

THE SADHU

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(rendered into English from Urdu by Syed SarwarHussain*)

There was once a small hut on the bank of a river, very far from the village. A sadhu maharaj² had been living in the hut for quite a long time. It was surrounded by a forest of brilliantly coloured flowers. In my childhood, I often went there to pluck flowers, and sometimes visited the sadhu's hut to ask for prasad³. I always found a crowd of devout followers of the sadhu in front of his hut. But no one knew anything about his past life.

Often in the stillness of the night, when the villagers drifted into sweet, restful sleep, the echoing cry of 'Harey Ram, Harey Ram' rent the still air, robbing the atmosphere of its calm. In my early days, the sound frightened me whenever it broke my sleep. In the dead of night, the maharaj often used to move around the village.

I had seen other sadhus too in my childhood days, and even now I see no dearth of them begging like ordinary beggars in the narrow streets and lanes. But the maharaj was never spotted begging for alms or anything else for that matter. Far from asking for charity, he never ever accepted any gift. A landlord, albeit, had fixed the revenue from about three acres of his agricultural land for the sadhu. The daily expenses of the maharaj were met with the money from that land.

The sadhu maharaj had a lovely parrot. With its ritual chants of 'Harey Ram, Harey Ram' every morning, this amazing bird attracted bathers going to the holy river to take their pre-breakfast bath. The maharaj was very fond of this parrot.

Amazing stories about the sadhu were rife among his followers. Some said that he was seen flying like birds, during the dark, moonless nights, while others stated that every part of his body disjointed and worshipped God separately.

There were others who said that he often stood for the whole night in the river, as an act of religious penance, and then the glorious light that exuded from his face, brilliantly illuminated the dark night to a distance. In fact there were as many stories making the rounds about him as there were mouths. But there was not a soul who really knew what the maharaj actually was.

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I still remember the day when my uncle took me to the sadhu maharaj after I had finished my Bachelor's exam. He had a firm belief that the sadhu's one close look at me would bring me good fortune. But I had little faith in paranormal beliefs, though I never attacked them in public. However, my uncle's constant insistence forced me to accompany him to the sadhu.

As I was conveyed to the presence of the holy man, our eyes locked together, and I felt a sudden shiver running through my body. My lips lost their quiver and I lost my speech. I still remember those piercing red eyes! They looked like those of a drunkard. Long dishevelled hair, flowing unkempt beard, and bushy moustache, all combined to make his face appear so passionately glorious and divine!

I was so lost in thoughts that I could not hear what transpired between him and my uncle. I was surprised how, having little faith in sadhus, I got so quickly impressed by that man. But some mysterious power radiated from the holy man and slowly overpowered my whole being. I was bathed in sweat. The spell was broken when the maharaj moved his lips, asking me to leave, and also reminding me to visit him sometimes.

My encounter with that incredibly strange man instilled in me some kind of belief in him, and therefore I started calling on him every day, and gradually gathered courage to converse and talk freely with him on various problems. It was amazing to find the maharaj talking about world history and on the growth of materialism in the contemporary world. The man appeared to be a clever clog, though ostensibly there was nothing in his aspect to show that he was a reservoir of such vast knowledge. I used to watch him dumbfounded when he spoke.

Misunderstandings about me cropped up in people's mind when they saw me so influenced by the man. My mother was so worried that she openly expressed her apprehensions of my becoming a sadhu.

She openly cried in despair, "Oh, no! How I fear my Manohar would turn into a sadhu!"

I tried to convince her that her fears were baseless, but she constantly forbade me to go to the maharaj, and finding me adamant, one day she herself sent a message to the maharaj asking him to prevent me from even thinking of becoming a sadhu, little knowing that in fact I never intended to be one.

On my subsequent visit to him, the maharaj advised me very affectionately, "Manohar, I think you should now stop coming to me! Of course, it pains me a lot to ask you to do that. But, please don't call on me anymore!"

