

Dus Diner Chhuti (Ten Days' Holiday)

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Two children have made me homeless in this summer heat! Their school has been closed for ten days but that's not just the reason. There would not be so much chaos in the house even if twelve suns appeared on the horizon. The older brother blunted the tips of all the pens he found within his reach, drew pictures on whatever paper he found; tried out the sharpness of a knife on his existing thigh; took out the machine from the watch he found and tried to rectify it; undid the bindings of all the books within his reach; climbed up on my shoulders if he found the opportunity – and so on! He moved on parapet walls in places where there were stairs for climbing; though everyone in the whole world believed in getting out of a car only when it stopped, he thought it was his only duty to jump out of a running car. Everyone accepted the fact that the sun was too hot during the summer but the human child that I am talking about probably did not differentiate much between sunshine and moonlight. So during the school vacation, the difference in belief and behaviour between him and the other ordinary people created a sort of revolution in the neighbourhood. Recently the elder brother has got such a leave for ten days and this news spread everywhere. People were not so overwhelmed even when they received the news of the English-Russian war. In the meantime his younger sister came to me off and on and demanded – “Uncle--.” It would be nice if he called me ‘Uncle’ but I would receive new names at least three times in a day – names which were not heard in any civilized country. These naughty children also scattered and turned my own possessions upside down. My own name also did not have a proper address. I could not make them understand that my own name was my personal possession. Anyhow, the small girl (not that she was too small) came and pleaded, “Uncle, come with us to Hazaribagh.” After a lot of thought I did not say anything else and ventured out on this summer day.

One cannot see much in a vacation of eight or ten days but at least we can peek at nature outside. At least one can stand beneath the open expanse of the blue sky and the vast open green fields for a few seconds and feel free. We live in the city and occasionally it becomes essential to prove that the world is not built entirely with bricks, wood and mortar. So, four of us began our journey. I have already acquainted you with the boy and the girl. I need to introduce the other person. He was a fat, round and simple man. He was older than all of us but even younger than these children. His fair and stout figure was full of humour and he seemed like a ripe and juicy fruit. Just like the bubbles in a huge pot of rice being cooked, his humour came out from his nose and eyes. There are some people who resembled the ‘sandesh’ – the sweetmeat without a covering, without anything hard inside, without thorns – just a smooth, juicy blend of cottage cheese and sugar. Our innocent and harmless companion was that kind of a very edible man.

We boarded the train at Howrah at night. The swaying of the train confused one's sleep – the sleeping conscience and the dream and waking up all got mixed up. There were occasional series of lights, sound of gongs, shouting, and calling the name of a station in a strange intonation. Again after three strikes of a gong all the sounds would subside within a few seconds and everything would become dark and quiet except for

the continuous sound of the train wheels moving in the dark. Keeping in tune with that sound all the strange dreams would keep on dancing in my head all night. We had to change trains at Madhupur Station at four o'clock in the morning. As the darkness faded away, I sat at the train window and looked outside at the early morning light. This was a new country! It seemed that due to some disturbance our flat land had cracked and was torn apart. It was rough, broken and full of big and small sal trees and there were high and low undulations everywhere. There were plenty of sal trees but they did not endear each other as they did in Bengal. Each tree stood independently on its own soil. In Bengal all the trees, plants and creepers entwined each other in a familial bonding, but I did not notice that in this hard soil here. Maybe the people here were also like that. We did not notice much habitation. Only occasionally one or two huts stood friendless here and there. In the wet and salubrious climate of Bengal, trees and plants, men and men, houses and houses all stick to each other, but here in this rough and dry place everything seemed to be standing independently on their own.

