

My Useless Uncle

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THE word "useless" is applied to many people—for example, our servant Nobokesto. In our childhood we frequently heard our mother say, "Nobo, you are utterly useless." But Nobo was really a good worker, though excessive sloth was indeed among his faults. In the afternoons he would take extended naps and consequently the tea kettle would be put on at four-thirty instead of four o'clock. Mother would then slander him with that word in anger.

I don't know whether the word useless has ever been as appropriate to anyone else as it was to Sejkaka.¹ His given name was Khetramohan Sen, but he was nicknamed Khetu. My father was one of five brothers. He was the eldest; then came *Mejo*, *Sejo*, *Sona*, and *Choto*². With the exception of Sejkaka, all of them succeeded in life. Father was a well-known lawyer. Mejo earned a double M.A. in literature and history and went on to become a respected professor. Sona made enough money in business to buy three houses. Choto received the approbation of the most renowned Muslim maestros and thirty-six gold medals from wealthy people for excelling in Indian classical music.

And what of Sejkaka?

This is his story and it cannot be told in one word.

Was there an earthquake just as he was born? In the opinion

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of many, that was the reason his brain had become a tangled web of confusion. Measles and chicken pox, on the other hand, are part of everyone's childhood, and Sejkaka, was afflicted with both. At one time or the other he also had whooping cough, diphtheria, dengue, eczema, and small pox. As a child he used to cry until he turned blue from hiccups and lost consciousness. When he turned seven, his stuttering became apparent; at nine and a half he fell from a guava tree and his stammer was lost. But this fall also broke an ankle, and as Doctor Biswas was unable to heal the joint properly, Sejkaka thereafter walked with a slight limp. Thus it was no longer possible for him to participate in sports. Moreover, his fingertips lacked the sensitivity required to play carrom, nor was his mind equipped for cards or checkers.

Sejkaka was admitted to school and sat for his F.A. examination three times without success, where upon his father, that is to say my grandfather, put an end to his studies. He said, "Khetu, you're utterly useless. Spending money on your education is like throwing it down the drain. But I can't have you just hanging around my neck like an albatross. From now on, you will accompany Bhombol to the market and learn to pick out spinach and vegetables, meat and fish. Then you will do the family shopping." Bhombol was a distant relative of my father's; yet he studied and grew to manhood in our home.

For a long while Sejkaka accompanied Bhombol to the market. Then one day when guests were due to dine with us, grandfather thrust two ten rupee notes into Sejkaka's pocket and said, "Let's see what you buy. Today the burden of shopping is on your shoulders."

That was the last time that Sejkaka did the family shopping. Before he reached the market the notes fell through the hole in his shirt pocket and melted into the path. Who would trust Sejkaka after this?

In my first memory, Sejkaka is thirty-three and I am three. It is the evening of Kalipuja. When I tell you a little of this event, you will see why it has stuck in my memory. Sejkaka is

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creeping on the floor of the verandah and I am riding on his back. Suddenly, a lit firecracker thrown from a nearby house falls into the verandah and lands on a cot. Sejkaka shouts, "Damnation!" and stands upright, thus throwing me from his back onto the paved floor, cracking my skull, and making me bleed profusely. That day Sejkaka had to listen to awful reproaches from almost everyone in the house. But I felt pity for him: no one respects him, or even considers him human. And that is why as I grew older I felt compassion for my uncle. Of medium height and fair-complexioned, there was always a look of happiness commingled with sorrow on his face. All men may be intelligent, all men may be industrious, what of it? What harm is there if in a big city chock-full of people there is one man like Sejkaka?

Whenever I got the opportunity, I would go to Sejkaka's first-floor room and sit with him telling stories. After a while, I realized that it was pointless to make him stick to a narrative, for he couldn't keep a story in mind through to the end.

"What happened next, Sejkaka?"

"Next. Hmm. Next. Wait, uh . . . afterwards . . . afterwards..."

