Trial by Fire

Mudra Rakshasa

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Repeatedly dunking five mango leaves in a shiny brass pot of Ganges water Pandit Ramagya Mishra sprinkled the temple's six steps then bowed very low and signalled to Acharya Brihaspati to ascend. Acharya looked left and right. He was almost bald. Some longer hairs on the back of his head he had bound together as a top-knot. Around his waist he had tied a fine, bright dhoti, one end of which he had wrapped over his shoulders, leaving his sacred thread visible. Sandalwood paste had been applied to his chest and shoulders. Red sandal had been used for the broad tilak across his forehead. On his feet were wooden sandals that clacked sharply when he walked.

Before the temple's inner sanctum was a square assembly hall, on three sides of which, supported by pillars, was a balcony, where the women sat. Inscribed on the walls beneath the balcony were verses from the Bhagavadgita and the Ramcaritmanas. On the right side under the balcony sat a group of devotees who took turns singing bhajans all day and all night.

A bright white sheet had been spread out in the middle of the hall. On it were

five new mats of sacred kusha grass.

To welcome Acharya Brihaspati a number of people were standing inside, prominent among whom were Dinanath Rastogi, wearing an expensive silk kurta and dhoti; Professor Doctor Vishnu Pratap Singh, in his safari suit; Professor Indradhwaj Bhadauriya, in a gleaming white dhoti and kurta; and Hariprakash Yagnik, wearing only a dhoti from the waist down, his shoulders covered by a ramnami scarf. They all touched Acharya's feet, and Dinanath Rastogi quickly held up an expensive garland of roses.

From the very beginning Acharya's face was taut. It was as impassive as if it were a mask of pink stone. His eyes seemed not to blink. Seeing the garland in Rastogi's hands he hesitated. The tension stretched even tighter across his face. Like a puppet he looked at Yagnik, who then stepped forward and said to Rastogi, "What are you doing, Rastogi ji? You should have asked first. Acharya ji doesn't touch anything like this. Just put it down by his feet."

Just then, the sound of a mobile. Then they realized it was Acharya Brihaspati's, an elegant golden one. On the phone he said, "Brihaspati."

He listened for a while in silence, then in a most machine-like voice he said in Sanskrit, "Look Ray, tell that minister we'll talk two days hence, in the morning."

Displaying a sycophancy filled with peevishness Yagnik said in Sanskrit, "People are always bothering Acharya ji."

Acharya made no response. Nor was he pleased. He dropped the wooden sandals off his feet and stepped onto the white sheet. Someone quickly snatched the garland out of his way. Acharya sat on one of the kusha grass mats. By now a

number of people had gathered outside. None of them, however, climbed the temple stairs. At the Acharya's signal the other four sat on the remaining mats, leaving the space in the middle empty.

Yagnik said in Sanskrit, "Command us. You are the judge in this trial."

Acharya asked, "Are the images of dharm and adharm ready?"

"Yes, Acharya," said Yagnik, pointing to two lumps of cow dung near the temple's idols, on one of which was a tiny silver image of dharm and on the other a tiny tin image of adharm. Each lump of cow dung sat in a freshly purchased clay bowl.

Acharya said, "Sprinkle each with the five products of the cow. On the image of dharm drop white flowers, on the image of adharm black."

Then, as if he had suddenly remembered something he said, "You said there were some interrogators, too?"

"Yes," said Yagnik, "they are present."

In a loud, clear voice Acharya recited this Sanskrit shlok:

No eye-witnesses, no legal documents,
No clear possession, no agreed-upon trial —
In such cases the king is the judge.
He can resolve such disputes
Because he is the lord of all.

Meanwhile, a servant brought a piece of paper and gave it to Yagnik. He read it and looked up in the balcony for a moment. Then he bowed slightly and said to

Acharya in Sanskrit, “Some honorable interrogators are sitting in the balcony. They are important Hindi writers. One is a prolific novelist, and he has written many articles on politics and culture. Another is a venerable Hindi critic and social thinker. Nowadays he’s working on the Rig Ved and the Natya Ved. The third is a respected Sanskrit teacher. They have asked if . . . ”

Acharya’s stone face became even harder. He asked abruptly, “Their caste?”

Shocked for a moment, Yagnik didn’t know what to do. Then, with some hesitation he stated fully the caste of each of them, at which point Acharya’s pink face turned bright red. Roaring in Sanskrit he said, “A shudra — here? The kayasth is a shudra, don’t you know?”

Among the three sitting in the balcony the Sanskrit teacher understood everything immediately. Standing up right where he was he himself said in Sanskrit, “Acharya, please listen to what I have to say as well. India’s law courts have already heard this debate, and their settled opinion is that a kayasth is not a shudra. In the *Vyavahar* of Dharmacharya Brihaspati, which is recognized as smriti, it is clearly stated that the kayasth is a twice-born.” He ended by politely and formally stating his full name.

