent on the day of her vision and began walking barefoot to Rome. Her pilgrimage lasted two years—and for that entire period, she slept outdoors, in the heat and the cold, living on alms and the charity of others. It was a miracle that she made it. But it was an even greater miracle that she was received by Pope Pius IV. Because the pope, just like María de Jesus, Teresa, and many others, was thinking of the same thing," he finished.

Just as Bernadette had known nothing of the Vatican's decision and the monkeys from the other islands couldn't have known about the experiment that was being conducted, so María de Jesus and Teresa knew nothing of what the other was planning. Something was beginning to make sense to me.

We were now walking through a forest. With the fog all but gone, the highest tree branches, covered with snow, were receiving the first rays of the sun.

"I think I know where you're going with this, Padre."

"Yes. The world is at a point when many people are receiving the same order: 'Follow your dreams, transform your life, take the path that leads to God. Perform your miracles. Cure. Make prophecies. Listen to your guardian angel. Transform yourself. Be a warrior, and be happy as you wage the good fight. Take risks.'"

Sunshine was everywhere. The snow was glistening, and the glare hurt my eyes. Yet at the same time, it seemed to support what the priest was saying.

"And what does all this have to do with him?"

"I've told you the heroic side of the story. But you don't know anything about the soul of these heroes."

He paused.

"The suffering," he picked up again. "At moments of transformation, martyrs are born. Before a person can follow his dream, others have to make sacrifices. They have to confront ridicule, persecution, and attempts to discredit what they are trying to do."

"It was the church that burned the witches at the stake, Padre."

"Right. And Rome threw the Christians to the lions. But those who died at the stake or in the sand of the arena rose quickly to eternal glory—they were better off.

"Nowadays, warriors of the light confront something worse than the honorable death of the martyrs. They are consumed, bit by bit, by shame and humiliation. That's how it was with Saint Teresa who suffered for the rest of her life. That's how it was for Maria de Jesus, too. And for the happy children who saw Our Lady in Fátima, Portugal—well, Jacinta and Francisco died just a few months later; Lucia entered a convent from which she never emerged."

"But that's not how it was for Bernadette."

"Yes, it was. She had to live through prison, humiliation, and discredit. He must have described that to you. He must have told you the words of the visitation."

"Some of them."

"In the visitations at Lourdes, the phrases uttered by Our Lady wouldn't fill half a page of a notebook, but one of the things the Virgin said clearly to the girl was *'I do not promise*

you happiness in this world.' Why did she warn Bernadette? Because she knew the pain that awaited Bernadette if she accepted her mission."

I looked at the sun, the snow, and the bare branches of the trees.

"He is a revolutionary," he continued, sounding humble. "He has the power, and he converses with Our Lady. If he is able to concentrate his forces well, he can be one of the leaders in the spiritual transformation of the human race. This is a critical point in the history of the world.

"But if he chooses this path, he is going to go through a great deal of suffering. His revelations have come to him before their time. I know the human soul well enough to know what he can expect."

The padre turned to me and held me by the shoulders. "Please," he said. "Keep him from the suffering and tragedy that lie in store for him. He will not be able to survive them."

"I understand your love for him, Padre."

He shook his head. "No, no. You don't understand anything. You are still too young to know the evils of the world. At this point, you see yourself as a revolutionary too. You want to change the world with him, open new paths, see the story of your love for each other become legend—a story passed down through the generations. You still think that love can conquer all."

"Well, can't it?"

"Yes, it can. But it conquers at the right time after the celestial battles have ended."

"But I love him. I don't have to wait for the celestial battles to end for my love to win out."

He gazed into the distance.

"On the banks of the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept," he said, as if talking to himself. "On the willows there, we hung up our harps."

"How sad," I answered.

"Those are the first lines of one of the psalms. It tells of exile and of those who want to return to the promised land but cannot. And that exile is still going to last for a long time. What can I do to try to prevent the suffering of someone who wants to return to paradise before it is time to do so?"

"Nothing, Padre. Absolutely nothing."

"There he is," said the padre.

I saw him. He was about two hundred yards from me, kneeling in the snow. He was shirtless, and even from that distance, I could see that his skin was red with the cold. His head was bowed and his hands joined in prayer. I don't know if I was influenced by the ritual I had attended the night before or by the woman who had been gathering hay, but I felt that I was looking at someone with an incredible spiritual force. Someone who was no longer of this world—who lived in communion with God and with the enlightened spirits of heaven. The brilliance of the snow seemed to strengthen this perception.

"At this moment, there are others like him," said the priest. "In constant adoration, communing with God and the Virgin. Hearing the angels, the saints, the prophecies and words of wisdom, and transmitting all of that to a small gathering of the faithful. As long as they continue in this way, there won't be a problem."

"But he is not going to remain here. He is going to travel the world, preaching the concept of the Great Mother. The church is not yet ready for that. And the world has stones at hand to hurl at those who first introduce the subject."

"And it has flowers to throw on those who come afterward."

"Yes. But that's not what will happen to him."

The priest began to approach him.

"Where are you going?"

"To bring him out of his trance. To tell him how much I like you. To say that I give my blessing to your union. I want to do that here, in this place, which for him is sacred."

I began to feel sick with an inexplicable fear.

"I have to think, Padre. I don't know if this is right."

"It's not right," he answered. "Many parents make mistakes with their children, thinking they know what's best for them. I'm not his father, and I know I'm doing the wrong thing. But I have to fulfill my destiny."

I was feeling more and more anxious.

"Let's not disturb him," I said. "Let him finish his contemplation."

"He shouldn't be here. He should be with you."

"Maybe he's communicating with the Virgin."