The train moved on continuously. In the cracked fields one could sometimes see the sand of dry river beds and in those river beds huge black rocks and stones lay like skeletons of the earth. Sometimes a few hills stood up like severed heads. The hills in the distance were dark blue in colour. The blue clouds in the sky that came to play with the earth seemed to get caught up here. They had raised their wings to fly back to the sky but could not do so because they were tied up. The maidens from the sky came and embraced them. I saw one dark man with a broad face, with his wild hair tied up in a knot, standing there with a stick in his hand. The plough was attached to the back of two buffaloes; they had not begun tilling yet, and they stood still looking at the train. Occasionally there were some clear plots of land encircled with fencing made of *ghritakumari* plants and with a brick well constructed in the centre. The whole region looked very dry. The thin, tall and white dry grass looked like grey hair. The short leafless berry plants were shriveled, dry, and dark. In the distance a few palm trees stood with their small heads and one long leg. Occasionally a peepul or a mango tree was also visible. A lone old roofless cottage with its broken frame stood in the middle of the dry land and looked at its own shadow. Nearby there was a stump of a huge burnt tree.

We reached Giridih station at six o'clock in the morning. There were no more train lines after that and so we had to take carriage drawn by human beings from here. Could we call this a car? It was a small cage over four wheels. As we began our journey in the morning, the four of us started chirping inside it like four fledglings. The young brother and sister began to talk about many things and also pester me with joy. Our stout companion mingled with the children and turned into such a child that by just looking at them my own age was reduced by fourteen years and eight months. At first we went to the Giridih Dak Bungalow and refreshed ourselves. There was no sign of grass anywhere as far as we could see. There were a few trees in between and waves of red earth everywhere. A lean pony was tied under the tree; after looking all around it didn't know what to eat. Having nothing to do it stood scratching its back on the wooden post. A goat was tied to another tree with a long rope and after a lot of research it stood breaking a sort of green plant with ease.

We resumed our journey from here. There were coal mines in Giridih but we could not see it due to lack of time. The road was hilly. We could see a great distance both

in front and behind us. The long and winding road lay on the dry and empty terrain like a serpent basking in the sun. The car was pushed on the uphill road with a lot of effort and then it would slide smoothly downhill. As we went along we saw hills on the way. There were tall and thin sal trees, termite heaps, stumps of trees that had been cut down. At certain places some hills were covered with only tall, thin and leafless trees. The starving trees seemed to spread their lean dry fingers towards the sky and the mountains seemed as if they had been pierced by hundreds of arrows like the bed of arrows on which Bhishma rested on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The sky was overcast and it began to drizzle. The coolies were letting out loud shouts while pulling the carriage and when their steps occasionally hit pebbles on the road, the carriage would suddenly shake up. Somewhere on the way the road ended and we saw a huge bed of sand with a narrow river in the distance. On asking the coolies we were told that it was the Barakar River. The carriage was pulled across the river and taken to the road on the other side. There were shallow ponds on both sides of the road and four or five buffalos leaning their heads on one another, dipped half their bodies in the water to relax themselves and gave us very casual glances.

When evening descended we got down from the carriage and went walking for the rest of the way. We saw two hills in the distance and the road went up and down through them. Whichever way we looked, there were no people, no human habitation, no grains, no tilled land. On all sides the undulated earth stood silent and barren like a hard ocean. The golden hue of dusk in the horizon cast dark shadows on us. Though there were no human beings or animals around us, there was a feeling that this huge earth was preparing for a huge person to come and sleep on its bosom. Like a sentinel someone was guarding the place with fingers on his lips and so everyone felt scared to breathe. The shadow of a traveller with luggage on his horseback came along from a distance and gradually crossed our path.

The night somehow passed between sleep and waking and tossing and turning sides. Upon waking up we saw a thick forest on the left hand side. There were creepers on the trees and the ground was covered with different kinds of shrubs. Above the forest we could see the blue peaks of distant hills. There were huge rocks and among their crevices were a few trees, their hungry roots growing long and spreading out on all sides. It seemed as if they wanted to break the rock in search of food and grasp it with their strong grip. Where did the forest on the left disappear all on a sudden? There were fields stretching at a distance. Cows were grazing there and they looked as small as goats. The farmers were tilling their land with the plough on the buffalo or cow's shoulders and by twisting their tails. On the left hand side the tilled land rose like steps on the hills. We had come close to Hazaribagh. On the way one or two hills stood as relics of some great natural revolution.