Acharya Brihaspati was unaccustomed to so much dispute. Loudly he said, “Then you should also be knowing that Yajnavalkya reminded the king that he should keep his distance from thieves, the depraved, extremists and kayasthas. And what response do you have for the opinion of Ushna and Sumantu?”

Yagnik realized this could only get worse; they’d never agree. So with the utmost humility he said to Acharya, “Bhagawan, please consider this my own

emergency measure and be pacified now. He to whom you have an objection will write something about what we're doing here, and that will only benefit dharm. He is very highly respected in the literary world."

Though not entirely, the venerable gentleman doing a study of the Rig Ved understood some of the back-and-forth that had taken place in Sanskrit. He had gathered that the point of disagreement concerned the caste of the excellent novelist and thinker who had come there with him. With the help of the balcony railing in front of him he was able to raise up slowly his heavy yet old body. Clearly, at one time, he must have been quite an athlete. Just as he was about to open his mouth, the Sanskrit teacher with him pressed his hand.

There was more discussion below and it seemed as if Acharya Brihaspati was about to express his objection even more sharply than before, but instead he looked up toward the balcony most disrespectfully, shut his eyes for a few moments and then sat down. Total silence.

Having somewhat regained his poise Acharya said, "Brihaspati is quoted in the *Yajnavalkyasmriti* to the effect that a shudra being tried must be dressed in red."

Yagnik replied in Sanskrit, "He has been dressed in red, Acharya."

Acharya said, "And it is also said that his face should be smeared with ashes from the cremation ground, a handprint of goat's blood should be applied to his chest, and a garland of animal intestines should be hung around his neck — make this announcement."

Yagnik announced, "*śūdrāṇāṃ tu yathāha bṛhaspatiḥ. taṃ klaivyena alaṃ*

kāregrā alaṃkṛtya śavabhasmanā mukhaṃ vilipya āgneyasya paśo śoṇitena urasi pañcāġgulāni kṛtvā grīvāyām āntrāṇi pratimucya savyena pāṇinā sīmāloptaṃ mūrdhani dhāraya iti. iti yājñavalkyena smṛtaṃ viśvarūpe."

Everyone responded, "Thus it was remembered by Yajnavalkya in the *Vishwarupa*."

By this time a large crowd had gathered below the steps outside the temple. Evening was falling, and the sky was strikingly yellow. In a very old peepul tree across from the temple flocks of birds were screeching. The crowd was quiet, but a little separate from them a woman was groaning and some children were crying.

It was likely their voices that Acharya heard. He looked fiercely toward the outside. Yagnik became unsettled. He got up and came toward the crowd. In a restrained voice from the top of the stairs he told them to stop the crying. A few young men quickly split through the crowd and went back to the woman and her children to silence them.

At about that same time Father Martin Ram returned. He still drove a very old rear-engine Volkswagen beetle. He was taking this shortcut despite the crowd he knew was always there. Today, however, the crowd on the street in front of the temple was larger than usual. He could only barely inch his car forward. Once he had passed through the crowd Martin Ram became a little perplexed. There was no devotional singing as usual in the temple, yet this crowd was unusually large, and it too was practically silent. Just then he happened to notice some young men almost shoving a mad-looking woman and her clutch of kids farther away from

the crowd. Martin Ram looked more closely and recognized the woman. She was the widow of Nokhe Kebari.

ON THE BANK of a deep, open sewer, customarily called a canal, there was a time when some people, essential for the working of the city but not considered worthy enough to live in it, gradually took up residence. Indeed, their own work depended entirely on the city. A very large part of the city's waste flowed through this canal. Both sides of it were well sloped and almost as high as a two- or three-storey building. Those restraining walls had been so well constructed of stone that they had endured as is for almost two centuries. To this colony, which was like a filthy row of people that had squatted on the banks of this sewer, or canal, to relieve themselves, came some Kunjar families. They did all kinds of odd work, such as selling vegetables, roasted ears of corn, or overripe fruit, or they would jump onto the back of trucks in the city hauling away discarded things, snatch some items and then look for any possible excuse to start a fight among themselves. These fights first seemed terrifying, but they usually ended harmlessly. Along the canal here lived some washermen, some stonebreakers, some junk dealers and many other such small entrepreneurs. These people generally built their shacks by putting together whatever they could find — bricks, broken bamboo, boards and sack cloth. Since these people were always preoccupied with the problems of constructing their homes out of these and other such materials, after some time many of them were able to construct sturdy, high walls.

At first, every resident of these shacks used the area behind his shack along

the bank of the canal for his morning defecation. That open-air, field system was gradually replaced by two bricks surrounded by a screening of sack cloth. Then the sackcloth was replaced by pieces of old, rusted-out tin. Now, when viewed from the windows in the high buildings on the other side of the canal it seemed as if it was the shacks themselves that were squatting there and defecating.