Surprised at the sadhu's suggestion, I asked him, "Why maharaj! Forgive me, if I've committed any mistakes. I touch your feet and apologize, but please don't send me away!"

"No, no Manohar, you haven't done anything wrong. Listen, my son! Your people think that you'll become a sadhu under my influence, and they don't like it! So, I feel you shouldn't come here." The sadhu's voice was laced with affection.

I replied respectfully, “Maharaj, it’s quite true that some people are nursing misunderstandings. But in fact, I never thought of turning into a sadhu, and what’s bad even if I did?”

The sadhu’s eyes sparkled. He surveyed me with an intent gaze, and answered, “Manohar, if it isn’t bad to live like a sadhu, it isn’t also a very noble idea to be one. And it’s a sin to turn a promising man like you into a sadhu. I hold the belief that to become a sadhu in youth is a sin and in old age an obligation. As you grow old your mind automatically finds refuge in ‘yog’, in the philosophy and practice of abstinence, self-discipline, and sobriety.”

A question slipped out of my mouth quite unwittingly, “Maharaj, what made you become an ascetic in your youth?”

The sadhu’s radiant face suddenly darkened, as when clouds obscure the bright moonlight. He looked up at me very closely. Tears were glistening in his eyes.

“My dear Manohar, You’ve asked me a strange question, the answer of which I had always avoided to give to anyone, not even you. But I don’t want you to harm yourself by even thinking of acquiring the life of an ascetic and, therefore, to clear your misunderstandings, listen carefully to what I am going to say now.

Manohar, my son, the world is so full of grand, seductive illusions that we cannot easily turn our faces away from it. If anyone tries to do it, he too gets caught up in the fascinating web of its deception. I believe a very large number of those who become sadhus do so to make it the main source of their livelihood. And the world indiscreetly issues them the credentials of self-denying hermits. The rest become sadhus because that is perhaps the only escape route for them.

I know people who have become sadhus only after they quarrelled with their wives and children. Besides, many notorious criminal and murderers have assumed the garb of a sadhu, for fear of being exposed to the world. No doubt, there are still people whose deep religious devotion has inspired them to take to asceticism. But I don’t grant any importance to them. Much more respectful than them, in my eyes, is the family man who leads a very pious life together with his wife and children. To run away from worldly responsibilities for fear of sin is the ultimate proof of weakness. Think it long and hard, and tell me whom would you revere, the man who dives into the river and swims across successfully to the other side, or the one who stares out to the river from a distance and refuses to swim for fear of drowning.

Well, I am now going to tell you the sad story of my life, and the incident that compelled me to become a sadhu. When you consider it deeply, you may come to the conclusion that I have done a wonderful job. But actually I have done nothing marvellous. You will clearly notice my profound weakness in opting for the life of a hermit. If on the one hand I have chosen to live a life of self- denial and abstinence as atonement for my sins, on the other hand, I am also guilty of the sin of shirking away from my duties towards my wife and children.”

The maharaj fell silent for some time. I found myself in a rather strange situation, and gazed at him, stunned. His speech sent currents flowing through my mind, and sparks flaring inside my body.

The maharaj looked quizzically at me, and continued, “Listen! I was born into a wealthy Brahmin family, the only child of my parents. I had an aunt who became a childless widow a few months after her marriage. After her husband’s death she came to live with us in our house. I was brought up with great love and care, and over the years my aunt had grown immensely fond of me. She always cried her eyes out whenever my father spanked me for my waywardness. And when this sequential drama became everyday affair, and her patience exhausted, she took me to her house in Allahabad, and put me in a school. I was ten years old at that time.

My aunt had a maidservant from the kaharu family. She was called Rohni. She was also a widow and lived with her only daughter Mohni. When I came to Allahabad, Mohni must be around four years old and was a very cute little child. I loved her immensely but innocently as children do in their tender age. We grew up together, and when she was seven years old, Mohni in accordance with the village tradition was married to a village boy, but was not sent to live with her husband because of her young age, and stayed with us.