We reached the dak bungalow at Hazaribagh at three o'clock in the afternoon. The town of Hazaribagh looked very clean amidst the wide landscape. There was no city-centric ambience here – no narrow lanes, dirt, drains, jostling, commotion, traffic, dust, mud, flies or mosquitoes. Amid the fields, trees and hills the town was absolutely clean. The giant houses in Kolkata are proud as stone – they stand treading the earth below, but here it was different. Here the clean and small thatched roof houses stand quietly in friendship with nature; they do not have glamour, they don't exert might. The town seemed to be like a nest in the trees. There was deep silence and peace everywhere. We hear that even the Bengalis who live here do not quarrel

among themselves. If this was true then there would be no enmity between the crow and the eagle or between the cat and the dog.

One day was gone. It was afternoon now. I sat alone quietly in a couch on the verandah of the dak bungalow. The sky was blue. Two pieces of thin clouds were sailing by. A mild breeze was blowing and brought in an earthy, grassy smell. There was a squirrel on the roof of the verandah. Two shalik birds were hopping about on the verandah and shaking their tails. I could hear the sound of the cow bells as they were driven by on the adjacent road. People were moving in different ways – some carried luggage on their shoulders and walked with open umbrellas on their heads, some were chasing a couple of cows, some moved slowly riding on the back of a pony. There was no commotion, no hurry, and no sign of worry on their faces. It seemed that human life here did not pant rapidly like a fast railway engine or moved with the screeching noises emanating from the wheels of a heavily laden bullock cart. Life here moves in the manner of a gentle breeze blowing beneath the shade of trees. The court house was in front of us. But even the court was not that rigid here. While the two lawyers in their black coats fought with each other inside, two papaya birds sat outside on the peepul tree and conversed among themselves constantly. The people who came here seeking justice sat in a group in the shade of the mango tree and laughed loudly among themselves. I could hear them from here. Sometimes the midday gong started ringing in the courthouse. Its sound seemed very serious in this leisurely ambience and slow rhythm of life. The occasional sound of the gong was a reminder that time had not flowed by in the casual slow place of lifestyle here. Standing in between it seemed to pronounce in its iron tone, “I am awake, even if others are not.” But the writer’s condition was not exactly the same. I felt sleepy. It was not a deep sleep. I could realize that the quiet nature and beauty all around had encircled me with great care but my senses were failing me in the details.

I spoke whatever I had to say about Hazaribagh (some might be thinking that I could have spoken much less) except that I did not mention that we became newly acquainted with the children of one of my friends. Upen Babu read the *Akshanmanjari* so we had to treat him with respect. I had mistakenly confused the alphabet sequence and he had instantly corrected it. That is why I was grateful to him. But in spite of many entreaties his sweet-looking naughty sister did not speak to us. I threatened to write an article and take revenge on her, so according to that promise I am spreading the word today letting the whole world know about her shy and coy words, and how she would run away whenever guests came to her house. I also cannot keep it a secret how we had received sweet sandesh and even sweeter welcome from our friend.

In order to save time on our return journey we came down in a two-wheeled small carriage. If nothing else happened, at least it reduced our longevity as the whole body got shaken up with the bones and the joints fighting against each other. As the body went on jerking and dancing like mad, the five elements with which it was composed gave us a tough time. I could hold it together somehow but nothing much beyond that. With so much of revolution in the whole body, I could not hold books in my hands, the cap on my head, the spectacles on my nose, food in my stomach. To add to all that was the scorching heat of the sun. I had left home with the full sixteen annas of my body intact but when I returned, I could not even account for twelve annas of it. The ten days’ holiday is over. Ah!