Of all these shack dwellers the most well-known was Nokhe Kebari. He roamed the entire city buying things both old and broken. He brought back all kinds of canisters and buckets that could be fixed and used. From him many people even bought broken cots. Such things he could buy for next to nothing. And right in this colony covered with filth and rubbish on the bank of this canal the people who could fix these things could also be found. Nowadays many people in the city had begun buying flour in plastic bags, and when the bags were empty Nokhe could buy them for almost nothing. In the colony there was a significant demand for them.

This junk dealing of Nokhe's was such that his wife and children also helped out. His son was a little older, so he was the one to go out with the scale in his basket to buy used newspapers. Amongst themselves the women he dealt with cursed him thoroughly, but to his face they very happily sold him two kilos of old newspapers for the price of one.

Every morning Nokhe's wife put up the day's food in a large, wide-mouthed copper pot in which she let the arhar lentils cook for a while. After it reached a healthy boil she added to it biscuit-sized squares of flour she had kneaded. Freshly cooked, this dish had an excellent flavor, but by evening it became even

tastier. The lentils had absorbed all the water, and you had to fish around in that thick soup to find the biscuits.

After putting up the food in the morning Nokhe's wife would then go out to work with her three younger children. She had made a large and sturdy sack by sewing plastic bags together. With the help of a pointed iron staff she gathered up all the paper and plastic lying on the street and stuffed it into her sack. She got the largest part of her haul where the official city sweepers dumped out their garbage barrows. Crows, street dogs and wandering, orphan cows all gathered together as soon as a new dump was made. Among them were Nokhe's children sorting through the trash with great interest. In addition to things like old toys, broken pencils and aluminum bangles they would find coins. They gathered these things up happily with the hope that sometime they might find a piece of jewelry made of gold or silver that a rich woman had carelessly dropped and lost. For an empty bottle of perfume they would even fight each other because while it was totally empty, it still gave off a wonderful fragrance.

Strange to say, the police were certain that the city's greatest concentration of thieves, pickpockets, murderers and conmen, etc. was in this very colony. Whatever kind of criminal they wanted they could easily find here. Gyas the locksmith, for example, they frequently arrested because they were convinced he was the one who cracked the lock wherever a robbery had taken place. Mangatram was a whitewasher by trade, but the police thought him a member of a gang of clever thieves for whom he used his profession as a way to determine how wealthy a house was and how best to get in and out.

Compared to all the other dwellings in this colony one particularly stood out. Its roof was made of cement and rebar. Built on the roof was even another room. Throughout the house iron grills decorated the windows. This house belonged to Laggu Kanjar. Right on this spot his father had lived in a tiny shack. He had made his living carrying loads on his rather large, buffalo-driven cart. He carried everything from grain and fruit to iron machinery. Out of sight, hanging beneath the cart near the axle, he attached a small burlap bag. When he returned in the evening that bag would have in it all kinds of things, such as bananas, oranges, grain, and even small bars of soap. When the city finally paved its streets, he was forced to give up his carting business and one day drank himself to death. His son Laggu Kanjar sold the buffalo to a butcher.

From a very early age Laggu had been involved in another occupation. He delivered bottles of fresh, illegal liquor. Even before his father died, the contractors had switched to selling it in plastic bags. The work behind these bags was very simple. It depended on one simple, efficient system. Out of the clandestine country liquor distilleries came a large number of plastic bags, without excise tax. They could be sold at two thirds the price of regular bags. A while back Laggu had setup a wooden stall next to his front door. From it he sold cheap toffee, cookies and other things children liked as well as cigarettes, biris, matches, packets of salt, cheap soap and little packets of paan masala for the adults. At night when most people were asleep and the street dogs awake, Laggu's real work began. Sometimes, though, he would be totally absent. His little frame of a store remained shut, and judging from the behavior of his wife

and children no one was able to infer the reason for Laggu's absence. Then one morning he'd show up swearing like a hellcat. To no one else but Father Martin Ram then he'd shout, "Look, sir! Just look at this, saheb! Every month these harami police shake me down. And look at this, this shows how badly they hit me."

While those nearby kept quietly doing their work Laggu pulled down, for all to see, the hemmed undershorts that were hanging off his naked body. And turning all around he showed the world the bruises on his buttocks and upper thighs.

On the other side of the street, across from this colony, stood the large, impressive homes of the well-bred and well-to-do, who were of the settled opinion that in the colony across from them lived only thieves, pickpockets and vagrants. But of course they never said that publicly. When they got together at festivals or during domestic rituals they did not refrain from expressing the worry they had concerning their neighbors across the street. Profoundly they said, "It's a question of rites and rituals. They have no rites and rituals. Look at their children. They can't read or write. If they don't become thieves or pickpockets, what else will they do?"

