

Zaan Ded

M.K.Raina



(Original in Kashmiri. Transliteration : J.L.Manwati)

[This story reflects our forced exodus in 1990 and also our fast vanishing cultural heritage. Zaan Ded, the central character of the story is an imaginary grand-old lady, who holds 'Treasure Trove' of the cultural heritage of Kashmir. She tries to preserve it under even the inhospitable environs and wishes its legacy to percolate to younger generations. Have we done enough to come up to her expectations and to preserve our heritage?]

Every nook and corner looked deserted. Buildings lay devastated and the trees uprooted. There seemed no trace of humans. Some had perhaps been swept away by the floods and some had fled away to save their lives. Though the rain had stopped now but black clouds were hovering. At some places, one could spot dogs and birds, who, God alone knows, had come wherefrom, trying to act as scavengers.

Zaan Ded palmed her eyes. She could spot only two remnant standing buildings in the entire 'Vethabal' township. One was an ancient temple of Lord Shankara which stood on the far away river bank and was still half submerged in the flood waters. The other structure was Zaan Ded's cottage. Though its roof was in shambles yet it stood erect. Being on a plateau, the floodwaters had not made a dent on it. Rest everything was in a state of devastation.

Zaan Ded was watching the aftermath scenario from her balcony. Incessant rain for months together had nearly shaken her cottage. Roof lay dangling. The dry-grass curtains, which covered the doors and windows of the cottage, were flown away by wind and rain. But her literary Treasure Trove, which she called 'vasmath' was intact along with its huge latch. At places, the wooden flooring of the balcony had given way and at other places it has loosened. But the walnut wood cot, recently crafted by Gula at the request of Kashi Nath in the corner of the balcony had stood the test of the weather. Sitting on this very cot, Zaan Ded was looking at far away temple and observing that part of Shivalinga, which was above the water and over which the brass pot was dangling.

Zaan Ded looked at her 'vasmath'. This 'vasmath' she had preserved from her childhood. Time had witnessed lots of ups and downs but this 'vasmath' had braved all those calamities. What lay inside the 'vasmath', that nobody other than Zaan Ded was aware of. But one thing was lucidly clear that whenever anyone, in order to have a peep into the

ancient times, asked any question to Zaan Ded, she would put her hand into the 'vasmath' and lo and behold, the answer would manifest itself. It was believed that inside the 'vasmath', there was an answer for every query. 'How did Habba Khatoon came to marry Yusuf Shah Chak', 'how did king Awantivarman save Kashmir from the floods', 'how did Kashmiri language come into being', 'when did Pandit Somadeva write Katha Sarit Sagar', 'what was the mystique of Lalla Ded's Vaakhs or Sheikh Nur -ud-Din's Shrukhs', 'where did the great books Rajavali and Nripavali authored by Kshemendra disappear', 'why did both Hindus and Muslims equally venerated Baba Rishi or Dastgeer Sahib' – all these perplex questions had an answer in Zaan Ded's 'vasmath'. It may have been three-year-old query or three thousand years old mystery, the 'vasmath' would come up with an answer at the behest of Zaan Ded. It was because of this delving capacity in the past and being repository of ancient times that Zaan Ded loved her 'vasmath' and never parted away from it.

The age of Zaan Ded was a mystery, which puzzled everyone. Some would guess it to be a hundred summers and yet some would stretch it to thousand years. Rahim joo, the oldest man in Vethabal would vouch that he had seen Zaan Ded in the same frame ever since his childhood. Hee Ded, who herself was over hundred years old, endorsed Rahim Joo's statement.

Zaan Ded, it was believed, had been booned a long life. Legend had it, that Zaan Ded had performed in the past, austere worship of Sharada Mata. Pleased, Sharada Mata had appeared before her in the form of eight-armed Durga and asked her to state her wish for a boon. Zaan Ded asked for the boon of immortality, because she was quite aware that people would always need her around. Goddess Durga said that She couldn't grant her this wish because 'one who takes birth had to die'. So she had to set a date of her death. Zaan Ded pondered and then pleaded that let her end come at a time when she would have firm belief that people would no longer need her. Durga Mata said, 'Let it be so'.

Children loved Zaan Ded because she was narrating to them tales and stories of kings and princes, which were all stored in her 'vasmath'.

