



# HUT TO CAFÉ



*An Exciting Journey*



P. SARANGI

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by

**P. Sarangi**

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*Dedicated to my parents*

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# 1. THE HUT - *SADABAHAR*

[*An Incredible Exciting Journey*]

**P**allishree is a small village surrounded by a dense forest. The road to the nearby town could be better. Yet people visit to enjoy nature's beautiful scenery. The orange sky of the Rising Sun and its reflection on the lake adds to the beauty. The chirping of colourful migratory birds and the movement of rabbits on the grass is another attraction. Murali lives in a small hut with his wife Ram Pyari, daughter Champakali, and son Birju. They run a tea shop – *Sadabahar*. It is a small hay-roofed cottage. Small polished logs substitute for the chairs. Visitors praise the *Sadabahar chahaa* served in beautiful cups made of baked clay.

Ranjit's son Vikram Singh Rathor (Raja Sahab) reached Sadabahar on a usual visit. Sandhya Rani Rathor, Ranjit's wife, was also with him. She was popularly known as Rani Maa.

Ram Pyari greeted Raja, "Aao Babu Ji".

Raja said, "Chachi, don't call me Babu Ji; call me Raja." She responded with a smile. Raja was preparing to leave. It started raining with thunderstorms.

Ram Pyari requested to wait till the rain stopped. Raja requested for another cup.

It was Vijaya Dashami – Champa's birthday.

Ram Pyari came with Kheer. Raja enjoyed the delicious item. Murali returned after distributing milk and greeted Raja Sahab.

Raja asked Champa her choice of a gift.

“Bhaiya, Your blessing is enough. Please visit our hut at shorter intervals.”

Murali requested a rest shed for the visitors. It would be a great respite from the rains and the brutal sun.

“And it would boost your tea sale,” said Raja. Murali smiled.

Raja was pleased to find Murali’s concern for the visitors.

Dayananda, Padmanabha, Chaturbhuja, Narayana and Keshava, the five jewels of Panchasakha, reached Sadabahar. They were in a discussion on the rehabilitation of socially neglected children. Krishna, Acharya of Shishu Mandir, arrived. Champa came with Chahaa.

Keshava started, “Krishna, I want to entrust you with a little girl who lost her parents very early. She is Manjushree, now in ‘*Ashray*’ – an orphanage. She is beautiful, smart and has an interest in learning. Given a little guidance, I foresee a bright future for her.”

“Keshava, your prediction never fails. I, too, need a daughter. It would allow me to help build a career for such a needy girl.” Thus, Manju got home to start a fresh life. She lived in a hut near Keshava’s home. After returning from school, Manju helped in domestic work. Keshava never treated her as a maid but as a daughter.

Murali and his family were busy with the inauguration of the rejuvenated Sadabahar. Pyare Lal advised him on the new business tricks from time to time. Birju has had a passion for painting since childhood. He hung a wooden board bearing a picture of a tea-filled cup and a leaf-made bowl containing *Nimki*. On the side of this, it had a four-anaa coin.

It was Shree Panchami. Raja, with his team, reached. A few from the neighbouring villages were also there. Ram Pyari blew the conch, signalling the beginning of the inaugural function. All stood up and offered flowers to *Mahamaya* – the traditional deity. Birju rang the bell and invited the visitors. Rani Maa – (Raja’s mother) was the

first to move to the service counter. She dropped some coins into the *Matka* (A big container made of baked clay) and took the cup and the leaf-made bowl containing *Nimki*. Others followed her.

Karodimal – a rice merchant, reached with his team. At first, he was surprised to see the changes. “The villagers have started learning the art of luring the customers,” – he murmured. He ordered five cups of tea. Birju requested that he collect it from the service counter after making the payment. Karodimal went to the counter and said, “Within a few months, you have doubled the cost. Instead of serving the cups, you direct us to collect them. Are you doing business or looting the customers?”

“Kaka, this is our custom. If you don’t like it, choose a better option,” said Birju. After finishing the cup, Karodimal threw it on the lawn. Others did the same.

“Babu Ji, please pick it up and drop it in the bin,” said Ram Pyari. There was a hot argument. Karodimal was astonished to see a lady picking up the cups.

“Who is this lady?” asked Karodimal.

“Shh....shh..., do you know Vikram Singh Rathor? We call him Raja Sahab. He is the Land Lord of this area. He is a people-friendly leader. The lady is Rani Maa – his mother.” Karodimal got embarrassed.

Pyare Lal explained, “Friends, every region has its own rules and traditions. In Pallishree, everyone enjoys freedom as regards his profession. However, all must pay respect to our traditions and culture. In case of conflicting issues, Rani Maa’s say is final.