Around this time is when the death of Nokhe Kebari occurred. In a narrow lane he had come across a brand new but broken, empty attaché case. He inspected it carefully. It was a fine piece but useless. It looked as if someone had smashed it like a coconut. He picked it up and put it in his bag. It had been stolen in the nearby railway station and belonged to an important official. Instead of

wasting his time trying to open it, the thief had smashed it.

With that attaché case in his possession Nokhe had been taken to the police station. At the insistence of Nokhe's wife Father Martin Ram had gone to the station that night. There he was told that Nokhe had already been released. That morning Nokhe's body was found in that very sewer, or "canal," on the bank of which he and his family lived in their tiny hut.

From their windows or from the wall all around the roof of each of their homes the well-to-do on the other side of the street noticed the crowd that had gathered on the bank of the canal. Very soon they learned the reason for that gathering, and they were quite pleased that finally god had rendered justice. You reap what you sow. God observes all.

Yet what a strange thing. The people living in those dirty little huts on the bank of that smelly sewer had never harmed or disturbed at all the inhabitants of those fine, immaculate homes on the other side of the street. Nevertheless, the wealthy, those residents of Vishnunagar, always regarded their poor neighbors on the other side of the street as if they were themselves some contagious disease. In fact, though, the poor women from across the street often worked for and helped out the mems of Vishnunagar, but that had no influence at all on their attitude.

Aishbag began where Vishnunagar ended. Here there was a tiny school — St. John's School. It wasn't like the other English-medium schools. Next to the very filthy colony on the bank of the canal were many more such colonies. It was the children from all these wretched colonies who came to study in this school run by Father Martin Ram. Not all the children, of course. Only a very small number of

them. Twenty-five at the most. In a small part of this school Father Martin Ram ran a tiny church as well.

MARTIN RAM stopped his car and looked back. It was Nokhe's wife, and she seemed to be moaning continually. Martin Ram drove his car a little further on, parked it on the side of the road and dashed out.

Having shoved her and her children quite a distance from the temple, the young men stopped and threatened her, "Don't go back over there, you won't like what'll happen to you."

Soon after they headed back she quickly followed. They turned around, bore their eyes into her and yelled, "Don't you understand anything, woman? You want a good slapping?"

For a few moments she remained standing just as she was, then, repeatedly hitting her chest with the palms of her hands, she slowly started crying.

Beside himself, Father Martin Ram stood watching all this. Meanwhile, in the temple the chanting had begun: *om, akṣaṇvantaḥ karṇavantaḥ sakhāyo manojaveṣu asamā babhūva . . .*

Sitting in the balcony the Sanskrit teacher said to the novelist, the social thinker and the old critic studying the Rig Ved, "Did you hear the mantra? The Vedic sage says, 'Even though all human beings are endowed with the same five sense organs, eyes etc., nevertheless, they are not equal. They are unequal due to their intelligence and heart.'"

The novelist was profoundly moved. He had a thin voice but chose his words

carefully. “Pandit ji, I have little knowledge of what you keep referring to as *rit*, or cosmic order, but here perhaps we are near it. These are our roots. From these racial remembrances of ours, these smritis, we have a sublime experience. I’m sure you remember *Jay janki yatra*. In that text somewhere Vatsyayan ji says that in the form of a thinker and cultural worker he got an intellectual inspiration from this aspect of our racial remembrances.”

Just then Yagnik’s voice broke in. “May the esteemed interrogators please be so kind as to take their places in the west side of the outer gallery.”

The loud sounds of the drum, finger cymbals and conch shell suddenly rose up from the back.

BEHIND HIS TINY STORE Laggu was sitting in a meditative pose. When Father Martin Ram turned his attention away from Nokhe’s wife and was about to get back into his car, he happened to see Laggu. As always, Laggu put his palms together in greeting, then he turned his attention back to the crowd outside the temple that had been built among the fine homes on the other side of the street.

Father Martin Ram felt this was a good time to ask what was going on. He was certain something unusual was happening there. Placing one foot in his car he asked Laggu, “What’s going on?”

Laggu stood up, came over to him and said, “Please let me sit in your car some time, Father saheb.”

“Certainly, of course, but those people over there . . . ”

“That bastard, too, is a motherfucker. Now what can anyone do?”

"What is it? Did someone defile the temple?"

"Aré, who has the balls to do that? But Father saheb, you didn't do what we asked. If you wanted, it would only take two minutes. That goddamned police sargeant, bastard — have that daughter-fucking Vijay Singhva sent to another station."

Father Martin Ram had grown quite accustomed to hearing such swearing. Everyone living in this colony right next to the sewer was proficient at it. A father might call his daughter a motherfucker, and a daughter might do the same to her own mother. From eight till ten at night Father Martin Ram prescribed homeopathic medicines to the colony's residents. His patients would often describe their problems in this fashion: "What can I say, padri ji, my asshole will be as wide open as a cunt, but my shit, like a motherfuckin' dick, doesn't want to come out!"

