

ADMISSION

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When you come in through the main door, you have to bear left, and then you'll see a queue: that's where you have to go. This much he remembered. And sure enough, from the door he saw people standing in line, and more people joining them. He joined the queue: one drop of suffering among so many others.

The drops accumulated: decrepit drops, diminished drops, drops at death's door. Even if a healthy drop joined the queue, it would leave with some disease or other, he thought.

The drops were still accumulating.

It had been a foggy morning. He had kept his hands in his trouser pockets. His stomach was upset, and he had worried from time to time about the number of times he was going to have to run for the lavatory. He'd already been three times by this time yesterday, but he had only realised what the problem was on his third visit. His ailment was really strange: the more he ate, the hungrier he felt, but everything froze like ice in his guts, and so he felt concerned. Now his stomach was swollen and bloated like a damaha drum that would ring out if you struck it; so much so that he thought he might have to run to the lavatory now.....

The drops were still accumulating, but now the situation had changed: they had begun to diminish as well. He began to move forward with the others, like a carriage in a railway train. He did not care whether those in front were pulling, or those behind were pushing. His only concern was to get to that window as quickly as he could. He moved up to the window: it had two holes in it, containing two pairs of eyes. Two eyes were levelled at him as if ready to attack, the other two had their gaze fixed on a register. He stared in through the hole and opened his mouth to say 'some medicine for my stomach.....' but he had not finished his sentence when the first two eyes attacked: 'Tell me your name, your name..... and your age right, give me 50 *paisa*'.

That was that job at the hole finished. Now he returned from the battlefield like a victorious warrior. How nice it would be if cinema-queues were this polite, he thought to himself.

Now he had a slip of paper in his hand: as soon as he took it, he felt he was cured. But his stomach was still swollen up like a kettle-drum. He looked at the slip of paper. 'Bir Hospital, O.P.D. 060246, name.....' it said. Then, on the other side, 'Ticket no. 32949.' Was this the number of his ticket in the lottery of life and death? What if he drew the death-ticket at his tender age? He would have to die before he was even married! But no, he never won in lotteries, he never had.

Drops were still joining and leaving the queue he had left. The same weak, weary, feeble-looking drops. He remembered addition and subtraction: the first arithmetic he had learned at school. A process of addition and subtraction, addition and subtraction, was going on in the queue. He left one settlement of drops and approached another, waving his slip of paper. Now there was no need to queue: it didn't matter where you sat. Those who got seats could sit down on them, the others could sit on the stairs, or stand up if they were able. It was a hospital built in the Ranas' day, its benches were rickety. Some held on to their seats jealously, others stood and leaned on them. But he did not socialise with them, he was as separate from them as oil is from water. Even in the crowd he felt alone. Although the sky is full of stars, the moon is always alone, he thought.

Hasn't the Doctor Saheb come?

Hasn't the Doctor Saheb come?

The Doctor Saheb hasn't come!

The doctor saheb hadn't arrived yet. The discussions went on — not just one but many. The drops coalesce and there is talk. They disperse and there is talk. They stabilise and there is talk.

The doctor saheb hadn't arrived yet. On a blackboard on the wall it was clearly written: patient examination time, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. It was just after a quarter to ten. No hurry, no complaints. The doctor is a giver of life. It would do no-one any good to speak against him. So stay quiet, sir, please do not try to rebel. The loss would be yours, not the doctor's. It is life they are waiting for, not the doctor. People come here to seek life; they queue to preserve their lives by waiting for the doctor. Oh, pardon me, not the doctor, but the Lord, the giver of life.

Now the tickets queue up, one in each hand. They reach the register, they are entered in the register, then they come back, still one in each hand. A line of people holding tickets forms by the door. There are numbers there: ticket numbers, numbers in a lottery of life and death.

Has the Doctor Saheb come?

Has the Doctor Saheb come?

The Doctor Saheb has come!

Now lots of eyes wake up all at once, anxious to pick the doctor out from the crowd. Should the feeling of sickness disappear as soon as you see the doctor? But his stomach was still like a drum, despite the doctor's arrival. If it did any good, he would have punched his stomach himself. But that did not make it better: if a punch had been the only remedy, he would not have had to come here like this. So he remained silent. Would a punch from the doctor cure it, perhaps?

