

Translation

Rajinder Singh Bedi

Quarantine*

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Introduction: Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915–1984) was one of the most versatile modern Urdu authors. He was particularly famous for his short stories depicting lower middle class life in minute detail. He took up writing in Urdu because, like most Punjabis of his generation, he was educated in Urdu and also because “Punjabi then was not the language which has developed now [i.e. in postcolonial India] ... Punjabi, I felt, just couldn’t do it for me. In order to reach the maximum number of people, I took up Urdu. Besides Urdu was in vogue [then]”¹

In 1941, Bedi joined the Urdu section of All India Radio, Lahore. After briefly working as the director of the Jammu and Kashmir Broadcasting Service, he moved to Bombay after the Partition 1947, when Lahore became part of Pakistan. In independent India, he managed to establish himself as a screenplay and dialogue writer in the Hindi film industry. He worked with famous film directors such as Sohrab Modi, Bimal Roy and Hrishikesh Mukherjee and also directed and produced some of his own films. His films deal with the same social and political concerns which mark his literary works. Working in the film industry was a means of livelihood for him, but it also taught him to use language and visual mode in his writings. He admitted: “I have gained from my films. My writing of literature and my writing for films have been complementary, each training me for the other.”²

Like many contemporary authors of his time writing in Indian languages and in English, Bedi was influenced by the *Progressive Writers’ Movement*, its social realism, anti-imperialist stance and its criticism of religious, political and social life in India. However, in an interview, the author candidly spoke about his association with the group:

I didn’t know until I was told that I was a “Progressive” writer and that the others were also “Progressive” writers. But it’s partly true that I was, for I did write about the life of the common people and was truthful about the life I had lived and knew. This was a very big part of the Progressive writing. Later, when the movement was struck down by a sort of formalism, I then realized that Progressive writing was also part of a larger doctrine or ideology which was being propagated through us. ... But later, in the later phase of the Movement, many of us had serious doubts about whether these people who were heading the Movement were really interested in our people; they simply wanted us to say ditto to their ideology, which was Communism.³

Bedi’s fame as prolific writer was established by his two early short story collections *Dānā o dām* (The Catch), featuring his prominent story *Garam koṭ* (Warm Coat), published in 1940, and *Grahan* (The Eclipse), published in 1942.

The story ‘Quarantine’ was part of Bedi’s first volume of 14 short stories, *Dānā o dām* first published in 1939. The second edition and the third edition of the volume came out in 1963 and 1980 from Maktaba Jamia Ltd, New Delhi. My source text is Dr Raziuddin Aquil’s rendition of the story in Hindi and published in his blog *Itihāsnāmā*. His *Devanagari* version of the original Urdu story is linguistically and culturally close to the original, but makes it more easily accessible for a contemporary

1 Rajinder Singh Bedi. Interview. *Mahfil*, Vol. 8, No. 2/3 (Summer – Fall 1972), pp. 139–158, p. 142.

2 Ibid 140.

3 Ibid 143–147.

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Hindi readership. Hindi and Urdu share a common phonology, morphology and grammar, but they are particularly distinct in their glossary, particularly in their technical vocabulary. His version works well with me as a mother tongue speaker of Hindi.

The Bubonic plague and other epidemic diseases led to the construction of much dreaded quarantine facilities in colonial India. In times of epidemics, people with symptoms were forcibly taken into these facilities in order to fight the disease. In the 1930s, the memory of the terrors of epidemics was still vivid. 'Quarantine' centres on the character of William Bhagu, a sanitation worker and a recent convert to Christianity and his relationship with the narrator, Dr Bakshi who works in a hospital and in the quarantine facility.

A brief note on translation: I have intentionally left the Hindi double honorific "Babu-ji" untranslated so as to introduce its specific cultural sense, without modifying it. The title "Babu" is used in the northern and eastern parts of India as a sign of respect for one's father or for any elderly or respected male, while honorific "ji" is a gender-neutral suffix added after the names of men and women. "Babu-ji" is the equivalent of "mister" and "sir" at the same time. It marks the unshakable respect that Bhagu displays, when he talks to a doctor. This usage has almost disappeared in contemporary urban India.