If our customs and traditions suit you, it is okay. Else, please don’t revisit our village.” This decision disturbed Karodimal very much. He left.

Be it an inconclusive stormy debate among *wise fools*, an ocean of beautiful thoughts emerges here. Some get a bit of respite from enormous stress. Others obtain relief from their inexpressible



problems at home by vomiting those before *close* friends. Fantastic ideas, innovative thoughts, and strategic moves to capture trouble-makers emerge from *Sadabahr's Chahaa* cups.

Most cultivated lands across the country suffered crop loss due to rain shortfall. Pallishree and adjoining villages got a bumper crop. Rice merchants had an eye on it. They planned to take advantage of the situation. Raja focussed on building up rice storage units in the area. Each family stored rice at home to meet the consumption for the year.

At Raja's call, the farmers met to plan a long-term strategy to overcome the miseries they had suffered in the past. Rani Maa appealed to all to stay in the village for livelihood. She emphasised being satisfied with the Almighty's gift and working hard to live a meaningful life. The farmers decided not to fall prey to the distress sale of rice at the hands of the rich.

Karodimal, with his team, reached to lure the farmers. He expressed his desire to buy rice at a reasonable cost. He also offered other attractive gifts. Chakrapani described the decision of the farmers – not to sell crops. Disappointed Karodimal left.

Chakrapani proposed Vikram to rejuvenate the temple of the traditional deity *Mahamaya*. Unlike most other shrines, it should have different traditions and a people-friendly environment. The construction of the Mahamaya temple started. The villagers were fully engaged under the guidance of Chakrapani. The structure of the temple was completed in a year. It was ready for devotees' visit. The temple premises included a children's park, a natural fountain, and a small pond with swans swimming.

Many tourists worldwide visit this place to observe the lifestyle of the inhabitants and enjoy the scenes of the setting sun. Peacocks, different types of colourful migratory birds, rabbits, squirrels and mongooses moving over the grassy field add to the beauty. Elderly persons move on wheelchairs. Ladies with babies in their arms are exempted from standing in a queue.

Many shrines offer visitors free entry and free meals. In such places, there is an uncontrolled crowd of devotees and a total lack of cleanliness. The shortage of washrooms adds to the miseries of the devotees.

In some cases, Sevaks (claiming to be servants of the holy shrine) ask the devotees to offer cash to the deities. The money collected goes directly into the pockets of the Sevaks.

The Mahamaya Temple has a different tradition. The Darshan is open from 07:00 AM to 01:00 PM. It reopens at 02:00 PM and closes at 07:00 PM. Free entry is limited to the Darshan of the deity only. Devotees willing to visit other places have to buy tickets on cash payment. The administration employs sevaks. They are not permitted to accept money or anything from the visitors. Devotees donate cash or other gifts in locked boxes placed at different places. The *Prasad* includes rice, chapatti, daal, vegetable curry, curd, chutney, sweets and tea/coffee. The visitors pay, pick up boxes from the service desk and move to the dining area. After finishing, they dump the trash in the bin.

The group of Panchasakha was busy discussing various issues of Society. Ranjit Singh Rathor, the ruler of Pratapgarh, arrived with family. All greeted each other. Ranjit expressed his concern about the deteriorating condition of the Society. He sought Panchasakha's advice to build an institution to educate the upcoming generation and preserve our rich traditions and culture. People of neighbouring villages were also invited.

After a little traditional formality, Acharya Dayananda started, highlighting some vital points that warranted the immediate attention of all concerned. The whole world is passing through horrible situations. The craze for power, intolerance of others' prosperity, destabilisation of the natural environment in the pretext of development, cruelty to all living beings, uncontrolled passion towards material things, and degradation of moral values have caused substantial harm to our peaceful living. Some have started their moves to destroy our rich tradition and culture to show their

supremacy over us. There is no scarcity of funds or intellectual human resources among us. We must struggle hard to build a bright future for the next generation.

Acharya pointed out the contribution of Arushi, Banke's wife, in this matter. She was the first to think of educating the children. She used to sit with the children under a banyan tree and tell them the stories from our holy books. At the end, she distributed homemade sweets among them. He proposed setting up an institution named after her. This would help guide the children to meet the challenges ahead. He presented a Master Plan written in palm leaves to Chakrapani. Thus, Arushi School of Learning, the first school of its kind, was established.