Father Martin Ram smiled at Laggu's always colorful speech and then squeezed his big, wide body into his car. Once seated in his little Volkswagen beetle, he looked as if someone had stuffed a large quilt into a briefcase. He even had to lower his head a little.

Once he had closed the door, Laggu grabbed it, bent over to look at him through the open window and said, "Motherfuckin' Titu, right? — they've got him bad. They're gonna light the bastard's ass. Instead of the motherfuckin' cripple Kebabi, right? — they're gonna roast butt kebab."

Starting to lose his patience he said, "But what's happening? Tell it to me straight!"

Laggu's wife appeared from who knows where. She lathered up her husband with a full hand of curses and then said to Father Martin Ram, "All this is the plot of that rich woman's men."

"What happened?"

Laggu's wife explained that warehouse-wallah Nokhe, his kid had been arrested and brought here, to the temple. They say he stole some rich woman's necklace. The bitch must've given a friend what she had earned by prostitution and then made up an excuse that Nokhe's kid had robbed her.

Father Martin Ram asked, "But how did his name get involved in this?"

"Aré, the little bastard goes around collecting old newspaper; he doesn't go into their homes. What can I say? They drew his name out of a hat."

"Are you sure he's innocent?"

"Aré, what are you saying, padri saheb? The little shit wouldn't even pocket a four-anna coin he found on the street."

"Has he been beaten up?"

Father Martin Ram shivered when he heard that in order to prove Nokhe's son's guilt or innocence an ancient religious rite was being carried out.

What was being done in the temple was being done in the temple's own language which no one here was likely to understand. In fact, they didn't even know the name of the ritual, but a summary of the procedures had already reached everyone.

THE THREE YOUNG MEN who had taken Nokhe's son away had used neither force

nor violence. Of course, they spoke firmly and with a sharpness that reduced both Nokhe's wife and his son to helplessness. In moderate tones they said, "Look, we don't want to involve the police in this situation. Whether someone has committed a crime or not, you know what the police would do if they took this kid away. We are not saying this boy stole the necklace, but Janki Vallabh ji says that his wife's golden necklace went missing when he was at their place buying used newspaper. We don't believe what Janki Vallabh ji said, but this boy will have to go to the temple and undergo a trial. We will not make the decision, dharm will do that. You have faith in dharm, don't you? If the trial shows that this boy is innocent, then Janki Vallabh ji will have to apologize in front of everyone. If he is guilty, then he will suffer a punishment."

Another said, "And we won't punish him, dharm will do that. If he's not guilty, then not a hair on his head will be disturbed."

A third suddenly asked Nokhe's son, "Did you ever see bahu ji's necklace?"

"Yes, I saw it. She was wearing it."

All those young men silently exchanged glances. Nokhe's son could see what they were thinking.

The third one said, "Look, if you took the necklace, then quietly return it. No one will say a word."

Nokhe's son felt he had made a mistake admitting to having seen the necklace. Seeing it on the neck of Janki Vallabh ji's young, well-dressed, fair, beautiful wife had been for him a breathtaking experience. When she had bent over and put the bundle of papers in front of him, that shiny necklace touched her

bright, fair chin, and under her low-cut, blue blouse her fair breasts were on full display. He was so befuddled he even forgot to shortweight the scales. Again and again he couldn't help looking at her breasts. Perhaps she too noticed where he kept looking. When asked about the necklace, that was the image that flooded his mind, and maybe because of that, he admitted to having seen the necklace.

The three young men took him to the temple. There they left him at the bottom of the stairway and themselves climbed the stairs. Hariprakash Yagnik was standing at the temple doorway. One of the young men said, "Pandit ji, he says he did see the necklace, but he denies having stolen it."

Yagnik replied, "Tend to your own affairs. Dharm will now discover the truth. Put him in the gardener's hut in back. Make sure he has water for bathing. Give him whatever he wants to eat before sundown. After that he must fast before the trial begins. Yes, and after he bathes he is not to speak with anyone or touch anyone." Then Yagnik turned and went inside.

On mats spread out before the inner sanctum were sitting Yagnadatt Sharma, the temple manager, and a handful of ranking members of the Rashtriya Samskritik Sangam, the National Cultural Society. Sharma asked, "What happened? Did he come?"

"Yes, he's here," Yagnik said."I've had him sent to the gardener's hut in the back for his bath and fast."

They were somewhat reassured. Then Sharma asked, "Which trial should we use?"

A member of the Rashtriya Samskritik Sangam said, "How about the trial by

pot and serpent?"

Yagnik said nothing. Then Sharma himself said, "The pot and serpent trial is doubtful."

"How so?"