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Plague and Quarantine!

Like a thick fog that crawls over and blurs everything in the plains lying at the foot of the Himalayas, the terror of plague had spread all over. Even children in the town shuddered to hear its name.

The plague was deadly but the quarantine was even deadlier. In fact, people were less tormented by plague than by the fear of the quarantine. So, the Health and Safety Department had put up life-size posters on the doors, the streets and roads – to warn the citizens of rats – which read: "No Plague – No Rats – No Quarantine" expanding the earlier caption "No Rats – No Plague."

The fear of quarantine among the people was quite natural. Trust my opinion as a doctor when I say that the death toll in the town was higher because of the quarantine than due to the epidemic itself. Quarantine is not a disease but a large space where during air borne epidemics, sick people are by law kept away from those who are not sick in order to check the spread of the disease.

Although proper arrangements for doctors and nurses were made at the quarantine facilities, patients would not get individual attention because of their large numbers. As the families of the patients were not by their side, I often saw patients sinking into despair. Many died even before death, seeing others around them die one after the other. Many times, patients died of the contamination in their surroundings. Because of the large number of deaths, last rites could only be performed according to the special rules of the quarantine. This meant that hundreds of corpses were dragged into a huge heap like dogs' carcasses and set on fire with petrol, without any religious rites. In the evenings, when other patients saw the flames, they thought the whole world was on fire.

The quarantine led to so many deaths because as soon as the symptoms of the disease appeared, the relatives of the afflicted tried to hide them for fear of being forcibly taken away. The doctors had to inform the authorities about those infected, so people refused to see a doctor. That a household was infected by plague was known only when a dead body left the house amidst heart rending cries and wails.

Those days I worked as a doctor at a quarantine facility. The terror of the plague had started affecting my mind and heart too. When I reached home, I washed my hands well with a carbolic soap longer than required, gargled with an antiseptic solution and had some brandy or hot coffee which nearly burnt my intestines. As a result, I started suffering from insomnia and blurred vision. I would sometimes take a pill to induce vomiting to cleanse myself. When my innards got burnt by hot coffee

or brandy and circles of vapour seemed to rise and enter my brain, I imagined I was infected. When I had a little itch in my throat, I feared it was a symptom of plague. Alas, I will also fall prey to this killer disease! And then quarantine...

It was during one of those days when a recent Christian convert, William Bhagu, the sweeper who cleaned the streets near my home, came to see me and said, "Babu-ji! Something terrible happened today. An 'ambu' took away twenty-and-one sick people from our colony."

"Twenty-one? Taken away in an ambulance?" I asked in shock.

"Yes... twenty-and-one in all ... They would be sent to a 'konteen' (Quarantine)... Ah, poor souls! Will they ever come back?"

As I spoke with Bhagu, I came to know that he gets up at three every morning. After gulping down half a quarter of liquor, he starts sprinkling lime powder on the Committee's lanes and drains, as instructed, to stop the spread of the disease. He said he gets up so early so that he could collect dead bodies scattered all over the marketplace and also to help out the residents of his colony, who were too scared of the epidemic to come out, by doing some odd jobs for them. He was hardly afraid of the plague. Instead, he believed that if death is around you cannot escape it, wherever you may go.

Those days when no one dared to visit each other, Bhagu would cover his face with his turban cloth and serve people with great devotion. His knowledge was rather limited but he advised people, like an expert, how to protect themselves from the disease from his own experience. He would tell them to maintain general cleanliness, sprinkle lime powder and stay indoors. One day I even heard him telling people to have liquor as much as they wanted. That day when he visited me I said, "Bhagu! Aren't you afraid of the plague?"

"No, Babu-ji... Death will not touch a hair on my head unless the time has come. You are such a big doctor, you have cured thousands of patients but when my time is come, even your medicines will not help. Yes, Babu-ji, please don't mind, but what I say is true and I am clear about it. Then diverting the flow of our conversation, he said, "Please tell me something about 'konteen', Babu-ji."