Zaan Ded was not alone. She believed that all the denizens of Vethabal were her progeny. This contention seemed in a way right, because she treated them as such and at times reprimanded them like one would treat her children. People were also taking due care of Zaan Ded and run her errands. She was quite happy with this caressing behaviour of the people. But suddenly things went topsy-turvy. Never had such a devastating flood been witnessed in the town. In the twinkle of an eye, torrential rain engulfed the whole Vethabal. Those who had stamina, braved the nature's calamity and fled saving their lives. The less privileged families were routed and finished. Houses collapsed and many persons lost their lives under the debris. Zaan Ded was stunned. It was raining hell from skies and rain and lightening enveloped the whole area. No one was in a state either to rescue or to extend a helping hand. Everyone ran for his own life. How many were consumed by nature's calamity, one couldn't account for. Zaan Ded wailed and cried. But in this fury nothing was audible. The water level was rising fast and

it could wash away Zaan Ded's cottage anytime now, and with that her 'vasmath' would also sink. Those who were lucky to escape the fury of the nature ran away for their lives. Gradually the whole town was soulless and Zaan Ded was left behind.

After some days, the rain stopped and the skies opened up. The Sun god smiled but Vethabal lay devastated. There was not a soul around. Water started receding and the temple seemed to protrude out but there was none to pray. Zaan Ded felt as if the Shivlinga was also morose. Though the temple was far away, but Zaan Ded had her eyesight in place. She could see things properly.

Almost a month went by but none of the Vethabal residents came to see Zaan Ded. She became restless. Time and again she would think about the people of the area and would remember them. She believed that there was quite a gulf between ancient and modern ways of living. In those olden days, people were full of warmth. People cared for one another. That bond was missing now. Modern man was selfish and careless. Zaan Ded had vivid idea of olden times as well as modern times, as if it was just a matter of yester years.

Kisha Kak lived on the other side of the river. It was his routine to get up before the dawn and come to the river for morning ablutions. After the morning rituals, he would cross the river bare footed to propitiate Lord Shankara with water. Be it rain or snow blizzard, Kisha Kak would never skip temple attendance. His regimen at the temple was to wash the stone steps leading to the temple, then he would bathe the Linga with water, and filling the pot above Linga with water would be his last duty. This routine was quite time consuming. The Sun would be almost midway up by the time his ritual would conclude.

Kadir Kak was younger to Kisha Kak in age. He lived on this side of the river. After offering his Namaz on the slab stoned bank of the river, he would look always to meet Zaan Ded and offer her the fruits which he would get religiously from his home everyday. It is said Kadir Kak could skip his meal, but Zaan Ded's fruits would not be missed.

Kashi Nath was of ripe age and he was terribly attached to Zaan Ded. He believed that Zaan Ded was symbol of the people around. The day people would stop associating themselves with Zaan Ded, their very existence would be in jeopardy. All the elders would endorse this view, some explicitly and some implicitly.

Ama Sahib's son Ali Mohammed had his job in the city. After an interval of one or two months, when he would come to town, he would normally get a bagful of gift articles for his relatives and neighbours. For Zaan Ded, he would never fail to get special band for her headgear, her tooth cleaner, mustard jagged sweets and her ladies' comb. In Vethabal town, when someone died, people would observe fast for the day in memory of the deceased. All of them would also take part in the last rites. For ten days, no food was to be cooked at the household of the deceased and neighbours would look after the arrangements.

Everyone was worried about the welfare of Zaan Ded. They used to make anxious enquiries about her. In return, they would be blessed by her blessings. But this was old time scenario. Times had changed now. Modern man was so engrossed that he didn't have time to enquire about the welfare of others. That was not all. Affluency of the time brought in an element of deceit. Envy and intolerance became order of the day. Caring and caressing became major victims, and it gave birth to enmity and ill will. But even in the changed scenario, their relationship with Zaan Ded didn't receive any dent.

Pondering upon this new trend, Zaan Ded fell asleep. Even in her state of slumber, she put her hand on the latch of her 'Vasmath'. In the process, she started daydreaming. She dreamt as if Ayodhya was sparkling with lights. The Palace of Raja Dashrath was well illuminated. Adorning new and colourful clothes, people were hailing King Dashrath and Prince Ramachandra. The occasion was coronation of Prince Rama. The inhabitants of Ayodhya were extremely pleased. A sea of people had assembled in front of the Palace and were anxiously looking forward to the coronation ceremony. Zaan Ded felt herself transformed into a young damsel whose name was Bela.