And to be quite honest with you Mohan, I could not hold my sly, guilty looks falling on her as she started growing. An overwhelming desire arose in my mind and occupied its permanent seat there. In fact, I never tried to drive it away from its resting place. On the contrary, it flourished there to the extent that, often when I was alone, I enjoyed playing with it in my imagination with Mohni as my playmate.

Years rolled on, and I, now a young man of twenty, was doing my Master’s. Mohni was still living with us. I was exceptionally intelligent and popular, and so offers for my marriage started pouring in from eager parents of marriageable daughters. My youth, quite naturally, carried with it all its spirited dalliance and reckless expenditure of feeling. Mohni had also grown up, and the spring had dawned on her with a hush, admiring its own image in her beautiful bloom. The shivering pulsation of youth in me was also restless for her embrace.

One day, my aunt and her maid Rohni went to attend a marriage ceremony of one of our relatives. I too had gone with them, but came back early, immediately after dinner. It was approaching midnight when I reached home. The guard at the gate was drowsing, and the gate was locked. I thought my aunt had already come back, so I called out and knocked at the door. To my surprise, I found Mohini opening the door for me.

Her disheveled appearance, as though she had just fallen out of bed, her sleepy eyes, her tousled hair, and her rumpled clothes, all made me delirious as though I had drunk hemlock. Controlling my emotions from spilling over, I asked her if my aunt had come back. She nodded in the negative, and I headed straight to my room. I climbed to my bed with an intensely powerful feeling welling up inside me. Why had I been avoiding her, not even talking to her with a smile, for fear of my aunt? That night the fear was not present. Burning, amorous desires fuelled for their fulfillment, and baser emotions craved for their expression, as I called her out to bring me a glass of water. After a few moments, she entered the room with the glass in her hand. I looked at her anxiously as a thief who is caught red-handed, and quite lost in her seductive form, forgot to shift my gaze. The moment she turned round to leave, after putting the glass on the table, I caught her hand and felt it tremble in my warm clasp. She tried to break free from my clench, but

gave in against its sheer power, protesting in a hushed voice, ‘Oh, no! What are you doing? I will tell bibijiv “. Her threatening words immediately brought me to my senses, and trembling, for fear of disgrace and insult, I left her hand free.

But the unquenched desires fuelling inside me refused to die down, and picking up a knife lying on the table, I spoke out, ‘Look Mohni! I cannot now live without you. I had been burning in your love for quite some time, and if you reject me like this, I’m going to take my own life.’ I drew the knife closer to my chest, and as I was going to thrust it in, she caught my hand and said, ‘Please don’t do it!’ My rebellious feelings got a new lease of life and I uttered them, ‘It’s really useless for me to live without you, and you can’t always stop me from dying!’ How weak is a woman’s heart, how credulous her mind! How easily she can be won by even a feigned expression of love! Mohni, at long last, held me in a warm embrace.”

The maharaj could not continue his story and began trembling. He was looking like the innocent person who had been wrongly convicted of an appalling crime. He wept openly for a while, and then wiping his tears, carried on, “Careless of its consequences, I enjoyed playing with her blooming youth for about three months. During that period my marriage got fixed, and I was sent to my village home. That was the time in my life when I was always ready to commit a sin whenever my eyes fell on any fair damsel.

After some time Mohni and my aunt also came to live with us. One day when there was no one at home, Mohni came to my room and broke the news that she had become pregnant. She asked me to take her to Allahabad anyhow, and get her pregnancy terminated or else she would not be able to survive in the society. I got angry at her courage, as she was no more an object of interest for me, and dismissed her, rebuking her sharply. But the thought of an impending infamy made me restless. The thought of how even one act of sin steals peace away from a man’s life kept worrying me. I maintained, nevertheless, a grave silence suppressing the tumultuous storm rising inside me.

We woke up the next morning to discover that there was no trace of Mohni in the house. We searched far and wide but she was not to be found. People were distressed at the incident, and her mother cried uncontrollably. Everyone at home was stunned with pain and awe, only I stayed unaffected and composed. Rumours about her went flying around. I knew the reason of her disappearance, and was relieved she had disappeared. My fear had vanished, and I was free now. Isn’t it strange Manohar, how after committing a sin man becomes extremely remorseless and hard-hearted!