"He may be. But even so, we have to go to him. If I approach him with you at my side, he will know that I have told you everything. He knows what I think."

"Today is the day of the Immaculate Conception," I insisted. "A very special day for him. I saw his happiness last night at the grotto."

"The Immaculate Conception is special for all of us," the padre answered. "But now I'm the one who doesn't want to discuss religion. Let's go to him."

"Why now, Padre? Why at this moment?"

"Because I know that he is deciding his future. And he may make the wrong choice."

I turned away and began to walk down the same path we had just come up. The padre followed me.

"What are you doing? Don't you see that you're the only one who can save him? Don't you see that he loves you and would give up everything for you?"

I hurried my steps, and it was difficult for him to keep up. Yet he fought to stay at my side.

"At this very moment, he is making his decision! He may be deciding to leave you! Fight for the person you love!"

But I didn't stop. I walked as fast as I could, trying to escape the mountains, the priest, and the choices behind me. I knew that the man who was rushing along behind me was reading my thoughts and that he understood that it was useless to try to make me go back. Yet he insisted; he argued and struggled to the end.

Finally, we reached the boulder where we had rested a half hour earlier. Exhausted, I threw myself down.

I tried to relax. I wanted to run from there, to be alone, to have time to think.

The padre appeared a few minutes later, as exhausted as I was.

"Do you see these mountains surrounding us?" he started in. "They don't pray; they are already a part of God's prayers. They have found their place in the world, and here they will stay. They were here before people looked to the heavens, heard thunder, and

wondered who had created all of this. We are born, we suffer, we die, and the mountains endure.

"There is some point at which we have to wonder whether all our effort is worth it. Why not try to be like those mountains—wise, ancient, and in their place? Why risk everything to transform a half-dozen people who will immediately forget what they've been taught and move on to the next adventure? Why not wait until a certain number of monkeys learn, and then the knowledge will spread, with no suffering, to all the other islands?"

"Is that what you really think, Padre?"

He was silent for a few moments.

"Are you reading my thoughts now?"

"No. But if that's the way you feel, you wouldn't have chosen the religious life."

"I've tried many times to understand my fate," he said. "But I haven't yet. I accepted that I was to be a part of God's army, and everything I've done has been in an attempt to explain to people why there is misery, pain, and injustice. I ask them to be good Christians, and they ask me, 'How can I believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world?'"

"And I try to explain something that has no explanation. I try to tell them that there is a plan, a battle among the angels, and that we are all involved in the battle. I try to say that when a certain number of people have enough faith to change the scenario, all of the others—everywhere on the planet—will benefit. But they don't believe me. They do nothing."

"They are like the mountains," I said. "The mountains are beautiful. Anyone who beholds them has to think about the grandness of creation. They are living proof of the love that God feels for us, but their fate is merely to give testimony. They are not like the rivers, which move and transform what is around them."

"Yes. But why not be like the mountains?"

"Maybe because the fate of mountains is terrible," I answered. "They are destined to look out at the same scene forever."

The padre said nothing.

"I was studying to become a mountain," I continued. "I had put everything in its proper place. I was going to take a job with the state, marry, and teach the religion of my parents to my children, even though I no longer accepted it. But now I have decided to leave all that behind me in order to be with the man I love. And it's a good thing I decided not to be a mountain—I wouldn't have lasted very long."

"You say some very wise things."

"I'm surprising myself. Before, all I could talk about was my childhood."

I stood and started back down the trail. The padre seemed to respect my silence and did not try to speak to me until we reached the road.

I took his hands and kissed them. "I'm going to say good-bye. But I want you to know that I understand you and your love for him."

The padre smiled and gave me his blessing. "And I understand your love for him, too," he said.

I spent the rest of the day walking through the valley. I played in the snow, visited a village near Saint-Savin, had a sandwich, and watched some boys playing soccer.

At the church in the village, I lit a candle. I closed my eyes and repeated the invocations I had learned the previous night. Then, concentrating on a crucifix that hung behind the altar, I began to speak in tongues. Bit by bit, the gift took over. It was easier than I had thought.

Perhaps this all seems silly—murmuring things, saying words that have no meaning, that don't help us in our reasoning. But when we do this, the Holy Spirit is conversing with our souls, saying things the soul needs to hear.

When I felt that I was sufficiently purified, I closed my eyes and prayed.

Our Lady, give me back my faith. May I also serve as an instrument of your work. Give me the opportunity to learn through my love, because love has never kept anyone away from their dreams.

May I be a companion and ally of the man I love. May we accomplish everything we have to accomplish together.

When I returned to Saint-Savin, night had almost fallen. The car was parked in front of the house where we were staying.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Walking and praying," I answered.

He embraced me.

"At first, I was afraid you had gone away. You are the most precious thing I have on this earth."

"And you are for me," I answered.

It was late when we stopped in a small village near San Martin de Unx. Crossing the Pyrenees had taken longer than we'd thought because of the rain and snow of the previous day.

"We need to find someplace that's open," he said, climbing out of the car. "I'm hungry." I didn't move.

"Come on," he insisted, opening my door.

"I want to ask you a question I haven't asked since we found each other again."

He became serious, and I laughed at his concern.

"Is it an important question?"

"Very important," I answered, trying to look serious. "It's the following: where are we going?"

We both laughed.

"To Zaragoza," he said, relieved.

I jumped out of the car, and we went looking for a restaurant that was open. It was going to be almost impossible at that hour of the night.

No, it's not impossible. The Other is no longer with me. Miracles do happen, I said to myself. "When do you have to be in Barcelona?" I asked him. He'd told me he had another conference there.