"Well, thousands of patients have arrived at the quarantine. We treat everyone as much as possible, but for how long we don't know. People who work with me are afraid to stay there for long hours. Their mouth and throat are always dry with fear. Also, no one wants to be near the patients like you. No one wants to break his back with work like you do. Bhagu! May God bless you for serving humanity with such devotion."

Bhagu lowered his head. Lifting a corner of his turban cloth which revealed his flushed face because of being drunk, he said, "Babu-ji! I am hardly worth anything. What better fortune it is to help others and to see my worthless body being useful to others. Babu-ji, Father Laabe (Reverend Mont l'Abbé), who often visits our quarters, says, "Jesus teaches us to sacrifice our life in the service of the sick and ailing. I think..."

I wanted to admire Bhagu's courage, but for a strong surge of emotions which stopped me from doing so. I was somewhat envious of his noble faith and meaningful life. I made up my mind that I will make my best efforts to cure more patients today at the quarantine. I will leave no stone unturned to comfort them. But we hardly practice what we preach. When I saw the horrible condition of the patients and the moment their foul breath touched my nostrils, my soul shuddered with fear and I had no courage left to serve them the way Bhagu did.

But with Bhagu by my side, I worked harder than ever at the quarantine. However, I delegated those jobs to Bhagu which required me by the side of the patients, and he did it without any qualms. I kept a physical distance from the patients because I was extremely afraid of death but even more of quarantine.

But was Bhagu beyond both death and quarantine?

That day about four hundred patients were admitted to the quarantine and two hundred and fifty succumbed to death.

It was because of Bhagu's courage that I was able to cure many patients. The chart on the wall of the Chief Medical Officer's room, plotting the latest status of patients' recovery, showed the steepest rise in their average health under my care. Every day, I looked for an excuse to visit the room to see the curve inching towards 100% – This rejoiced my heart.

One day I had more than my fair share of brandy. I felt palpitations in my heart and my pulse raced like a horse. I ran here and there like crazy. I feared that contagion had eventually got me and very soon lymph nodes would appear on my throat and thighs. In utter distress and fear, I simply wanted to run away from the quarantine. I trembled with fear as long as I was there. That day I got the chance to see Bhagu only twice.

In the afternoon, I saw him comforting a patient with his arms around him. He patted his hands affectionately. The patient tried hard to muster all his strength and said, "Brother, Allah is our Master. Let even our enemies not come here. I have two daughters..."

Bhagu stopped him in between and said, "Thank Lord Jesus, Brother. You look better now."

"Yes, brother, by God's grace I am better than before. Only if I could..."

Even before he could complete the sentence, his veins tightened, his mouth frothed, his pupils dilated, his body convulsed a few times, and the patient who looked better to us and even felt better himself, was silent forever. Bhagu shed invisible tears of blood on his death – who else would have done that? Only if his near and dear ones were around, their heart-rending cries and wails would have wrenched Heaven and Earth! Bhagu was everyone's relative. He had compassion for everyone. He cried for them and felt angry for them... One day he even offered himself to Lord Jesus with great humility to pay for the sins of humanity.

The same day by evening, he came rushing in to see me. Breathless, he sighed with extreme anguish and said, "Babu-ji! This quarantine is like hell. Father Laabe would tell us similar stories of hell..."

I said, "Yes, Brother! This place is even worse than hell... I want to escape from here... I feel very unwell today."

"Babu-ji, "What could be worse than this? Today a patient fainted with the fear of plague. He was mistaken for dead and dumped on a pile of dead bodies. After the heap was doused with petrol and set on fire, the flames engulfed the corpses. To my horror, I saw him struggling to come out. I quickly dragged him out, Babu-ji, but by that time he was badly burnt. Even my right hand got burnt trying to save him."

I looked at his arm and saw the exposed yellow fat tissues. I shivered and asked him, "Is the man alive? What happened to him?"

"Babu-ji, he was a noble soul. The world is now deprived of his goodness and kind-heartedness. Even in terrible agony, he lifted his burnt face, looked at me feebly and thanked me."