Weeks, months, and years went by and Mohni was not to be found. I was now a married man with two children. Rohni died crying in grief for her daughter. But I never regretted my deed, nor did my conscience reproach me. My lust for the pleasures of the flesh grew unabated, and my outrageous desires remained unquenched. Righteous, positive thoughts never crossed my mind. I don’t know how many blooming flowers I had crushed, and snatched their charm, earning their curses.

It was roughly sixteen years back that I went on a tour to Benaresw . One day as I was coming out of water after taking a bath in the Ganges, I saw a woman passing by my side on the river

bank. She threw a piercing glance at me and went away. She was a middle aged woman and was wearing a very expensive dress. She appeared to be a wealthy woman whose face hadn't yet completely lost the splendour of youth.

The next day when I again went to the river bank, a man came to me and handed over a letter, telling me that the 'bai'x who had sent the letter was be waiting for me. He asked me if I was ready to accompany him. I asked him to come back in the evening and take me there, as I wasn't free then. There was no name in the letter, but I gathered from it that it was from a prostitute. I wasn't surprised, as I had acquaintance with many of them.

The man appeared in the evening and took me to the place. The same woman whom I had seen on the river bank welcomed me at the door of a decorated house. I tried hard but could not recognize her, and on discovering my perplexed face, she spoke out, 'Ramesh babu, haven't you recognized me?' Deeply embarrassed, I could only say, 'No, not really! I'm sorry!' She said, 'Oh, yes! Why should you know me now? Listen, I'm the same Mohni whom you have devastated.' I suddenly felt as if thunder shook the ground under my feet. My head hung in shame. I fell utterly silent, and watched a young, beautiful girl entering the room where we were now sitting. Mohni said to the girl, 'Mona, touch his feet! He's your father, darling!' The girl touched my feet and saluted me, sitting in front looking at me with extreme love and respect. Heaven seemed falling on me. I was shocked at the sudden blow.

It is very difficult for me to narrate to you how I felt at that moment. Things were whirling before my eyes. Someone was hitting me from my inside; my whole body convulsed and I cried within. Mohni, finding me unable to speak, urged, 'Speak, Mahesh babu! Why are you silent now?' But how could I speak? I was a sinner before her, and the burden of guilt didn't allow me to lift my head or move my lips.

She continued when I refused to utter a word, 'One has to receive punishment for his sins, anyway, anyhow. I forgot my duties, and the love that was someone else's trust on me, I surrendered to you. I'm still suffering the punishment, living the wretched life of a disgraced prostitute, and though born and brought in a family house, will die as a prostitute. You outraged my modesty, destroyed my life and threw me out, and see how you're too punished for your sins. Your own daughter is living the life of a prostitute with me.'

I could not hear all that Mohni was saying. I was boiling with emotions, and unable to hear more, I silently got up and left the place. What I had seen and heard was enough to drown me with shame and regret. I had no other option after all that had happened with me, except accepting the punishment of shunning the world altogether, following complete abstinence from all worldly pleasures, and leading the life of a sadhu, for my expiation, my deliverance."

The hut is a desolate place now. The sadhu suddenly vanished one night, leaving the place in darkness. People say the sadhu had taken Samadhi, submitting to be buried alive. But his name still lives on the tongues of the inhabitants of the Yashanpur village.

I still yearn to listen to the voice of the sadhu maharaj.

NOTES

1. A Hindu holy man, especially one who lives away from people and society.
2. A respectful term for a Brahmin guru.
3. Offerings that a Hindu makes to a Hindu deity.
4. The Hindu chant of their deity Ram
5. A lower caste of Hindus known, whose business was to carry palanquins, or do domestic chores.
6. Respectful term for the mistress of the house.
7. A town in north India in the state of Uttar Pradesh.
8. Prostitute