Bela had travelled a long distance to witness the ceremony. She was keenly waiting for the auspicious moments, but God had willed otherwise. Bela's wish remained unfulfilled. In the corridors of the Palace, something tragic took place.

Queen Kaikayee picked up a row and demanded that King Dashratha fulfill the two boons granted to her. One boon, she demanded should make her son Bharat the king of Ayodhya instead of Rama, and by the second, she would like to banish Rama for fourteen years to forests.

When the news leaked from the portals of the Palace, a shadow of gloom descended upon Ayodhya. People were dumbfounded. King Dashratha had swooned. Ramji, Sitaji and Lakshmanji donned the mendicant's apparel and left for the forests. Bewildered people followed them. They were not ready to live in Ayodhya without Rama.

On reaching Tamsa river, Ramji camped there for the night. People were not ready to return. They wanted to toe themselves with Ramji during his banishment. Ramji did not want his people to be put to any inconvenience. When people fell asleep during the night, Ramji along with Sitaji and Lakshmanji left quietly on the chariot with Sumantra. In the morning when people woke up, they found Ramji had already left. Not knowing where to find Ramji, they returned to Ayodhya with heavy hearts. But Bela didn't. She went ahead in search of Ramji.

After a long journey, she reached the banks of the Ganga. There, she learnt that Ramji, Lakshmanji and Sitaji had crossed the river in the Raja Nishad's boat. She could not see any oarsman who could help her to cross the river, because all of them had followed Ramji. Bela was dejected. Disillusioned, she sat under a tree by the side of the river bank.

Bela decided that she would not return to Ayodhya until Ramji would return. Sitting under the tree, she started meditating upon Ramji. Hardly had she been in the meditative posture, when her concentration was broken by the trumpeting of the drums. She found the boatmen had assembled on the bank. They were gleefully beating the drums and hailing Ramji. Bela could not make out whether they were happy for Ramji's banishment to forests, or were they disheartened? They were singing Ramji's praise and beating the drums simultaneously. Whatever Bela could elicit from them, that appeared unbelievable for her. She learnt that after fourteen years of banishment to forests, Ramji, Lakshmanji and Sitaji had returned to Ayodhya in the Pushpak Vimana. Bela was dazed. She thought why should oarsmen lie, but how did fourteen years pass by? It was a puzzle for her. She felt as if it was an illusion. When she was just pondering upon it, she felt as if Ramji stood before her and held her hand. The moment she sensed the touch of Ramji, she felt as if a thousand Suns had blazed near her.

The glare of the Sun woke up Zaan Ded. She opened her eyes, and to her astonishment, neither Bela was there, nor the Ganga and nor was there the presence of Ramji. She rubbed her eyes properly and looked out. A strange scene appeared before her. The temple was no longer visible. New houses had come up in its front side. Nay they were not just houses but mansions and villas. The mighty river had shrunk into a small rivulet. The willow tree tract, which used to be in the rare site of the temple, was nowhere to be seen. It had turned into a huge ground, bereft of trees, where some people were taking lesson in the art of gunfire. People were seen huddled up all over. There were no familiar faces among them. Some had guns hanging on their shoulders. There were some horses and hounds tied to an old chinar tree.

Zaan Ded realised for certain she was in deep slumber for fourteen years in her guise as Bela. Ramji came back to Ayodhya after fourteen years banishment to the woods. But her Rams, Lakshmans and Sitas did not return to their Ayodhya. "Where were they", she mused. Suddenly there was noise around and the small groups got panicky. In the meantime, three persons emerged from a big house and headed towards the big ground. There they stood on a high pedestal-like pavement of stones, which perhaps was made from the stones of the river bank. All the three men had leather jackets on. One of them had a turban with a flowing tail donned on his head, and he had two gunmen in his retinue. He seemed to be the leader. All the people sat down on the ground in front of the stone pavement. Some youngsters stood on either side of the pavement.

The leader appeared to be saying something and the crowd seemed to endorse it. Zaan Ded closely watched the scene. She discovered there were some in the crowd who did not approve what the leader was saying. Zaan Ded keenly wanted to hear what the leader spoke, but she failed to make anything out of it. Suddenly one elderly person from the crowd got up and said something to the leader. The people sitting near him persuaded him and made him to sit down. The leader also appeared to have replied to the elderly person, casually though, and proceeded with his speech. When the leader finished his speech, people cheered him.