He didn't answer, and his expression turned serious. *I shouldn't ask such questions,* I thought. *He may think I'm trying to control his life.*

We walked along without speaking. In the village plaza, there was an illuminated sign: *Mesón el Sol.*

"It's open—let's have something to eat" was all he said.

The red peppers with anchovies were arranged on the plate in the shape of a star. On the side, some *manchego* cheese, in slices that were almost transparent. In the center of the table, a lighted candle and a half-full bottle of Rioja wine.

"This was a medieval wine cellar," our waiter told us.

There was no one in the place at that time of night. He went off to make a telephone call. When he came back to the table, I wanted to ask him whom he had called—but this time I controlled myself.

"We're open until two-thirty in the morning," the man said, "So if you like, we can bring you some more ham, cheese, and wine, and you can go out in the plaza. The wine will keep you warm."

"We won't be here that long," he answered. "We have to get to Zaragoza before dawn."

The man returned to the bar, and we refilled our glasses. I felt the same sense of lightness I had experienced in Bilbao the smooth inebriation that helps us to say and hear things that are difficult.

"You're tired of driving, and we've been drinking," I said. "Wouldn't it be better to stay the night? I saw an inn as we were driving."

He nodded in agreement.

"Look at this table," he said. "The Japanese call it *shibumi*, the true sophistication of simple things. Instead, people fill their bank accounts with money and travel to expensive places in order to feel they're sophisticated."

I had some more wine.

The inn. Another night at his side.

"It's strange to hear a seminarian speak of sophistication," I said, trying to focus on something else.

"I learned about it at the seminary. The closer we get to God through our faith, the simpler He becomes. And the simpler He becomes, the greater is His presence.

"Christ learned about his mission while he was cutting wood and making chairs, beds, and cabinets. He came as a carpenter to show us that—no matter what we do—everything can lead us to the experience of God's love."

He stopped suddenly.

"But I don't want to talk about that," he said. "I want to talk about the other kind of love."

He reached out to caress my face. The wine made things easier for him. And for me.

"Why did you stop so suddenly? Why don't you want to talk about God and the Virgin and the spiritual world?"

"I want to talk about the other kind of love," he said again. "The love that a man and a woman share, and in which there are also miracles."

I took his hands. He might know of the great mysteries of the Goddess, but he didn't know any more than I did about love—even though he had traveled much more than I had.

We held hands for a long time. I could see in his eyes the deep fears that true love tests us with. I could see that he was remembering the rejection of the night before, as well as the long time we had been separated, and his years in the monastery, searching for a world where such anxieties didn't intrude.

I could see in his eyes the thousands of times that he had imagined this moment and the scenes he had constructed about us. I wanted to say that yes, he was welcome, that my

heart had won the battle. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him and how badly I wanted him at that moment.

But I was silent. I witnessed, as if in a dream, his inner conflict. I could see that he was wondering whether I'd reject him again, that he was thinking about his fear of losing me, and about the hard words he had heard at other, similar times—because we all have such experiences, and they leave scars.

His eyes gleamed. He was ready to surmount any barrier.

I took one of my hands from his and placed my glass of wine at the edge of the table.

"It's going to fall," he said.

"Exactly. I want you to tip it over the edge."

"Break the glass?"

Yes, break the glass. A simple gesture, but one that brings up fears we can't really understand. What's wrong with breaking an inexpensive glass, when everyone has done so unintentionally at some time in their life?

"Break the glass?" he repeated. "Why?"

"Well, I could give you lots of reasons," I answered. "But actually, just to break it."

"For you?"

"No, of course not."

He eyed the glass on the edge of the table—worried that it might fall.

It's a rite of passage, I wanted to say. It's something prohibited. Glasses are not purposely broken. In a restaurant or in our home, we're careful not to place glasses by the edge of a table. Our universe requires that we avoid letting glasses fall to the floor.

But when we break them by accident, we realize that it's not very serious. The waiter says, "It's nothing," and when has anyone been charged for a broken glass? Breaking glasses is part of life and does no damage to us, to the restaurant, or to anyone else.

I bumped the table. The glass shook but didn't fall.

"Careful!" he said, instinctively.

"Break the glass," I insisted.

Break the glass, I thought to myself, *because it's a symbolic gesture. Try to understand that I have broken things within myself that were much more important than a glass, and I'm happy I did. Resolve your own internal battle, and break the glass.*

Our parents taught us to be careful with glasses and with our bodies. They taught us that the passions of childhood are impossible, that we should not flee from priests, that people cannot perform miracles, and that no one leaves on a journey without knowing where they are going.

Break the glass, please—and free us from all these damned rules, from needing to find an explanation for every thing, from doing only what others approve of.

"Break the glass," I said again.

He stared at me. Then, slowly, he slid his hand along the tablecloth to the glass. And with a sudden movement, he pushed it to the floor.

The sound of the breaking glass caught the waiter's attention. Rather than apologize for having broken the glass, he looked at me, smiling—and I smiled back.

"Doesn't matter," shouted the waiter.

But he wasn't listening. He had stood, seized my hair in his hands, and was kissing me.

I clutched at his hair, too, and squeezed him with all my strength, biting his lips and feeling his tongue move in my mouth. This was the kiss I had waited for so long—a kiss

born by the rivers of our childhood, when we didn't yet know what love meant. A kiss that had been suspended in the air as we grew, that had traveled the world in the souvenir of a medal, and that had remained hidden behind piles of books. A kiss that had been lost so many times and now was found. In the moment of that kiss were years of searching, disillusionment, and impossible dreams.

I kissed him hard. The few people there in the bar must have been thinking that all they were seeing was just a kiss. They didn't know that this kiss stood for my whole life and his life, as well. The life of anyone who has waited, dreamed, and searched for their true path.