With Maharaja's approval, Chakrapani took the lead in implementing the project. The villagers, assisted by some of the neighbouring villages, started the work. A cottage made of wooden planks was built. An Aahar Gruha, three small huts for the teachers furnished with washrooms, was added to the school. It was ready to function. It could accommodate fifty students. Sushree and Mahashweta joined as teachers. A nine-member body, under the chairmanship of Chakrapani, looked after the school's management. Rani Maa inaugurated the school on the auspicious day of Shree Panchami. It was an excellent opportunity for the parents and grandparents. Students were very much excited to join this new environment. Sweet packets were an additional attraction to them. The National Society for Children's Welfare (NSCW, a non-governmental organisation) could smell its bad days ahead. Its plan to implement the 'Modern Education System' might fail.

Manish Kumar (Manish), with a few members of the NSCW, visited Pallishree. He wanted to explain the facilities they provide to the children. The Society charged tuition fees of Rupees Seventy Thousand per year per student. School uniform & shoes, mid-day meal, and study tour were free. Chakrapani took them to the school premises. All had to wait outside as it was the time for prayer.

First, all children offered prayer to the Sun God. A little exercise followed this. Sushree and Mahashweta, assisted by some parents, helped the children have breakfast. Children started playing with the rabbits in the grassy field. Some picked up the colourful birds and fed them grains. Some enjoyed viewing the peacocks spreading their beautiful tails.

Teachers communicate with the students in the local language. A foreign language would be taught only in class five. Identifying the different objects of nature (Plants, trees, fruits, and vegetables) and counting numbers are all taught through pictures, models, and actual objects. Protection of the environment and its care, helping people in distress, respect for elderly persons, good habits, and health care are all taught through stories printed in good quality paper books.

Manish's offer to provide books, study materials, articles of games and toys failed to lure the villagers. The parents did not accept the new system of education. Chakrapani's emphasis on using resources available at home rather than depending on aid from external sources worked well.

All attempts of the rival group to mobilise the villagers to go for the new education system failed. A beautifully decorated car, *Sarvoday*, reached Pallishree to distribute Prasad on the eve of the Car Festival. Some holy books and household items for performing Puja at home were also available. The team appealed to the residents to voluntarily donate to uplift people experiencing poverty. This practice of collecting funds from innocent people was not allowed. Finding a feeble response, *Sarvoday* left the village.

It is time to awaken the people and caution them from getting trapped at the hands of different self-claimed charitable organisations. This time, Keshava addressed the villagers, focusing on the education system and moral values.

The Almighty has given us enough to live a peaceful life. Open skies, dust-free air, pure water from rivers/fountains, and greenery are rarely available in developed urban areas. We must perform our

duty not only for ourselves but also for the Society we live in. We must provide proper education to our children to meet the challenges ahead. Veenapani Vidyamandir is one step in this direction. Age is no bar for achieving knowledge. Elderly persons must also learn to read and write. For this, we have started evening classes in the school. Begging in any form is prohibited in our culture. Everyone has to work for his livelihood. However, an exception is there for very old and physically challenged persons. Some people are making efforts to make us dependent on their products. These are unhealthy and aim to scrape our age-old indigenous methods of producing essential goods. The production, storage, and sale of such items are prohibited in our state.

On a request from Vikram, the Panchasakha drafted a code of conduct for performing the rituals in the temples. The aim was to replace some unethical and unhygienic practices used for a long.

Dayananda spoke on animal sacrifice. In Prasad's plea, eating non-vegetarian items is not a healthy practice. Some people, claiming to be veterans of our rituals, offered animals and birds as gifts to the Devi on some selected occasions. None dared oppose it. This practice is continuing in many places. Goats, sheep and cocks are the common victims. The devotee brings the baby goat or lamb before the priest for the preliminary Puja. Then, A person drags it to the altar for *sacrifice*. None cares for the animal's *mey...mey..*, and the axe falls on its neck. How can the Goddess, whom we believe to be the protector of all living beings, accept these as Prasad? It is difficult to bear the horrible blood-shaded scene of the place. This practice must stop.

It was Padmanabha's turn to speak on keeping a hygienic environment in the temple premises. Devotees used to offer lighted diyas before the Goddess. True, it brings concentration. Some people earn by selling diyas. But with the rise in devotees, the environment becomes smoky. It becomes challenging to breathe. Being a little unmindful, women devotees get their sharees burnt.

Devotees should be prevented from offering diyas. This practice should be performed by the priest alone twice a day – once in the morning and next in the evening. Hawan also creates a smoky atmosphere. Besides, much ghee is wasted while offering it to the fire god. Short-duration hawans should be restricted to once or twice a year on selected occasions.

Chaturbhujia pointed out the noise pollution created by hymns chanted by the priests on uncontrolled audio systems. Slogans of the devotees add to this. This practice continues from the early morning to late night, with a little break. Children and elderly persons are the worst sufferers. The use of the mike system should stop. Silence must be maintained in the temple premises except for uttering slokas in low voices.

Narayana visited many temples across the country. His primary focus was to eliminate the monopoly of the descendants of a particular family.