The elderly person stood up again and addressed something to the leader. Looking at the facial expression of the leader, it appeared he had not liked the old man's point of view. He nodded towards one of his gunman. The gunman held the elderly man by his arm and took him away to the nearby tree. Two persons from the crowd got up and tied the elderly person to the tree. Then the gunman looked at the leader. The elderly person was gesticulating with his hands and crying out something. The leader gave some instructions to the gunman and the gunman pulled the trigger of his gun. The old man's head drooped.

People were dumbstruck. Zaan Ded could not make out whether the people approved or disapproved the action. A youngster stood up from the crowd, headed towards the tree and lifted the dead body on his shoulders after untying his knot. The gunman was prohibiting the youngster to carry the dead body, but the young man was not ready to listen. The gunman pushed the youngster away and he fell down like a log. Seeing this, all the people became restive. A friend of the young boy came forward and helped his friend to get up. The leader saw it all. He felt that there were some more people who could come to the rescue of these two youngsters. He ordered the gunman to shoot down both these young friends. With downing of these two youngsters, there lay three dead bodies on the ground.

People were watching it all. Nobody dared to say a word. The leader said something aloud this time and left the scene. His concomitants and his gunmen followed him. Thereafter people quietly got up and left the place one by one. The dead bodies remained unattended. Blood had spluttered around the place. Behind the ground, the jackals were strutting around, perhaps waiting to pounce on the dead bodies.

Zaan Ded kept her eyes wide open. After a while, eight youngsters came out from different houses and reached near the chinar tree. They started to saddle their horses. Near the horses, there were guns in the gunny bags. They lifted the bags and galloped away.

Zaan Ded looked searchingly at her cottage. It looked the same as she had seen it before her slumber. Down the plateau, some people were working in the fields, but there was no familiar face. Zaan Ded kept pondering, "When shall I find my own kith and kin again"?

Zaan Ded peeped through the gap between two houses and found that the pinnacle of the temple was discernable. The tall grass, which had come up on the front of the temple, had obstructed the view of the temple. She saw through the grass and found the Shivalinga had fallen down and the brass pot was nowhere to be seen. In the evening, the youngsters, who had trotted away, came back. Zaan Ded counted them. Out of eight, only five had returned. The horses carried lot of costly goods, which perhaps they had looted. When these youngsters neared their homes, Zaan Ded observed that their clothes were stained with blood. Zaan Ded was more than sure that this was only human blood.

Lasa Kak looked through the Almanac. He realised that fourteen years had passed since he had come here from Vethabal. In a flashback, he remembered the time when the denizens of Vethabal had left the town for the fear of their lives. While fleeing, what hardships they had to undergo and for how many days they had to remain empty stomach, no one had the count of. In this arduous journey, many got separated from their herds. Many a young and elderly ones passed away.

Lasa Kak's wife Kamlavati pined for last drop of water. When her daughter brought water from far away place for her to drink, Kamlavati had left her mortal frame. The ten-year old Janki Nath's son Moti Lal developed high fever and convulsions. Hakeem Sahib was not there. He had long before, while he was collecting his medicinal herbs, been washed away by the floods. Moti Lal could hardly fight his malady for two hours. His mother turned hysteric. Janki Nath had to ignore the dead body of his son and attend to his hysteric wife.

Though Fatû Ded was helped to walk by her son, yet she slipped down while descending. Trudging along became so difficult that many people left their valuables enroute which they had carried while fleeing.

The new place of rehabilitation was Bharatpur. It presented new challenges but people gathered courage. Gradually people found means for their sustenance. After passage of some time, people learnt that Vethabal had been invaded by some villainous people and settled there. In spite of people's caution, Kailas Nath and Badri Nath took courage and decided to visit their native land. After fifteen days, Badri Nath could return safely after escaping unhurt. But Kailas Nath had been murdered at the very time when he had just reached his place. Nobody dared later to visit their place after this gruesome episode. They felt, unless they had government protection, it was useless to make such a naive attempt.

Bharatpur was a large town. People of various castes and creeds lived there. All of them sympathised with the denizens of Vethabal. New settlers were wise as well as thinking people. Therefore they did not have much difficulty in mixing with the people of Bharatpur.