The moment of that kiss contained every happy moment I had ever lived.

He took off my clothes and entered me with strength, with fear, and with great desire. I ran my hands over his face, heard his moans, and thanked God that he was there inside me, making me feel as if it were the first time.

We made love all night long—our lovemaking blended with our sleeping and dreaming. I felt him inside me and embraced him to make sure that this was really happening, to make sure that he wouldn't disappear, like the knights who had once inhabited this old castle-hotel. The silent walls of stone seemed to be telling stories of damsels in distress, of fallen tears and endless days at the window, looking to the horizon, looking for a sign of hope.

But I would never go through that, I promised myself. I would never lose him. He would always be with me—because I had heard the tongues of the Holy Spirit as I looked at a crucifix behind an altar, and they had said that I would not be committing a sin.

I would be his companion, and together we would tame a world that was going to be created anew. We would talk about the Great Mother, we would fight at the side of Michael the Archangel, and we would experience together the agony and the ecstasy of pioneers. That's what the tongues had said to me—and because I had recovered my faith, I knew they were telling the truth.

Thursday, December 9, 1993

I awoke with his arm across my breast. It was already midmorning, and the bells of a nearby church were tolling.

He kissed me. His hands once again caressed my body.

"We have to go," he said. "The holiday ends today, and the roads will be jammed."

"I don't want to go back to Zaragoza," I answered. "I want to go straight to where you're going. The banks will be open soon, and I can use my bank card to get some money and buy some clothes."

"You told me you didn't have much money."

"There are things I can do. I need to break with my past once and for all. If we go back to Zaragoza, I might begin to think I'm making a mistake, that the exam period is almost here and we can stand to be separated for two months until my exams are over. And then if I pass my exams, I won't want to leave Zaragoza. No, no, I can't go back. I need to burn the bridges that connect me with the woman I was."

"Barcelona," he said to himself.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's move on."

"But you have a presentation to make."

"But that's two days from now," he said. His voice sounded different. "Let's go somewhere else. I don't want to go straight to Barcelona."

I got out of bed. I didn't want to focus on problems. As always after a first night of love with someone, I had awakened with a certain sense of ceremony and embarrassment.

I went to the window, opened the curtains, and looked down on the narrow street. The balconies of the houses were draped with drying laundry. The church bells were ringing. "I've got an idea," I said. "Let's go to a place we shared as children. I've never been back there."

"Where?"

"The monastery at Piedra."

As we left the hotel, the bells were still sounding, and he suggested that we go into a church nearby.

"That's all we've done," I said. "Churches, prayers, rituals."

"We made love," he said. "We've gotten drunk three times. We've walked in the mountains. We've struck a good balance between rigor and compassion."

I'd said something thoughtless. I had to get used to this new life.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Let's just go in for a few minutes. The bells are a sign."

He was right, but I wouldn't know that until the next day.

Afterward, without really understanding the meaning of the sign we had witnessed in the church, we got the car and drove for four hours to get to the monastery at Piedra.

"The roof had fallen in, and the heads were missing from the few images that were still there—all except for one.

I looked around. In the past, this place must have sheltered strong-willed people, who'd seen to it that every stone was cleaned and that each pew was occupied by one of the powerful individuals of the time.

But all I saw now were ruins. When we had played here as children, we'd pretended these ruins were castles. In those castles I had looked for my enchanted prince.

For centuries, the monks of the monastery at Piedra had kept this small piece of paradise to themselves. Situated on a valley floor, it enjoyed a plentiful supply of what the neighboring villages had to beg for water. Here the River Piedra broke up into dozens of waterfalls, streams, and lakes, creating luxuriant vegetation all around.

Yet one had only to walk a few hundred yards to leave the canyon and find aridity and desolation. The river itself once again became a narrow thread of water as if it had exhausted all of its youth and energy in crossing the valley.

The monks knew all this, and they charged dearly for the water they supplied to their neighbors. An untold number of battles between the priests and the villagers marked the history of the monastery.

During one of the many wars that shook Spain, the monastery at Piedra had been turned into a barracks. Horses rode through the central nave of the church, and soldiers slept in its pews, telling ribald stories there and making love with women from the neighboring villages.

Revenge—although delayed—finally came. The monastery was sacked and destroyed.

The monks were never able to reconstruct their paradise. In one of the many legal battles that followed, someone said that the inhabitants of the nearby villages had carried out a sentence pronounced by God. Christ had said, "Give drink to those who thirst," and the priests had paid no heed. For this, God had expelled those who had regarded themselves as nature's masters.

And it was perhaps for this reason that although much of the monastery had been rebuilt and made into a hotel, the main church remained in ruins. The descendants of the local villagers had never forgotten the high price that their parents had paid for something that nature provides freely.

"Which statue is that? The only one with its head?" I asked him.

"Saint Teresa of Avila," he answered. "She is powerful. And even with the thirst for vengeance that the wars brought about, no one dared to touch her."

He took my hand, and we left the church. We walked along the broad corridors of the monastery, climbed the wooden staircases, and marveled at the butterflies in the inner gardens. I recalled every detail of that monastery because I had been there as a girl, and the old memories seemed more vivid than what I was seeing now.

Memories. The months and years leading up to that week seemed to be part of some other incarnation of minean era to which I never wanted to return, because it hadn't been touched by the hand of love. I felt as if I had lived the same day over and over for years on end, waking up every morning in the same way, repeating the same words, and dreaming the same dreams.

I remembered my parents, my grandparents, and many of my old friends. I recalled how much time I had spent fighting for something I didn't even want.