Sharma said, "In the *Vyavahar* the pot and serpent is the ordeal recognized as being able to test a woman's faithfulness to her husband. Among the records of Mahamandaleshwar Kirtivirya is this: *samprāptā ghaṭasarpajātavijayaṃ lakṣmīdharapreyasī*. To prove her faithfulness to her husband Lakshmidhara's queen placed her thumb in a pot in which there was a snake, and then she pulled her thumb out. This proved her faithfulness. The snake did not bite her. For shudras trials by water, poison or fire are appropriate. Right, Yagnik ji?"

"On this there is no disagreement. The rainy season has begun. According to the *Narada Smriti*, in the rainy season the trial by fire is the only appropriate one of the three."

"Fine then, but preparations will have to be made?"

"Yes. Sharma ji, have someone put a large brazier behind the temple in the garden and make certain it will be lit first thing in the morning. We will also need a large flatiron placed on the brazier and heated up. The accused will have to sit on that flatiron for twenty seconds. After that his hands will be placed on it, and he will touch it five times with his tongue. If the accused is not burned, that will prove his innocence. We will know then that he did not commit the theft."

Sharma said, "And the interrogators? At that time, in addition to the learned tribunal there are also interrogators. Three great scholars have come in our

society's delegation. Should I send for them?"

"Yes, please do," said Yagnik, "but we must arrange for them to sit separately because in the trial are either the members of the law committee and its director Acharya Brihaspati or five witnesses of pure mind."

"May I sit them up in the balcony?"

"Please do so."

There was no official announcement about any of this. No one leaked it either, but by the next day everyone knew what was going to be done to Nokhe's son in order to determine if he had stolen Janki Vallabh's wife's necklace — how they'd make him sit on a red-hot flatiron. It was on everyone's lips.

Father Martin Ram needed little time to understand the entire situation. What he couldn't figure out was what he should do. He started up the engine and slowly drove ahead. What he knew for sure was that no intervention would be easy.

His church was not at all an important one. It was no more than a small, old building in which he had begun teaching some children whose homes were jammed up against the bank of the canal. Some people sent their children to him because late in the evenings he had already been giving them cheap homeopathic medicines. Actually, though, the inhabitants of that colony had no particular interest in education, nor did their children have any particular zeal for it either. Their children enjoyed flying kites, playing marbles and cursing one another, or they enjoyed running some small-time business. Later he started giving little packets of butter to his school kids. He thought their desire for that would increase the school's enrollment, but that didn't happen at all. In fact it had little,

if any, influence on them. They already had arrangements for getting the things they enjoyed. And they often concentrated their efforts on getting cigarettes or packets of paan masala.

His attempts to arouse interest in his school one day led to a sticky situation. When the children came for class that day they said, “Father ji, somebody stuck a piece of paper on the wall outside, and it has your name on it.”

He had no idea what such a notice could be about. While the children couldn’t understand much, they knew for sure that whatever was written on the paper wasn’t good. At first he felt he should merely ignore this totally unexpected news, but then he got up and went outside. He read the notice and his spirits plummeted. On a large poster-sized piece of paper was written:

CHRISTIAN DOG MARTIN RAM

THE CHRISTIAN NET

YOU CATCH PEOPLE WITH

IS ABHORRENT AND INJURES

HINDU DHARM. STOP.

WE WILL NOT TOLERATE

YOUR TEMPTING HINDUS

AND MAKING THEM CHRISTIAN.

His hands trembled for a moment. Maybe he thought of ripping it up, but he left it just as it was and headed back inside. Some of his students had followed him out. One of them asked, “Father ji, want me to tear it up?”

He did not respond. The children immediately ripped it to shreds, but while it was no longer on the wall, he felt as if it had been stapled to his heart.

That day he taught as usual, but his spirit wasn't in it. In fact, he even let his students leave early. Back in his room he paced back and forth for a while before he sat down. The weather was particularly hot and humid. For no particular reason he opened the Bible at random and read: "Jesus was troubled in his soul and gave witness: 'I tell you truly that one among you will betray me.' Simon Peter gestured and said to him, 'Lord, who is it?"'

Actually, this poster was not totally unexpected.

When Martin Ram had come to this rather small building that he converted into a school and church, only a few shacks existed near the canal and in them lived either some vegetable sellers or Laggu's relatives with their carts and buffalo. The street was very neglected and pot-holed, and on the other side of the street, where the fancy homes are now, was one large maidan where a cattle market was sometimes held. A few of that market's managers had their homes there too, which were quite dilapidated. The building that now houses the church was, relatively speaking, large. The establishment of the church there made it easy for the few Christians already living there. Before then they had had to go quite far for Sunday services.

After that, who knows when or how, in a very planned manner homes started popping up in that empty maidan. In almost the exact same-sized plot of land a building would go up with a small garden in front and a veranda. Almost every home also had a portico and a garage.

As the number of those homes grew so did the number of shacks across the street next to the canal. And then one day Martin Ram's friends suggested he open a school for the poor children of that colony.