He joined the ticket-holders' queue, and names were called out. Hariparsat, Shyamparsat, Kedarnath....none of them was his. How long would he have to wait before his name came up. How long?

The doctor has gone into his room. Patient number 1 is in there too. Number 2 waits by the door, ready to enter. Number 3 sits on the bench. Number 4 could be anywhere. What number would his turn be? He didn't know. If it was the number on the ticket, he thought, he would have time to get married and name his first child before his turn came around.

The person taking the tickets was shouting, 'Hariparsat! Hariparsat!' Although his name was not Hariparsat, he jumped with fear as if it was. He remembered his friend Hariparsat from his teenage days, and felt tickled. He even laughed to himself. He was alone, he was smiling inside. But no smile came to his lips. You need a companion if you're going to smile. How long would it be before his turn came around? What number patient was he? He wanted to ask, but he couldn't ask the hand that was taking the tickets. It was too busy shouting 'Hariparsat! Hariparsat!'

Why did it only shout Hariparsat's name? Did it think that everyone was called Hariparsat? He didn't ask this either. Indeed, he saw now that the other weak, diminished drops were trying to laugh too. But only inwardly, nothing showed on their lips.

One drop coughs and spits.

Another drop just spits.

Then another drop wipes snot on the wall.

One is wiping pus from a leg-wound.

One young female drop stands wilting like a pretty spring flower.

A couple are talking near to her. 'No, our turn hasn't come yet.'

'It'll come soon though. You should go to the doctor's clinic first and make a payment in advance, then your turn will come around quickly.'

'If that's how it is, I wouldn't want to go to hospital.'

‘There’s no question of *wanting* to go. If you’re sick, you’ve no choice.’

‘These doctors are just money-grabbers now, the sinners!’

He felt that these two drops represented them all: what they said was a bitter truth that everyone wanted to utter, but could not, or lacked the courage to. There were three more drops on the other side, two males and a female. They were talking too. One of the males looked ill.

(a) Are you ill yourself?

(b) No, it’s my son.

(a) What’s wrong with him?

(b) Fever. Look, do you think he would have recovered quickly if he’d been admitted?

They say they don’t make admissions like that.

(a) If it’s only fever, perhaps there’s no need for him to be admitted.

(b) It seems like a fever, but I’m not sure. We’ll find out when he’s been looked at.

(c) Mummy, I want some water!

(b) Wait, son, wait!

She pours some water into a spoon from a bottle, and goes about wetting his throat.

Then another conversation between two drops enters his ears:

- What’s wrong with you?

- Jaundice of course, what else?

- More and more people are getting jaundice these days.

- When that oil got contaminated, the jaundice was bound to spread like this.

- Just the oil, you say? Everything’s polluted! What isn’t polluted? The water, the air, people’s minds too! Everything’s polluted!

- You’re right. Even the people you see walking around looking well — they’re all sick too. It’s just different illnesses. I never see healthy people. The whole city’s polluted, and everyone’s ill.

It seems to him that the man calling out the names is Chitragupta, who never calls you until the appointed time.¹ After a very long time, his name was uttered and he hurried to the door. Chitragupta told him with a gesture — wait just a moment, it will soon be your turn to go in.

The same two women were still talking:

‘I spoke to a nurse I know. She said she’d get us called quickly, but they still haven’t called.’

‘The doctor’s still dealing with his own folk and the clinic people, I expect. Will he still send for us?’

‘We should have sat down and waited inside. My legs are tired from standing here.’

‘There’s no room even to stand in there. Look at that rotten peasant standing there, blocking the door.’

(The gentleman he saw as Chitragupta was a rotten peasant?)

‘We’ve been waiting an hour for the doctor now. I still have to get my teeth checked too.’

‘Yes, I know. But we can’t give up now, I’m sure our turn will come soon. And how long will you have to wait to get your teeth checked?’