Why had I done that? I could think of no explanation. Maybe because I had been too lazy to think of other avenues to follow. Maybe because I had been afraid of what others would think. Maybe because it was hard work to be different. Perhaps because a human being is condemned to repeat the steps taken by the previous generation until—and I was thinking of the padre—a certain number of people begin to behave in a different fashion. Then the world changes, and we change with it.

But I didn't want to be that way anymore. Fate had returned to me what had been mine and now offered me the chance to change myself and the world.

I thought again of the mountain climbers we had met as we traveled. They were young and wore brightly colored clothing so as to be easily spotted should they become lost in the snow. They knew the right path to follow to the peaks.

The heights were already festooned with aluminum pins; all they had to do was attach their lines to them, and they could climb safely. They were there for a holiday adventure, and on Monday they would return to their jobs with the feeling that they had challenged nature—and won.

But this wasn't really true. The adventurous ones were those who had climbed there first, the ones who had found the routes to the top. Some, who had fallen to their death on the rocks, had never even made it halfway up. Others had lost fingers and toes to frostbite.

Many were never seen again. But one day, some of them had made it to the summit.

And their eyes were the first to take in that view, and their hearts beat with joy. They had accepted the risks and could now honor—with their conquest—all of those who had died trying.

There were probably some people down below who thought, "There's nothing up there. Just a view. What's so great about that?"

But the first climber knew what was great about it: the acceptance of the challenge of going forward. He knew that no single day is the same as any other and that each morning brings its own special miracle, its *magic moment* in which ancient universes are destroyed and new stars are created.

The first one who climbed those mountains must have asked, looking down at the tiny houses with their smoking chimneys, "All of their days must seem the same. What's so great about that?"

Now all the mountains had been conquered and astronauts had walked in space. There were no more islands on earth—no matter how small—left to be discovered. But there were still great adventures of the spirit, and one of them was being offered to me now. It was a blessing. The padre didn't understand anything. These pains are not the kind that hurt.

Fortunate are those who take the first steps. Someday people will realize that men and women are capable of speaking the language of the angels—that all of us are possessed of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and that we can perform miracles, cure, prophesy, and understand.

We spent the afternoon walking along the canyon, reminiscing about our childhood. It was the first time he had done so; during our trip to Bilbao, he had seemed to have lost all interest in Soria.

Now, though, he asked me about each of our mutual friends, wanting to know whether they were happy and what they were doing with their lives.

Finally, we arrived at the largest waterfall of the Piedra, where a number of small, scattered streams come together and the water is thrown to the rocks below from a height of almost one hundred feet. We stood at the edge of the waterfall, listening to its deafening roar and gazing at the rainbow in its mist.

"The Horse's Tail," I said, surprised that I still remembered this name from so long ago.

"I remember..." he began.

"Yes! I know what you're going to say!"

Of course I knew! The waterfall concealed a gigantic grotto. When we were children, returning from our first visit to the monastery at Piedra, we had talked about that place for days.

"The cavern," he said. "Let's go there."

It was impossible to pass through the torrent of water. But ancient monks had constructed a tunnel that started at the highest point of the falls and descended through the earth to a place at the rear of the grotto.

It wasn't difficult to find the entrance. During the summer, there may even have been lights showing the way, but now the tunnel was completely dark.

"Is this the right way?" I asked.

"Yes. Trust me."

We began to descend through the hole at the side of the falls. Although we were in complete darkness, we knew where we were going and he asked me again to trust him.

Thank you, Lord, I was thinking, as we went deeper and deeper into the earth, because I was a lost sheep, and you brought me back. Because my life was dead, and you revived it. Because love wasn't alive in my heart, and you gave me back that gift.

I held on to his shoulder. My loved one guided my steps through the darkness, knowing that we would see the light again and that it would bring us joy. Perhaps in our future there would be moments when the situation was reversed—when I would guide him with the same love and certainty until we reached a safe place and could rest together.

We walked slowly, and it seemed as if we would never stop descending. Maybe this was another rite of passage, marking the end of an era in which there had been no light in my life. As I walked through the tunnel, I was remembering how much time I had wasted in one place, trying to put down roots in soil where nothing could grow any longer.

But God was good and had given me back my lost enthusiasm, directing me toward the adventures I had always dreamed about. And toward the man who—without my knowing it—had waited for me all my life. I felt no remorse over the fact that he was leaving the seminary—there were many ways to serve God, as the padre had said, and our love only multiplied the number of them. Starting now, I would also have the chance to serve and help—all because of him.

We would go out into the world, bringing comfort to others and to each other.

Thank you, Lord, for helping me to serve. Teach me to be worthy of that. Give me the strength to be a part of his mission, to walk with him on this earth, and to develop my spiritual life anew. May all our days be as these have been—going from place to place, curing the sick, comforting those in sorrow, speaking of the Great Mother's love for all of us.

Suddenly, the sound of water could be heard again and light flooded our path. The dark tunnel was transformed into one of the most beautiful spectacles on earth. We were in an immense cavern, the size of a cathedral. Three of its walls were of stone, and the fourth was the Horses Tail, with its water falling into the emerald-green lake at our feet.

The rays of the setting sun passed through the waterfall, and the moist walls glittered.

We leaned back against the stone wall, saying nothing.

When we were children, this place was a pirates' hide-out, where the treasures of our childhood imagination were kept. Now, it was the miracle of Mother Earth; I knew she was there and felt myself to be in her womb. She was protecting us with her walls of stone and washing away our sins with her purifying water.

"Thank you," I said in a loud voice.

"Whom are you thanking?"

"Her. And you, because you were an instrument in restoring my faith."

He walked to the edge of the water. Looking out, he smiled. "Come over here," he said.