Around that same time the temple was built. During its construction perhaps no one thought of it as competing with any church, but it is the only temple in the entire city that has a high-ceilinged assembly hall with a balcony on three sides. The idol-consecrating ceremony was held in the temple with great fanfare.

Father Martin Ram himself attended that celebration. When he perfectly recited some Sanskrit shloks, a number of conversations stopped in amazement. He also gave a very beautiful exposition on the phrase "True brahmans say the one is many." People regarded him with much delight and enthusiasm, but what he didn't notice was the group of young men sitting a little distance from him who were regarding him with profound suspicion.

After father Martin Ram left, those people were in a quandary. To counter the Christian priest they needed to establish their prestige, but the only way they could do that was by reciting Sanskrit shloks, which they were unable to do.

Pandit Candradatt Vedtirth could read precisely the faces of those young men sitting near him. Softly he said, "Now it's the Christians and the Parsees who will be teaching us Sanskrit."

One of them replied, "Whether they teach Sanskrit or Persian doesn't matter; have you ever given any consideration to their actions?"

"Meaning?"

"Vedtirth ji, you keep doing your Vedic pilgrimages, but it's come to our

attention that at the rate the Christians are converting Hindus, soon there won't be any Veds left and there won't be any pilgrimage places!"

The evening after that uncomfortable conversation a march was held. Neighborhood boys had gone around to high caste families and raised enough money to purchase a silver parasol. They decorated it with flower garlands and set it up on a vehicle decorated over every inch of its body and which now was the head of the parade. Behind it marched a crowd singing, drumming, clapping, playing finger cymbals, and throwing red powder into the air.

When the march came by the church some young men set off fireworks. It was not by chance that their rockets usually flew into the open windows of Martin Ram's room. When quite a number of them had gone in and exploded then, despite some tension on his face, Martin Ram came out with a smile.

He had a very tall and wide body. Even to go through his own doorway he had to bow down a little. For a moment the boys setting off the fireworks stopped, then they started sending their rockets up into the sky instead of through his windows, and the march continued on its way.

Not long after that, someone tore down the little cross from the top of the church. Which could not have been an easy job. They would have had to have used either a very long bamboo pole or a rope. Father Martin Ram usually spent nights in his room at St. John's, but sometimes, after dispensing medicine to patients, on the weekend he would cross the Gomati River and spend the evening in the old colony called Candganj. It would always be late when he returned. That's what happened that night. He arrived late, parked the car and was about to

open the lock on the door of his room when he saw the cement cross smashed on the ground.

He had lived in this neighborhood now for quite some time, and he had earned the trust of those living on the bank of the canal, or at least he thought he had. What was it that, despite everything, had made him totally separate from all of them? He did not understand. He was unable to sleep that night. He thought he might phone one of his friends and tell him what had happened, but he did nothing. He felt himself falling into a deeper and deeper loneliness.

Whether the road was relatively empty or not, Father Martin Ram drove his Volkswagen beetle very slowly. Drivers not from this neighborhood thought he was new to driving and stared at him as they drove by. Knowing what was happening in the temple today caused him to drive that much more slowly. He wondered how the people living next to the canal were. In the temple the drums were being played so loudly that he could hear them where he was. The drummers had to be Prem and Bhullu. They also lived in that colony. They played at both large festivals such as Durga Puja and in individual homes for small domestic rituals. On other days they would wander the lanes and find work replacing the broken heads of women's drums. Always trying to find favor with the women, they sang and played loudly.

Prem and Bhullu lived right next to Nokhe's scrap-paper family, and in the evening sometimes they too would eat some of their lentil-and-biscuit dish or drink some of their liquor from the same plastic bag.

TODAY Nokhe's son was about to be almost burned alive, and dancing and drumming nearby were Prem and Bhullu.

For them playing the drum was mechanical. Often, while playing in a bridegroom's party they would dance around with the drunken, dancing partiers.

Although it was fobidden for anyone to enter the courtyard behind the temple during the trial, many people were nevertheless standing right up near its walls.

The judge Acharya Brihaspati was sitting on a low wooden seat placed quite far away from Nokhe's son. Without looking at anything in particular he said, "Do not let the defendant's garment dry out."

The red cloth wrapped around Nokhe's son's waist had not dried out, but all the same the gardener splashed more water on it again.

Brihaspati began chanting: *om tvaṃ māyābhir apa māyino 'dhamaḥ svadhābhir ye 'dhi śuptāvajuhvata . . .*

Sitting in the back balcony, the interrogators watched silently. After his recitation Acharya Brihaspati commanded Yagnik in Sanskrit, "Focus your attention on the eight gods in the eight directions and request them kindly to take their places. Place the eight vasus south of Indra, the twelve adityas between Indra and Ishan, the eleven rudras east of Agni . . . "

Night was falling, and the electric light in the courtyard was dim. Frightening flames began arising out of the very large brazier. Silence reigned all around.