As he mutters "next, next," his voice loses breath and becomes thin like a harmonium running down. Leaving off the story, he begins to hum out of tune, and at the end of the song, he would be so spent that his head would rock forward drowsily. I then understand that he cannot summon the effort to recall the rest of the story. I tiptoe out of his room. Sejkaka does not call again.

When I was twelve years old I once found him in his room reading a thick tome with great enthusiasm. In answer to my question, he replied, "an ayurvedic book."

"Why are you reading that book?"

Reflecting for a moment, he said gravely, "If this isn't a disease, what is it?"

"What?"

"I can't get anything done, I can't remember anything, noth-

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ing enters my mind—if that isn't a disease, what is it?"

What could I say? "That sort of thing does happen, Sejo-kaka."

"Why shouldn't there be a cure?"

I said, "You mean you're going to cure yourself?"

I knew that no one had ever thought of taking him to a doctor for his feeble-mindedness. To tell the truth, after the rash of childhood illnesses, he had never been especially sick. Generally he was in good health.

Sejokaka was saying, "Along the footpath to Cok Bazaar, I came across this book for ten annas. Perhaps it will be of some use. I'm hoping that there is an ayurvedic cure for even my disease."

Two days later in the afternoon—it was the rainy season then—as I approached the house, I saw that he was preparing to go out: canvas shoes on his feet, his dhoti tucked between his legs, a cotton muffler around his neck and an umbrella in his hand. He said, "I've heard word that there's a special tree in the neighbourhood, behind the broken Shiva Temple. I want its root. If I get it, then my problems will be solved."

Sejokaka left. The sky was darkening: if it rained, his plan would be ruined.

I wandered around downstairs for an hour or so and then went upstairs to my own room. Through the window to the south the road out front could be seen. The rain never came, and as evening fell I saw him returning. I made it downstairs in time to meet him just as he reached the door.

"Did you get the root?"

"No, I forgot something; I should have brought a torch. That place is a jungle and much too dark."

"But what's that?"

While he was talking, my eyes had wandered to a red spot in the middle of his khaddar shirt.

"Oh! I hadn't noticed this at all."

As soon as he opened his shirt, a leech popped out. In the same way that Bhima sucked the blood from Duryodhana's

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chest, this leech was so swollen with Sejkaka's blood that at the flick of his finger, it fell to the earth with a thud. But what could one leech do to Sejkaka? From his shoulder, elbow, waist, knees, heels, ankles—all told fourteen leeches were picked off his body. There is no doubt that he had lost five or six ounces of blood that day. Needless to say, this incident put an end to his study of ayurveda.

I was quite good at my studies. In my day there was F.A.; after the entrance period, one went on to Matric. As I stood third in the university examination and wanted to study science, I came to Calcutta. I lived at the hostel while I read for M. Sc. degree. Obtaining a first in the first class, I went on to America where I became well known as a scientist. Ultimately, I took a post at the University of Chicago to both teach and do research.

As a result of staying abroad, my ties to Sejkaka weakened. Once, when I had just started teaching, I received a piece of strange news in a letter from home. Sejkaka had got a chance to act in a film. Here I'll say that Sejkaka's appearance bore a certain similarity to that of Swami Vivekananda. Not that there was any similarity in build—Sejkaka was only five feet six inches tall—but to all eyes there was an arresting similarity about the face. When he heard that a film was going to be made about Ramakrishna Paramhansa in which the character of Vivekananda would appear, Sejkaka met with the director personally and expressed his desire to play that part. He had no difficulty in getting the part because of the facial similarity.

Within just a week or so, I learned through another letter that Sejkaka had been let go. Because, despite his sequestering himself away and cramming his lines furiously, if Vivekananda were to answer Ramakrishna in the first scene with lines from the third scene, then how could work proceed using Sejkaka? Even as a film actor, Sejkaka had succeeded in establishing that he was completely useless.