Times changed fast. Old guards nearly vanished. New generation emerged. The wise old men started popping off one by one. This situation presented some intriguing questions which the people found it hard to reply.

Every home presented new queries. For example, 'why was the following day of Herath called Salaam'; or 'why was birch bark lit on 'Sunder' ritual; or, 'how could Hakeem Sahib while looking at the 'Tika' of Vasa Kak say that he was about to die?' There were many a such questions which were posed almost by everyone. Some queries could be answered and some would remain answerless. Though by such queries it couldn't be implied that such intriguing questions were not being raised while living in Vethabal. Even there, every new generation sought answers to such questions but finding answers

there was not difficult, because there was all-knowing Zaan Ded available. But people there had committed a blunder. They were not percolating the replies tendered by Zaan Ded to the new generation.

The new generation had not seen Vethabal, so they were not too much enamoured by the idea of returning to their native land. But it is human curiosity which take on you to know about a place or thing which may be far away from you. This curiosity in the youngsters had egged them upon to know more about the place which their parents had left behind after much pain and agony.

When Zaan Ded was talked about amidst the young generation, they yearned to meet her. When Brij Nath enquired of his father, as to where did Zaan Ded go, or didn't she leave with them, he had no answer. Youngsters riled the thought that the people, while fleeing, had not thought about the fate of Zaan Ded. These youngsters were equally curious and keen to know how did 'Vasmath' look and how did Zaan Ded fathom into it to find answers to all the questions.

Sama Kak had turned insomniac. He didn't have any children, but he used to treat children of his community as his own siblings. Every evening, they would throng around him to listen to old tales. When they posed questions to him about Zaan Ded, he would turn speechless. His own conscience would curse him. Sarvanand's plight was almost similar. Both of them decided that they would once, even at the risk of their lives, go to Vethabal and enquire about Zaan Ded.

Sama Kak was quite older than Sarvanand in age. Even then he volunteered. After perilous journey, they arrived at the outskirts of Vethabal. The whole place had undergone a total change. They were scared as well. "Would someone here know about Zaan Ded", they pondered. "Or", they thought, "even if they would know about her, will they speak the truth"? "Who knows", they thought, "they might even kill us". Sama Kak looked up. He noticed that Zaan Ded's hut was intact on the plateau. In order to find if Zaan Ded's 'Vasmath' was there, both of them climbed the plateau from the back side. To their surprise, they found Zaan Ded sitting, as she always would, on the balcony, with her head drooping and eyes closed. Even today, her hand was stuck on the latch of 'Vasmath'. Sama Kak could not make anything out of it. For a moment he thought, Zaan Ded may have passed away. Slowly he put his hand on her hand. Suddenly Zaan Ded came alive. She held the latch tenaciously and raised her head. Both Sama Kak and Sarvanand shrieked and prostrated before her. Zaan Ded recognised both of them. She hugged them tightly and said, "I have been waiting for long. And did you remember your Zaan (heritage) today."

Zaan Ded was not ready to leave alone. She declared, if at all she would leave, she would carry her 'Vasmath' along. The matter was grave. To carry 'Vasmath' along was quite a difficult task, but Zaan Ded did not budge and they couldn't just ignore her. Sama Kak tried to hold her hand but she shook it away. She was ready to go on her own. Sarvanand tied a rope to 'Vasmath'. Two of them held it on either side and started pulling it slowly. Pulling it with equal force from both sides, it didn't look heavy. After

trudging along for days, they covered almost half the distance. On reaching the fringe of 'Balû Marg', they rested. From here, they had to negotiate a deep descent and it was precarious one. Sama Kak had by now lost all the stamina. He wanted to take a night's halt and resume the journey next morning. So they camped at the 'Kashyap Naag' for the night. This spring was bigger than other springs around the place and its water was sweet.