Nokhe's wife had probably come back to the temple's stairway because her voice could be heard inside again. Outside, someone threatened her, "Aré, you'll either get away from here or I'll beat you away with this stick!"

She didn't stop crying out. Helpless, Father Martin Ram paced up and down in his room a while, then he looked at the image of Jesus attached to the wall and said, "O daughters of Jerusalem, weep for yourselves and for your children because behold, the days are coming when it will be fortunate to be barren, to be a fetus dead before its birth, to have breasts that have never flowed with milk. At that time we will implore the mountains to fall on us and the hills to cover us."

Whether reading from the Bible or reciting a memorized passage, he was overcome with emotion. His throat constricted, and his eyes blinked back the tears.

In that state he arrived at the police station. It wasn't too far away. On the other side of the old bridge that cut through the colony by the canal was a neighborhood of truckers, on the edge of which was a pile of vehicles on each of which was a sign reading FOR THE JUNKYARD, and right there was the police station. Just within the station's compound and to the left was a temple. There a few policemen sat listening to the priest recite from the Ramcaritmanas. Seeing that, he had to admit, increased his despair a bit.

Turning to the right, to the policeman standing on the veranda he said, "Excuse me, sir, is the saheb in?"

He also immediately identified himself. The policeman said he was. Inside, sitting at his desk, the officer was explaining something in a peevish voice to a minor deputy standing nearby. He saw Father Martin Ram but took no notice of him. After a little wait Martin Ram identified himself.

"Oh! So you're Martin Ram! Please do sit down."

Father Martin Ram sat down. Then the deputy made a phone call. Martin Ram became even more unsettled. But there was nothing he could do. After a while the officer said again, “Ji, so you are Martin Ram! You have a church, don’t you?”

Martin Ram said, “Sir, a boy’s life is in danger, and you are the only one who can save him.”

Then, as quickly and clearly as possible, Martin Ram told the officer the entire story. The officer became serious. Leaning back against his chair he said, “You realize how sensitive this matter is. In the end it’s a matter of dharm. Why do you want to interfere with the ways of another religion?”

Though wounded by that comment, Father Martin Ram tried to justify his position logically. “It’s not a matter of religion; it concerns a human life.”

The deputy leaned on the desk, stared him straight in the eyes and said, “Look, sir, I didn’t want to but now I’ll tell you. A number of people have come here and reported to us that you are forcibly converting to Christianity the poor people in the area. You even give them things in order to tempt them to become Christian.”

“I forcibly convert people!?” replied Martin Ram. “If there is even one person in this area . . . ”

The officer interrupted him. “Listen to what we have to say first. It has also been reported that your church is a headquarters for treasonous activities against the state.”

“But these reports . . . !”

"Reports such as this keep coming in, but I have taken no action at all on them. And I have never interrogated you. You can forget all that now. Let me see what I can do concerning that boy you say is in danger."

Hearing about these reports from the police left Father Martin Ram at a great loss. All this had been going on against him for such a long time! He got in his car and headed back. He also realized the police were not going to do anything about what was happening in the temple to that boy. He decided not to return to the church. Maybe he was avoiding the trial in the temple. He went to see his friend P.K. Das in Candganj. He stayed there a long time. Das's wife had prepared some excellent steaks. To a large degree Father Martin Ram forgot his troubles.

When he returned, the temple was absolutely still. It seemed everyone had left. He felt it was probably for the best that he had not been a witness to what had taken place. The filthy colony on the bank of the canal was also very still. He caught a glimpse of a few men standing together, but for now he had no desire at all to make contact.

As soon as he stopped his car opposite the church, he knew what had happened.

Just as Nokhe's son was being forced to sit in his wet clothes on a red-hot flatiron, two policemen came into the temple compound. One of the young men standing outside the temple asked them, "What's the problem?"

A policeman asked, "What's going on here?"

"What do you mean 'what's going on here?'?"

"A report was filed at the station that a boy's life was in danger here. What's going on?"

Startled the young man said, "Who filed such a report?"

The policeman told him the Father Saheb had done so. He had come in his car.

"We had to investigate," said the other policeman.

"It's too much! We're conducting a religious ceremony in this temple. Now the state of the Hindu has become such that he can't even perform a religious ceremony in his own temple! And you people come here and do an investigation?"

From the beginning the policemen were ready to turn on their heels silently and go back to the station. They headed out of the compound.

The young man said, "Come back in a little while and take some prasad with you."

No sooner had the police left than a large group of enraged young men ran headlong toward Father Martin Ram's church.

He saw that an axe had probably been used to break down the door. Everything inside had been ripped up, smashed and demolished. Even the lights in the ceiling and the fans had been destroyed. Just then he heard a frenzied noise. He thought he should go out, but he realized his beetle was being smashed to pieces. Through the broken church windows he saw people dancing around with lit torches.