When I was forty-eight years old, I read in a letter from my

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younger brother that Sejkaka had become the pupil of a *sadhu* and gone to Coimbatore.

Last year I had to go to Calcutta in the beginning of December for the wedding of Kakali, the daughter of Chotokaka. With me were my wife and my two thoroughly Americanized daughters. During all the time that passed since that letter, I had got no more news of Sejkaka. Thus, when I learned on arriving in Calcutta that he was in that very city and in restored health, I was naturally eager to meet with him. I was then sixty years old. So he was easily ninety. I had taken it for granted that he had died during my years abroad.

I heard that he was staying on Fern Road with his sister's son, Ranesh Gupta, who is a doctor. He had been putting up with him for about three months. Apparently, he could not bear to hear anything about religion. Nor had his ten years in Coimbatore produced any fondness for *idli* and *dosa*. He had lost thirty kilos. When he heard that I had come, he said to his nephew the doctor, "Tell Jhontu that he should come see me at least once."

One Sunday evening, I showed up at Fern Road. Load-shedding was in progress, and in a dim second floor room lit only by a single flickering candle sat Sejkaka reclining on a cot. On a coarse silk shawl rested a green muffler which was wrapped around his neck.

I knew it was Sejkaka instantly, and I have to say that for a man of his age he looked quite fit. His hair had gone completely gray, but even to have hair at his age is something. His mouth opened in a smile when he saw me; perhaps a dozen original teeth were still evident. Though his voice had grown thin there was a noticeable vigour in his speech. I had never seen this vigour in him before. Perhaps because he was now the senior member of the family and no longer had to bow his head to his brothers, his deportment seemed more dignified.

"So Jhontu," said Sejkaka, "Tell me what you are doing in America."

I described my work with as much modesty as possible.

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"Physics? Research?" said Sejojaka, "Do people respect you?"

My seventy year old aunt dismissed my humble mumblings and expounded on my fame in hyperbolic crescendo.

"Oh, really?" said Sejojaka, "Tell me, have you won the Nobel Prize yet?"

I shook my head with a slight laugh.

"Then is there anything else to brag about? Why, you're utterly useless!"

Just as I was beginning to parry these rhetorical blows, I disappeared beneath the surface of Sejojaka's tirade.

"You ran away to live in another country, while I thought I would find some peace in Calcutta. You're going to spend these final few days of my life with me. Tell me what's going on here. Vultures have picked this city to the bone. Ten hours a day there is no electricity. It is impossible to breathe this smoke and dust. Everything is so expensive the stomach can't be satisfied even with poor food. It's very, very...very—useless!"

That day I knew that my affection for Sejojaka had in no way diminished. Listening to him was still a delight. It occurred to me that perhaps we were wrong all along, we had it all backwards Sejojaka was a man of naturally sound disposition while, in this perfect creation, we were the useless ones.

This, however, was not exactly right either, as Sejojaka proved just a few days later.

One morning I received a phone call from my aunt's house telling me that Sejojaka had left this world at dawn. His choice of a day to die was in keeping with the way he had lived his life. The evening of that day was the time appointed for my cousin's marriage.

Notes

1. Kaka is the Bengali equivalent of "uncle".
2. *Mejo* and *Sejo* are Bengali for second and third in order of birth. After these there is no stipulated designation; *Sona* means Golden and is the free choice of the family. *Choto* means the youngest.

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3. There is an untranslatable pun here. The Bengali equivalent of *Physics* is *Padartha Bigyan*. *Bigyan* is just the generic term for *Science*. The pun involves the epithet "useless" which Sejoakaka has had to bear. This word in Bengali is *Apadartha*, a transparent derivative from *Padartha*. *A* is the regular negative prefix in Bengali.

"Apadartha", *Ebaro Baro* (Calcutta : Anand Publishers, 1984).

*Translated from Bengali
by Vinay Lal and Douglas Varley.*