I joined him.

"I want to tell you something you don't know about yet," he said.

His words worried me a little. But he looked calm and happy, and that reassured me.

"Every person on earth has a gift," he began. "In some, the gift manifests itself spontaneously; others have to work to discover what it is. I worked with my gift during the four years I was at the seminary."

Now I would have to "play a role," as he had taught me when the old man had barred us from the church. I would have to feign that I knew nothing. *There's nothing wrong with doing this*, I told myself. *This is not a script based on frustration but on happiness.*

"What did you do at the seminary?" I asked, trying to stall for time in order to play my role better.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "The fact is that I developed a gift. I am able to cure, when God so wills it."

"That's wonderful," I answered, acting surprised. "We won't have to spend money on doctors!"

He didn't laugh. I felt like an idiot.

"I developed my gift through the Charismatic practices that you saw," he went on. "In the beginning, I was surprised. I would pray, asking that the Holy Spirit appear, and then, through the laying on of my hands, I would restore many of the sick to good health. My reputation began to spread, and every day people lined up at the gates of the seminary, seeking my help. In every infected, smelly laceration, I saw the wounds of Jesus."

"I'm so proud of you," I said.

"Many of the people at the monastery opposed me, but my superior gave me his complete support."

"We'll continue this work. We'll go out together into the world. I will clean and bathe the wounds, and you will bless them, and God will demonstrate His miracles."

He looked away from me, out at the lake. There seemed to be a presence in the cavern similar to the one I had sensed that night in Saint-Savin when we had gotten drunk at the well in the plaza.

"I've already told you this, but I'll say it again," he continued. "One night I awoke, and my room was completely bright. I saw the face of the Great Mother; I saw Her loving look. After that, She began to appear to me from time to time. I cannot make it happen, but every once in a while, She appears."

"By the time of my first vision, I was already aware of the work being done by the true revolutionaries of the church. I knew that my mission on earth, in addition to curing, was to smooth the way for this new acceptance as a woman. The feminine principle, the column of Misericordia, would be rebuilt—and the temple of wisdom would be reconstructed in the hearts of all people."

I was staring at him. His face, which had grown tense, now relaxed again.

"This carried a price—which I was willing to pay."

He stopped, as if not knowing how to go on with his story.

"What do you mean when you say you *were* willing?" I asked.

"The path of the Goddess can only be opened through words and miracles. But that's not the way the world works. It's going to be very hard—tears, lack of understanding, suffering."

That padre, I thought to myself. *He tried to put fear in his heart. But I shall be his comfort.*

"The path isn't about pain; it's about the glory of serving," I answered.

"Most human beings still cannot trust love."

I felt that he was trying to tell me something but couldn't. I wanted to help him.

"I've been thinking about that," I broke in. "The first man who climbed the highest peak in the Pyrenees must have felt that a life without that kind of adventure would lack grace."

"What do you mean when you use the word *grace*?" he asked me, and I could see that he was feeling tense again. "One of the names of the Great Mother is Our Lady of the

Graces. Her generous hands heap Her blessings on those who know how to receive them. We can never judge the lives of others, because each person knows only their own pain and renunciation. It's one thing to feel that you are on the right path, but it's another to think that yours is the only path.

"Jesus said, 'The house of my Father has many mansions.' A gift is a grace, or a mercy. But it is also a mercy to know how to live a life of dignity, love, and work. Mary had a husband on earth who tried to demonstrate the value of anonymous work. Although he was not heard from very much, he was the one who provided the roof over their heads and the food for their mouths, who allowed his wife and son to do all that they did. His work was as important as theirs, even though no one ever gave him much credit."

I didn't say anything, and he took my hand. "Forgive me for my intolerance."

I kissed his hand and put it to my cheek.

"This is what I'm trying to explain to you," he said, smiling again. "I realized, from the moment I found you again, that I couldn't cause you to suffer because of my mission.

I began to feel worried.

"Yesterday I lied to you. It was the first and last lie I've ever told you," he continued.

"The truth is that instead of going to the monastery, I went up on the mountain and conversed with the Great Mother. I said to Her that if She wanted, I would leave you and continue along my path. I would go back to the gate where the sick gathered, to the visits in the middle of the night, to the lack of understanding of those who would deny the idea of faith, and to the cynical attitude of those who cannot believe that love is a savior. If She were to ask me, I would give up what I want most in the world: you."

I thought again of the padre. He had been right. A choice had been made that morning.

"But," he continued, "if it were possible to resolve this awful predicament in my life, I would promise to serve the world through my love for you."

"What are you saying?" I asked, frightened now.

He seemed not to hear me.

"It's not necessary to move mountains in order to prove one's faith," he said. "I was ready to face the suffering alone and not share it. If I had continued along that path, we would never have our house with the white curtains and the view of the mountains."

"I don't care about that house! I didn't even want to go in!" I said, trying not to shout. "I want to go with you, to be with you in your struggle. I want to be one of those who does something for the first time. Don't you understand? You've given me back my faith!"

The last rays of the sun illuminated the walls of the cavern. But I couldn't see its beauty. God hides the fires of hell within paradise.

"You're the one who doesn't understand," he said, and I could see his eyes begging me to comprehend. "You don't see the risks."

"But you were willing to accept those risks!"

"I *am* willing. But they are *my* risks."

I wanted to interrupt him, but he wasn't listening.

"So yesterday, I asked a miracle of the Virgin," he continued. "I asked that She take away my gift."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I have a little money and all the experience that years of traveling have given me. We'll buy a house, I'll get a job, and I'll serve God as Saint Joseph did, with the humility of an

anonymous person. I don't need miracles in my life anymore to keep the faith. I need you."