In most temples, decedents of a particular family enjoy full benefits in monitoring the various activities of the rituals. They create situations to compel the devotees to pay cash and ornaments. These offerings go straight to the servitors. The devotees are exploited for every function, like hair-cutting of babies, thread ceremonies, engagements, and marriages. Narayana suggested the management of the temple by a Trust. The Trust would appoint servitors to serve the devotees. The offering of cash, ornaments, and clothes should be stopped. The devotees would donate as they wished in locked boxes securely placed at different places. The temple's activities should be limited to prayers in the morning and evening, Darshan of the idols by the devotees and holy pravachans.

Keshava gave the final touch. Devotees of Lord Shiva pour milk on the Shivalingam, especially on the occasion of Shivaratri. Babies do not get milk to drink, yet a million litres of milk go to waste due to this practice. Offering flowers and fruits like coconut and banana to God increases the crowd, and many devotees fail to have a darshan. The temple premises become unclean due to residues of fruits and

flowers. Keshava opined for a ban on offering flowers and fruits. Instead, Prasad should be available in closed packets at cash payment counters.

The meeting came to an end. Ranjit appreciated the suggestions of the Panchasakha. Chakrapani scribed the guidelines in palm leaves. Initially, there was a little discontentment among a few for the deviation from the traditions. Finally, all had to agree with it. The devotees got a respite from the exploitation at the hands of the servitors. The guidelines were displayed at different places on the temple premises. The school completed a year. A new session was to start. Manish and his team visited the village with a new plan. Just a few days before the school's reopening, Manish and his team reached the village with school uniforms and study materials for distribution among the students. He planned to distribute these items at the students' houses. On reaching the village, Manish's team was surprised to see some students in new uniforms going to school with their parents. He immediately moved to Chakrapani for clarification.

"Manish Ji, why did you get into trouble? We have arranged everything for our children. Please join the meeting scheduled to start today shortly."

"We have already brought the uniforms. What shall we do now?"

"That is your problem."

The new academic session was going to start. A meeting of the villagers was scheduled at 10:00 AM. Children in uniform, with parents, were on their way to the School. A few guests from neighbouring villages were also invited. Posters depicting the ban on selling packaged snacks were seen in prominent places. Maharaja with family was present.

Dayananda started. "Respected Maharaja Ji, Rani Maa, dear children and friends. The school has completed a year. Now we have 32 students in Class One and 35 in Two. We want to provide our children with basic education based on our tradition and culture. The focus is to train them to earn their livelihood, stay healthy and learn

good manners. They should not be overburdened with unnecessary things at this age. Some organisations have approached us to implement the new system of education. Our Executive Council has rejected it. Some have planned to start free mid-day meals to attract students. We have already started it since last year. The school hours will be from 07:00 AM to 11:00 AM – from Monday to Friday. First, the students pray to the Sun God and then have breakfast. Teaching will be completed at 11:00 AM. After lunch, they will return home. Thank you all. You are invited to lunch.”

Mahashweta requested that Maharaja and his family join the lunch. Rani Maa proposed to feed the children first. Parents helped the students take the lunch. Rani Maa and others moved to the service desk, put some coins in the box and picked up packets. One guardian asked, “We do not have coins. What shall we do?” Chakrapani said, “Kaka, you have already paid more than the required amount. I shall explain it afterwards.”

The lunch was over. All guests highly appreciated the quality of the food. Dharam Das wanted to know the cost of a packet. Chakrapani replied that it was up to the guest to donate. “Do you provide such meals in all meetings?” asked Vinay. Chakrapani replied that meetings are usually held on holidays. There is no provision for providing snacks or other dishes. However, people may take tea and snacks from Sadabahar on payment.

Manish was surprised at some of the developments of the school. He never disclosed his plan for the distribution of school uniforms. The school authorities did it well in advance. Before the packed snacks were brought, posters indicating a ban on those items were fixed at strategic places. No one could know the source of funds spent on the school’s management. Invited educationists were ready to highlight the merits of the new education system. But before that, Chakrapani explained the school management’s decision on the proposed plan. Prakash Book Store opened a temporary stall near the school. Books with coloured pictures and other study materials were available for the students. Surprisingly, Dharam Das found



children with books with excellent photos of characters from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and other holy books. Every page had a small story with a moral. Prakash's attempt, too, failed to attract the students.

Some guardians approached Chakrapani to get their children admitted to a neighbouring school under the pretext of getting an education befitting the changing times. Chakrapani sought advice from Keshava. Keshava suggested allowing them to face the consequences. Within a few months, they realised. High cost, more stress on children and unhygienic food was unbearable. Children were brought back to the School.



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