

Santhara by Chandrashekhar Sastry

Santhara – a story

Aloke Sengupta received the National Award for meritorious teachers in Indian schools a year after he retired as Headmaster of the Government School in Sathyopara. With this, he reached the pinnacle of achievement in the teaching profession. On the 5th of September, he was given the prestigious award by the President of India. The day is celebrated every year as Teachers' Day. A colourful ceremony was held at the Vigyan Bhawan and he was immensely gratified that his ailing wife could witness the presentation of the award by the President. Each teacher along with one family member was treated as a State Guest and their expenses were borne by the Government. The award comprised a handsome purse and an impressive citation. The next day they were on the train when his neighbour Dr Soumitro called him on the mobile phone.

"Bonya died last night," he said in a taut voice.

"We took the body to be cremated this morning by the riverside with all the appropriate rituals."

The strained voice and the tragic news disturbed Aloke. He related the conversation to his wife and they sat silent for a long while; such things could not have awaited their return. The train chugged along on its way to Kolkata at its steady clattering pace letting out a long and loud whistle as it approached the next station where it was not scheduled to stop.

Bonya was the only daughter of Aloke's cousin sister. They lived in the Headmaster's home after she was widowed. Fiercely independent, Indrani had to be persuaded to come and keep house for her brother and help his weakly wife. Her dark nubile daughter had finished school and was being groomed to be a competent housewife. She helped Indrani the real housekeeper who was looking after all the

family needs, mopping and cleaning, washing and ironing clothes and cooking and serving meals. Alope's wife was too frail after a debilitating illness. She had to leave all the housework to Indrani who along with her young daughter effectively ran the house.

Alope smiled when he saw his neighbour at the Howrah station so early in the morning. Soumitro bundled them into his car parrying their questions and as they moved along the majestic Howrah Bridge enquired,

"How was the award ceremony, Alope-da? Were there many teachers from Bengal?"

Alope was brief in his reply. His natural politeness hid his displeasure and yet he was brooding on the long drive home through the crowded city and then beyond to reach Satyopara. Soumitro had not given an account of what happened while they were away. When asked he said he would explain on reaching Satyopara. Stepping out of the car on arriving he thanked Soumitro for receiving them at the station and went straight into the pooja room. He needed to thank the gods for the safe return home.

"What happened to Bonya?" he asked when Soumitro called on him in the early evening. His cousin sister Indrani had replied to the question with a cryptic 'What can I tell you Dada? Bonya is dead,' breaking into tears. After that she had stubbornly refused to talk on this. He had to learn more of the tragic death from Dr Soumitro and heard the sordid story in silence.

"Indrani knocked on my door late in the night sobbing, 'Daktar-babu my daughter is bleeding.'

"I was ready to go to bed and would have refused any other call but this was from your house. I went at once braving the late monsoon shower and found Bonya twitching her legs in pain. Her lower clothes were wet with blood and she was blanching through her dark skin. Her lips had turned ashen. Asked when this

happened Indrani was evasive - about two hours ago she said. The girl had lost a lot of blood and was very weak. She must have bled incessantly for more than two hours and could barely speak. I thought it unnatural and pleaded with Indrani to relate what had transpired to bring Bonya to such a condition. Faced with a prolonged silence I had to point out some severe consequences if she did not speak the truth."

Dr Soumitro paused and looked at Alope. He could not discern any emotion on his face and continued in the clinical tone that doctors assume when they make a professional pronouncement.

"I gave the girl a sedative and a pain killer to ease the hurting. Indrani watched while I administered the injections. I then turned to her and raised my voice, 'Speak up, how did this come about?'

'Daktar-babu I did not want this to happen. It was the child growing inside her that I had to destroy. She had missed the monthly twice and though I beat her she would not reveal the name of her seducer. Daktar-babu I have not told you this before but your driver Shyamol is an unwanted son I had as an unwed maiden. He knows this not nor does he know why I was extremely happy when you agreed to Dada's request and employed him as your driver. Shyamol and Bonya are both my children and it was a sinful incest; I could not allow a monster to come into this world. I had to make her drop the child in the only way I knew with a sharpened bamboo stick but things went wrong and Bonya bled and bled. When it wouldn't stop I ran up and called you. Daktar-babu, don't let her die,' Indrani sobbed."

Soumitro was sweating and wiped his face with a handkerchief drawn from a kurta pocket.

"Alope-da I could not save her; I have held my tongue and no other person will ever know this," the doctor cut short his story. Shyamol has not turned up for work since, he added.

Aloke was speechless. Raising his tall frame from the deckchair on the verandah he nodded to the doctor and staggered in to lie on his bed. This was all too much and more than he could bear. So many crimes committed under his roof; molestation of a minor, incest, abortion; a doctor's complicity in concealing an unnatural death. It had all happened here in his home within these walls. As head of the family he must bear the guilt and it called for a total purification. The whole family stands tainted. He would not let such a cloud hang over his invalid wife and the children, one in Bangalore and two in Canada.

He reflected on his younger days when, as an ardent admirer of the Mahatma, he spun the charka and read Gandhiji's *My Experiments with Truth*. He had tried to follow the Mahatma's precepts in his own life and was downcast at what had happened in his home. Anger was alien to him and he rarely lost control of his temper flaring up only when he came across a flagrant transgression of what he considered righteous. His own strict personal habits and sage advice to those who sought his guidance in personal affairs made the community regard him with much respect and esteem. He was held up as an exemplar of propriety. Now what a loss of face! He used to expound his views on morality and ethics, and write letters to the Editors of *The Statesman* and *The Telegraph* in Kolkata. They always posited an upholding of noble values and a stern disapproval of the falling standards in public life. But here was this great tragedy in his home. It was only last month that he accepted an invitation to address a gathering in the Town Hall on Independence Day. The talk had been greatly appreciated. He remembered the accolades he received and now wept silently at the irony of crimes having taken place in the abode of a man with lofty ideals.