My legs were growing weak, and I felt as if I might faint.

"And just as I was asking that the Virgin take away my gift, I began to speak in tongues," he went on. "The tongues told me, 'Place your hands on the earth. Your gift will leave you and return to the Mother's breast.'"

I was in a panic. "You didn't..."

"Yes. I did as the inspiration of the Holy Spirit bade. The fog lifted, and the sun shone on the mountains. I felt that the Virgin understood—because She had also loved so greatly."

"But She followed Her man! She accepted the path taken by Her son!"

"We don't have Her strength, Pilar. My gift will be passed on to someone else—such gifts are never wasted."

"Yesterday, from that bar, I phoned Barcelona and canceled my presentation. Let's go to Zaragoza—you know the people there, and it's a good place for us to start. I'll get a job easily."

I could no longer think.

"Pilar!" he said.

But I was already climbing back through the tunnel—this time without a friendly shoulder to lean on—pursued by the multitude of the sick who would die, the families that would suffer, the miracles that would never be performed, the smiles that would no longer grace the world, and the mountains that would remain in place.

I saw nothing—only the darkness that engulfed me.

Friday, December 10, 1993

On the bank of the River Piedra I sat down and wept. My memory of that night is confused and vague. I know that I almost died, but I can't remember his face nor where he took me.

I'd like to be able to remember all of it—so that I could expel it from my heart. But I can't. It all seems like a dream, from the moment when I came out of that dark tunnel into a world where darkness had already fallen.

There was not a star in the sky. I remember vaguely walking back to the car, retrieving my small bag, and beginning to wander at random. I must have walked to the road, trying to hitch a ride to Zaragoza—with no success. I wound up returning to the gardens at the monastery.

The sound of water was everywhere—there were waterfalls on all sides, and I felt the presence of the Great Mother following me wherever I walked. Yes, She had loved the world; She loved it as much as God did—because She had also given Her son to be sacrificed by men. But did She understand a woman's love for a man?

She may have suffered because of love, but it was a different kind of love. Her Groom knew everything and performed miracles. Her husband on earth was a humble laborer who believed everything his dreams told him. She never knew what it was to abandon a man or to be abandoned by one. When Joseph considered expelling Her from their home because She was pregnant, Her Groom in heaven immediately sent an angel to keep that from happening.

Her son left Her. But children always leave their parents. It's easy to suffer because you love a person, or the world, or your son. That's the kind of suffering that you accept as a

part of life; it's a noble, grand sort of suffering. It's easy to suffer for a cause or a mission; this ennobles the heart of the person suffering.

But how to explain suffering because of a man? It's not explainable. With that kind of suffering, a person feels as if they're in hell, because there is no nobility, no greatness—only misery.

That night, I slept on the frozen ground, and the cold anesthetized me. I thought I might die without a covering—but where could I find one? Everything that was most important in my life had been given so generously to me in the course of one week—and had been taken from me in a minute, without my having a chance to say a thing.

My body was trembling from the cold, but I hardly noticed. At some point, the trembling would stop. My body's energy would be exhausted from trying to provide me with heat and would be unable to do anything more. It would resume its customary state of relaxation, and death would take me in its arms.

I shook for another hour. And then peace came.

Before I closed my eyes, I began to hear my mother's voice. She was telling a story she had often told me when I was a child, not realizing it was a story about me.

"A boy and a girl were insanely in love with each other," my mother's voice was saying.

"They decided to become engaged. And that's when presents are always exchanged.

"The boy was poor—his only worthwhile possession was a watch he'd inherited from his grandfather. Thinking about his sweetheart's lovely hair, he decided to sell the watch in order to buy her a silver barrette.

"The girl had no money herself to buy him a present. She went to the shop of the most successful merchant in the town and sold him her hair. With the money, she bought a gold watchband for her lover.

"When they met on the day of the engagement party, she gave him the wristband for a watch he had sold, and he gave her the barrette for the hair she no longer had."

I was awakened by a man shaking me.

"Drink this!" he was saying. "Drink this quickly!" I had no idea what was happening nor the strength to resist. He opened my mouth and forced me to drink a hot liquid. I noticed that he was in his shirtsleeves and that he had given me a wrap.

"Drink more!" he insisted.

Without knowing what I was doing, I obeyed. Then I closed my eyes.

I awoke in the convent, and a woman was tending me.

"You almost died," she said. "If it weren't for the watchman, you wouldn't be here."

I stood up dizzily. Parts of the previous day came back to me, and I wished that the watchman had never passed my way.

But apparently this was not the time for me to die. I was to go on living.

The woman led me to the kitchen and prepared some coffee, biscuits, and bread for me. She asked me no questions, and I explained nothing. When I had finished eating, she gave me my bag.

"See if everything's still there," she said.

"I'm sure it is. I didn't really have anything much."

"You have your life, my child. A long life. Take better care of it."

"There's a city near here where there's a church," I said, wanting to cry. "Yesterday, before I came here, I went into that church with..."

I couldn't explain.

"... with a friend from my childhood. I had already had enough of the churches around here, but the bells were ringing, and he said it was a sign—that we should go in."

The woman refilled my cup, poured some coffee for herself, and sat down to hear my story.

"We entered the church," I continued. "There was no one there, and it was dark. I tried to look for the sign, but I saw only the same old altars and the same old saints. Suddenly, we heard a movement above, where the organ was.

"It was a group of boys with guitars, who began to tune their instruments. We decided to sit and listen to the music for a while before continuing our trip. Shortly a man came in and sat down next to us. He was happy and shouted to the boys to play a *paso doble*."