From the table land of Kashyap Naag, one could see huge tract of open land just below and the deep descent. Across this open land was a running torrent 'Grazû Aarû' which had to be crossed to reach Bharatpur. Just as they stretched themselves, Sama Kak was overcome by sleep. Sarvanand followed but Zaan Ded remained awake. When Sarvanand got up in the morning, Sama Kak, he noticed, had passed away during the night. But this time, along with Zaan Ded, he had also held the latch of 'Vasmath' very tightly with his hands. Sarvanand got worried. "What could he do all by himself", he pondered. Having a companion makes the burden light and the company is always a source of encouragement. Zaan Ded told him not to worry, and suggested that they had time. If someone would be ready to come from Bharatpur, the problem would be solved. Sarvanand felt that this was a good idea. He knew Zaan Ded was capable of guarding the 'Vasmath' all by herself. So he took leave of Zaan Ded with the promise to get some help from the town.

On reaching Bharatpur, Sarvanand first narrated the story of finding Zaan Ded and then about the demise of Sama Kak. People were excited about Zaan Ded, but Sarvanand's death made them glum. Nothing more was discussed on that day. Next day, Sarvanand called a meeting of elders and appealed them to come forward for help. Some youngsters had sheerly out of curiosity come to attend the meeting. 'Who could go along with Sarvanand' was the agenda discussed. Two youngsters were ready to join the elders on the mission, but their parents were reluctant and they made them to keep quiet on the issue. Although there was none other than Kashi Nath who was willingly ready to go, even then others unwittingly nodded in affirmation. Kashi Nath had the zest, but considering his age, people didn't consider his offer. In order to find the solution, lots were drawn and thus four persons were listed after the draw.

The first name in the list was that of Aka Lal. He was a small shopkeeper and aged fifty two. His family consisted of his wife, two sons and daughters-in-law. Both his sons were in service. They were well to do. Aka Lal was not running the shop for any monetary considerations, but his contention was that sitting at home makes one peevish. Therefore, keeping oneself busy is better option. This way, one remained healthy and the atmosphere at home also remained peaceful. The shop was not even well stocked.

The second name in the list was that of Mohan Lal. He was forty five years old but unmarried. He lived with his old parents. He had good landed property. He wasn't quite educated though, yet over and above he was ill-mannered and a little arrogant. It was said that at Vethabal, his marriage was more or less fixed but when the girls side came to know about his traits, they had withdrawn their proposals. That time, Mohan Lal was

around twentyeight years old. After that none came forward with any marriage proposal and Mohan Lal also gave up the idea.

Jamal Sahib was the third in the list. Age-wise he was younger than Aka Lal and elder to Mohan Lal. He was working as Accountant with some businessman in some other town. The businessman had all respect for him. Jamal Sahib also liked this occupation. There was no restriction of time, he could come and go at his sweet will. Jamal Sahib, besides his wife Rafiqqa, had a daughter Yasmeen who was married.

The fourth name on the list was that of Gopi Nath, about thirtyfour or thirtyfive years of age. He was a businessman. He was not living with his parents because his wife was hot tempered. He didn't have any child. He was not on talking terms with his parents. He never wanted to remain under the command of his parents. All the elders had failed in talking to Gopi Nath or give him their advice on the issue. He was stubborn. He wasn't ready to listen to any one.

Though Sarvanand was quite tired, yet he wanted to return immediately. He consulted the four chosen ones. But they wanted to finish some important jobs on hand before starting on the journey. So, it was decided that all of them would assemble at Sarvanand's place on the tenth day of moonlit fortnight early in the morning and would leave together for the mission. The appointed day was five days away. For Sarvanand, each day passed in agony. But there was no choice and he had perforce to stay on. At last the appointed day arrived. Sarvanand was ready even before the dawn. He was keen to leave as early as possible because he was worried about Zaan Ded, whom he had found after great hardship.

The Sun appeared and it was day light, but nobody turned up. He waited for them anxiously. When no one came, even when the Sun was quite on ascent, he became anxious. "Are they well", he thought to himself and decided to go to everyone's home and enquire about their welfare.

Sarvanand first went to Aka Lal's house. Aka Lal was getting ready to leave for his shop. He was pretty embarrassed on seeing Sarvanand but he put up a brave face. He said, "O' Sarvanand, I did realise that you would be waiting for me and I was just thinking of coming your way. Day-after is the betrothal ceremony of Saligram's son, and you know, they depend on me for their merchandise. Yesterday morning, he came himself and handed over to me a long list of articles needed for the occasion. Since last night, I am trying to collect his merchandise. I think it will take me another two days for the job. If you listen to me, you please go ahead. After I finish the job here, I shall be with you." Before Sarvanand could react, Aka Lal started counting on fingers and said, "I will be with you on the morning of Poornima. If for some reason I can not make it, then I will send some one else in my place. This is my promise". Sarvanand enquired, "Who is Saligram". "He is the co-brother-in-law of Makhhan Lal. To be precise, he is his cousin cobrother-in-law, but they take their relations seriously." Makhhan Lal was the brother-in-law of his elder son. Sarvanand took leave of Aka Lal. Disillusioned, he left for the home of Mohan Lal.