That night he made up his mind. He had gone to bed without dinner, Soumitro's revelations replaying in his mind endlessly. Santhara, the Jain ritual of renunciation he concluded is the best way to self purification – and by purifying himself rigorously he would purify the whole clan. His children would then live free of the taint of these sins. He would embrace death through resolve and penance. He

considered this to be an act of utmost piety, purification and expiation. He arrived at that decision sitting up calmly in bed after a final unruffled and prolonged introspection in the early hours of the morning. He would cleanse himself of all encumbrances to attain the highest state of transcendental well-being, the ultimate *Moksha*.

He refused the morning cup of tea and discarded all his medicines for diabetes and blood pressure. He recollected a quotation from H G Wells that he often cited in his talks on morality and ethics:

All crime in the end is the crime of the community.

That being so he concluded that guilt and punishment too must finally be visited upon the community. He pored through the books in his library to understand the doctrine of Santhara. 'A person observing the ritual subjugates the passions, which are the root cause of himsā (injury or violence),' he read. It was these weaknesses of the flesh that had caused the various crimes and his severe penance would expiate those sins. As he thought about it deeply he was surprised that he should feel the need to protect his family from scandal. Santhara required him to shed all connections and so it should be a matter of indifference and not a matter of concern. Why was he then so protective about family? He was unable to resolve such a conundrum.

On the second day, Soumitro was called in to see him. On hearing that Alope was refusing food and drink he pleaded,

"Alope-da, I don't know why you are doing it but this is not proper. You should not gamble with your health."

The stethoscope told him that the lungs were clear and the blood pressure normal. The sugar levels too were at the lower limits fasting having brought them down. Alope spent the days in reading and in prayer and his wife, weak and fearful of the

obstinate way he refused food, had given up pleading with him. Over the years, she had learnt to dread his strong will and righteous anger when it came to what he considered an impropriety. She thought it was a Satyagraha and wondered what had triggered it. After a few days, Alope was too weak to move to the pooja room without help. Soumitro attended to him daily and as Alope got weaker he decided on a glucose drip for the dehydration that was setting in. Alope protested but was unable to resist the doctor. For two days, he put up with it, and then refused the intravenous drip.

One morning immediately after the religious songs on the radio they heard the news.

A High Court has ruled that the Jain ritual of Santhara did not constitute an essential religious practice nor was it necessarily required for the pursuit of immortality.

It held Santhara was illegal, since it amounted to suicide. The High Court made the practice punishable under Sections 306 and 309 of the Indian Penal Code. It took some time to sink in when Alope heard it. This verdict made his Santhara a criminal offence and would now add to the list of crimes he was expiating. It was so perplexing. The law-abiding nature ingrained in him as a teacher made him waver. What was the right thing to do? The Jain ritual is performed under the guidance of a Guru but he had none to turn to. It troubled him and he even thought of abandoning the fasting. Ultimately, his overriding will prevailed and he prayed for longer periods lying down on the bed. He was growing weaker and as the doctor had predicted started feeling a dull pain in the limbs. He could no longer go to the pooja room and needed great effort to go to the bathroom.

Looking back on his career he rationalised that death would not matter to him for he had attained an immortality by virtue of the long line of students who would not forget him. He knew the students would look back and remember him as the teacher who shaped their lives. His children had their own lives and paid the annual

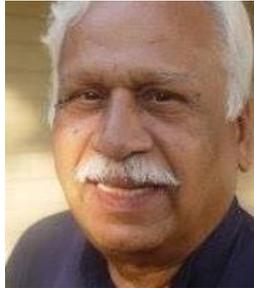
homage of a hurriedly short visit. They had not found it convenient to attend the award ceremony in Delhi. He found it easier to detach from them. He had to abandon all desires and dislikes and concentrate exclusively on the spiritual. He would disregard this perverse judgment of the High Court and would not reverse his decision.

Dr Soumitro felt totally helpless. He wanted to alleviate the pain that starvation would have brought about but that would involve force-feeding and he was loath to take such drastic measures without the cooperation of the patient. Alope's children had answered his requests to come down and the eldest son was the last to arrive from Canada. A family conference was due the next day and Soumitro was wondering what advice he could give them so late after a fortnight without nourishment.

Next afternoon as they assembled to confer with the doctor they heard the news reader announce on the radio:-

Supreme Court stays High Court decision declaring 'Santhara' as illegal.

It was a crisp announcement and a comment followed explaining that the decision of the Supreme Court now absolved the persons from any criminal intent if they observe a Santhara that would result in the cessation of life. It was left to the jetlagged firstborn to break the news to Alope. Lying in a stupor between wakefulness and sleep he heard the son say something, mentioning it as important. He asked him to repeat what he said. Slowly as comprehension dawned on him a wan smile spread across his face. He said faintly "No crime. No crime." He was smiling and kept on smiling till late in the evening with a feeble gasp the life ebbed out of him. His face seemed noble and dignified with that beatific smile lingering on even after death.



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His first book *The Non-Resident Indian* (Panther Publishers, 1991) was a pioneering work with an unorthodox treatment of a contemporary subject. His second book *The Tanjore Painting* (Penguin, 2014) deals with the cultural imports that the diaspora carries to their new found homelands.

He has been contributing to *The Times of India*, *The Deccan Herald*, *The Statesman*, *Muse India*, *The Little Magazine* and *Reading Hour*.

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