The doctor had come at 10.25. So far he had seen off only five or six patients. The two women were still talking. He was waiting to be beckoned in. Then the curtain on the

¹ Chitragupta is the god at the gates of Paradise who assists Yamaraj, lord of the Underworld, by keeping a record of every person’s sins and good deeds.

doctor's door was swept aside, and a young woman in a cotton crown came out. Her voice seemed stereophonic:

'Shanta Thapa, please come now.'

Before she had even finished, the two females got up and shot into the room and vanished. One ticket can win two lotteries, can it? he thought. But nothing was impossible. What had happened in front of him was an example of this. He had no answer for it. How could this happen? But there was no point in asking, he would gain nothing from it. And this was not a place for asking questions. It was only a place for getting answers. Here you only get life or death — nothing else is available.

Those two drops disappeared for ages. As he waited he wondered how long it would be before they emerged and he was sent in. 12.05, 12.15, 12.25.....they still did not come out. As the hands of the clock approached 12.28, they came out and Chitragupta made the long-awaited sign.

'Namaskar!' He saluted the doctor in the traditional manner.

'Uh, sit down,' said the doctor without glancing up. He spoke in a voice as hard as Yamaraja's. The doctor was examining an elderly woman. She looked like a *gyapuni*. He wrote out a prescription and gave it to her.

'Here, I've written down the medicine for you. Buy it from the medical store.'

'But you haven't looked at me with that thing yet,' said the woman, indicating the stethoscope.

'It's not necessary. Take the medicine, and you'll get better.'

'The other day a doctor looked at me with that, and I felt a bit better.' The old woman pressed her case.

'Alright,' the doctor roared, 'Where shall I put it?'

'Here!' She pointed at her back, and the doctor put it where she told him.

'And how much will the medicine cost?' the old woman asked.

'Ask at the medical store where you buy it.' The doctor was irritated.

'Is it tablets, or liquid?'

'Liquid, it's liquid!' He was thoroughly annoyed.

'And how often should I take it?' She still hadn't gone.

The doctor fumed in silence. 'It's written on the ticket,' said the nurse, 'Follow those instructions. Please leave now.'

The old woman probably wanted to ask something else, but the nurse took her by the arm and ushered her out.

'What should I take it with?' she asked from the doorway.

'Take it with whatever you like!' said the doctor, without even looking up. The old woman went out, weighed down by despair.

'Yes, what's happened to you?' The doctor turned and spoke to me in his Yamraja style.

'I eat, but everything seems to congeal in my guts. Nothing comes down. I feel like going to the lavatory, and I go, but nothing comes down. Look!' He showed the doctor his stomach, swollen like a drum.

It was like a pregnant woman's. Perhaps that was why the doctor smiled. But he maintained a serious air.

'Are you a man or a woman?' the doctor chuckled.

He tensed up, but he kept his patience and checked his ticket: there was nothing there under 'sex'. He laughed, and thought of saying, 'What evidence can I give you for you to determine my gender?' But he didn't say that. The doctor's question was insulting, he felt just

as insulted as he would if the doctor made fun of the moustache that had just begun to grow between his nose and his top lip. But he sat there and put up with it in silence.

‘Does it hurt? How does it hurt?’ asked the doctor in his Yamraja tone.

‘It does, and I feel a stabbing pain in my side as well.’

The doctor made him lie down and breathe deeply, then examined his side with a stethoscope. Briskly, he scribbled out a prescription and said,

‘I have prescribed two kinds of medicine. Two spoonfuls of one kind every three hours, the other morning and night only.’

He nodded his head. The doctor nodded too.

[While he had nodded his head to acknowledge what the doctor had told him, the doctor’s nod meant ‘Your life is not over; you still have much to enjoy. You will be able to enjoy life again. Now please go right away, I have to call another patient.’ But he hadn’t understood this, and he remained standing there.

‘So, that will make my stomach better, will it Doctor Saheb?’

‘Yes, yes, all will be well. Take the medicine I’ve prescribed and your stomach will be fine.’

The doctor’s voice was the voice of a god now: he felt relieved as he left.

There were still patients outside: patient number 7, patient number 8, patient number 9, patient number 25, patient number 30.....

Without looking to left or right, he walked out of the hospital compound. It was as if he was entering the province of life, from the boundary between life and death.

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