On reaching Mohan Lal's house, Sarvanand called him out. From the attic window, Mohan Lal looked down. Having seen Sarvanand, he withdrew. There was some cacophony inside. After some time, his elderly father came down. He wished Namaskar to Sarvanand and said, "You have taken trouble for nothing. I had asked Mohanji last night only to tell you the whole truth". Sarvanand could not understand a thing. Mohan Lal continued, "Look, you congratulate us first. There is something coming up for Mohan Lal's matrimony. Some people from girl's side are coming this evening. With Goddess Ragyna's blessings, next Sunday there will be engagement ceremony. All of us are busy with its finalisation. At this juncture, how could we allow Mohan Lal to be away?" Sarvanand left crest-fallen. Empty stomach, Sarvanand reached Jamal Sahib's house. He wasn't there. The house was locked. Surveying here and there, Sarvanand spotted the servant of Jamal Sahib. He was watering the plants. Sarvanand enquired, "Where is Jamal Sahib?" "He didn't return from the job last night", the servant replied, "His employer has cancelled all his off-days." "And where is Rafiq?" asked Sarvanand. "She has gone to see her daughter". Sarvanand retracted but he had a hunch that both Jamal Sahib and Rafiq were inside the house and they had instructed the servant to keep the house locked from outside.

By the time Sarvanand reached Gopi Nath's house, the Sun had started its journey on the west side. The moment Gopi Nath saw Sarvanand, his face flushed as if he was just waiting for him. Somebody had foretold him about the likely visit of Sarvanand. "I was about to come to you. I came to know that you had not started today. Therefore I thought to share the good news with you". Sarvanand was astonished, "What good news?" I have been friends again with Tathya. Yesterday my elder maternal uncle had come and on his intervention, we have buried our past. So today, we are going to his place and make 'Roth' (an offering to God). I had a great desire to accompany you. So please excuse me. I wish you to come back safely and happily, and on your return I would bring the 'Roth' Naveed for you."

Sarvanand left all by himself. When he reached Zaan Ded, she was anxiously waiting for him. He almost fell down in disgust. Zaan Ded looked around. She couldn't locate anyone other than Sarvanand. Sarvanand revealed the whole affair.

Poornima came and the night went by also, but Aka Lal did not come. Sarvanand's legs gave way. He thought, had Aka Lal too ditched him? But Zaan Ded was magnanimous. She gave him moral support. She said, "Aka Lal is not the man who would let you down. If he has promised, he would definitely arrive. If he hasn't come on this Poornima, he would definitely come on the next Poornima". Sarvanand felt encouraged and his spirits soared. He cursed his thought process. He thought to himself, "May be, the poor man is still busy collecting the merchandise of Saligram."

Another Poornima came but Aka Lal did not turn up. Sarvanand too did not have strength enough left in him to go back to the town and assess the situation. The winter had set in and it snowed heavily. It became terribly cold but neither did Aka Lal come, nor did he depute anybody else. The winter passed and the spring dawned. Sarvanand thought, may be because of severe winter conditions, Aka Lal could not make it earlier.

When the first Poornima of the spring came, Sarvanand kept looking at the far away 'Grazû Aarû' for Aka Lal. When Sarvanand did not even turn his head backward till evening, Zaan Ded grew anxious. She nudged him. Sarvanand's eyes had deflated and his body had turned cold.

The wheel of time went on. Many were born and many departed, but Zaan Ded didn't lose heart. She was still hopeful. Because as per the boon, she would leave her mortal frame only when she would be sure that people no longer needed her. And Zaan Ded did not want that day to come yet.

Legend has it that Zaan Ded is still waiting at Kashyap Naag, hoping that on some appointed Poornima, Aka Lal or his some deputy would arrive and help her to cross the river of life.



[Contact M.K.Raina at rainamk1@yahoo.co.in

Archives: www.mkraina.com