"Bullfight music?" the woman said. "I hope they didn't do that!"

"They didn't. But they laughed and played a flamenco melody instead. My friend and I felt as if heaven had descended on us; the church, the surrounding darkness, the sound of the guitars, and the man's delight—it was all a miracle.

"Little by little, the church began to fill. The boys continued to play the flamenco, and everyone who came in smiled, infected by the joy of the musicians.

"My friend asked if I wanted to attend the mass that was about to begin. I said no—we had a long ride ahead of us. So we decided to leave—but before we did, we thanked God for yet another beautiful moment in our lives.

"As we arrived at the gate, we saw that many people—perhaps the entire population of the town—were walking to the church. I thought it must have been the last completely Catholic town in Spain—maybe because the crowds seemed to be having so much fun.

"As we got into the car, we saw a funeral procession approaching. Someone had died; it was a mass for the dead. As soon as the cortege reached the gates of the church, the musicians stopped the flamenco music and began to play a dirge."

"May God have mercy on that soul," said the woman, crossing herself.

"May He have mercy," I said, repeating her gesture. "But our having gone into that church really had been a sign—that every story has a sad ending."

The woman said nothing. Then she left the room and returned immediately with a pen and paper.

"Let's go outside," she said.

We went out together, and the sun was rising.

"Take a deep breath," she said. "Let this new morning enter your lungs and course through your veins. From what I can see, your loss yesterday was not an accident."

I didn't answer.

"You also didn't really understand the story you told me, about the sign in the church," she went on. "You saw only the sadness of the procession at the end. You forgot the happy moments you spent inside. You forgot the feeling that heaven had descended on you and how good it was to be experiencing all of that with your..."

She stopped and smiled.

"... childhood friend," she said, winking. "Jesus said, 'Let the dead bury the dead' because he knew that there is no such thing as death. Life existed before we were born and will continue to exist after we leave this world."

My eyes filled with tears.

"It's the same with love," she went on. "It existed before and will go on forever."

"You seem to know everything about my life," I said.

"All love stories have much in common. I went through the same thing at one point in my life. But that's not what I remember. What I remember is that love returned in the form of another man, new hopes, and new dreams."

She held out the pen and paper to me.

"Write down everything you're feeling. Take it out of your soul, put it on the paper, and then throw it away. Legend says that the River Piedra is so cold that anything that falls into it—leaves, insects, the feathers of birds—is turned to stone. Maybe it would be a good idea to toss your suffering into its waters."

I took the pages. She kissed me, and said I could come back for lunch if I wanted to.

"Don't forget!" she shouted as she walked away. "Love perseveres. It's men who change." I smiled, and she waved good-bye.

I looked out at the river for some time. And I cried until there were no more tears.

Then I began to write.

Epilogue

I wrote for an entire day, and then another, and another. Every morning, I went to the bank of the River Piedra. Every afternoon, the woman came, took me by the arm, and led me back to the old convent.

She washed my clothes, made me dinner, chatted about trivial things, and sent me to bed. One morning, when I had almost finished the manuscript, I heard the sound of a car. My heart leaped, but I didn't want to believe it. I felt free again, ready to return to the world and be a part of it once again.

The worst had passed, although the sadness remained.

But my heart was right. Even without raising my eyes from my work, I felt his presence and heard his footsteps.

"Pilar," he said, sitting down next to me.

I went on writing, without answering. I couldn't pull my thoughts together. My heart was jumping, trying to free itself from my breast and run to him. But I wouldn't allow it.

He sat there looking at the river, while I went on writing. The entire morning passed that way—without a word—and I recalled the silence of a night near a well when I'd suddenly realized that I loved him.

When my hand could write no longer, I stopped. Then he spoke.

"It was dark when I came up out of the cavern. I couldn't find you, so I went to Zaragoza. I even went to Soria. I looked everywhere for you. Then I decided to return to the monastery at Piedra to see if there was any sign of you, and I met a woman. She showed me where you were, and she said you had been waiting for me."

My eyes filled with tears.

"I am going to sit here with you by the river. If you go home to sleep, I will sleep in front of your house. And if you go away, I will follow you—until you tell me to go away.

Then I'll leave. But I have to love you for the rest of my life."

I could no longer hold back the tears, and he began to weep as well.

"I want to tell you something..." he started to say.

"Don't say a thing. Read this." I handed him the pages.

I gazed at the River Piedra all afternoon. The woman brought us sandwiches and wine, commented on the weather, and left us alone. Every once in a while, he paused in his reading and stared out into space, absorbed in his thoughts.

At one point I went for a walk in the woods, past the small waterfalls, through the landscape that was so laden with stories and meanings for me. When the sun began to set, I went back to the place where I had left him.

"Thank you" was what he said as he gave the papers back to me. "And forgive me."

On the bank of the River Piedra, I sat down and wept.

"Your love has saved me and returned me to my dream," he continued.

I said nothing.

"Do you know Psalm 137?" he asked.

I shook my head. I was afraid to speak.

"On the banks of the rivers of Babylon..."

"Yes, yes, I know it," I said, feeling myself coming back to life, little by little. "It talks about exile. It talks about people who hang up their harps because they cannot play the music their hearts desire."

"But after the psalmist cries with longing for the land of his dreams, he promises himself,

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand forget its skill.

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,

if I do not exalt Jerusalem."

I smiled again.

"I had forgotten, and you brought it back to me."

"Do you think your gift has returned?" I asked.

"I don't know. But the Goddess has always given me a second chance in life. And She is giving me that with you. She will help me to find my path again."

"Our path."

"Yes, ours."

He took my hands and lifted me to my feet.

"Go and get your things," he said. "Dreams mean work."

END