"And Babu-ji", Bhagu continued, "after this he suffered so horribly that, in my whole life, I have never come across a person taking his last breath in such agony. I wish I had let him die. By keeping him alive I had only prolonged his suffering but he couldn't be saved. I have thrown him away in the same dump with these burnt hands..."

Bhagu couldn't utter a word after that. Amidst shivers of pain, he could only utter haltingly, "Do you know what killed him? Not plague, but quarantine, the quarantine killed him!"

Although detachment towards the dead alone gave some comfort to people trapped in this unprecedented crisis, the heart wrenching howls of those ill-fated people pierced my ears every night.

The sobbing and wailing of mothers, the laments of sisters, the mourning of wives, and of the howls of children – created a terrible atmosphere in the town where even owls dared not hoot at midnight. If this burdened the hearts of people who were not sick, imagine the plight of those lying sick at home who only saw the shades of hopelessness everywhere, on doors and walls, like those a patient with jaundice or the patients in quarantine camps who could only see death across the

threshold of despair and who clung to life like someone who clings to the top of a tree in a terrible storm when tempestuous waves rise higher to drown even the treetop.

That day I didn't go to the quarantine as I felt sick and excused myself on the pretext of some urgent work but my head continued to throb with pain. Perhaps I could have saved a patient's life. But terror had engulfed my mind and heart and shackled my legs. Before I went to bed at night, I got the news that by late evening around five hundred new patients had arrived at the quarantine.

Just as I was about to sleep after having some boiling hot coffee, I heard Bhagu at my door. My servant opened the door. He rushed in breathlessly and said, "Babu-ji! My wife has fallen sick. Glands are appearing on her throat. For God's sake, please save her. Our one-and-a-half-year-old son still suckles; he will also die."

Instead of showing sympathy, I said angrily, "Why didn't you come earlier? Didn't the symptoms show up before?"

"No, she was feverish this morning when I went to 'konteen'.

"You mean to say that she wasn't well and still you went to the quarantine?"

"Yes, I did Babu-ji." He trembled as he said this. She was just a little sick. I thought she suffered from milk-fever. Besides this, she had no other problem. My two brothers were also at home to look after her, while hundreds of patients were helpless at the 'konteen'.

So, finally you brought the infection home by being too considerate and sacrificing. I had warned you not to get too close to the patients. You know, that's why I didn't go there today. It's all your own fault. Now, what can I do? Brave people like you should face the consequences of your bravery. There are hundreds of patients in the town..."

Bhagu pleaded, "But Lord Jesus ..."

"Now leave. What do you think of yourself? You knew it would put you in danger. Why should I care? This is no way to sacrifice. I can't help you so late at night."

"But Father Laabe..."

"Leave! Go away! You and your Father Laabe!"

Bhagu bowed his head and left. Half-an-hour later when my anger cooled off, I felt ashamed of my behaviour. I wasn't so insensitive that I wouldn't feel remorse later. Without any doubt, the biggest punishment for me would be to crush my pride, seek forgiveness from Bhagu and treat his wife sincerely. I quickly changed my clothes and rushed to his house... There I found his two younger brothers taking their sister-in-law out in a cot...

I looked at Bhagu and asked, "Where are you taking her?"

He said gently, "To the 'konteen'"

"Well, you don't think quarantine is hell anymore, Bhagu?"

"You refused to come, Babu-ji. What else could I do? I thought I would get help from doctors there and look after her with other patients."

"Keep the cot down. You still haven't got over the idea of helping other patients? You fool!"

The cot was taken inside. I had carried some effective drug with me which I gave to his wife. This felt like entering into a combat with my opponent – the plague. Soon, Bhagu's wife opened her eyes.

Bhagu's voice trembled as he said, "I will be grateful to you all my life, Babu-ji."

I said, "I am very sorry for my earlier behaviour... May God reward you for your service to humanity by curing your wife."

Just then, I saw my opponent using its last weapon. Bhagu's wife's lips trembled. I could feel her pulse rate dipping and sliding towards her arm. My hidden adversary who usually won the fight, had once again crushed me down. I bowed my head in shame and said, Bhagu! You unfortunate Bhagu! What a terrible reward for your sacrifice. Ah!"

Bhagu wept bitterly.

It was heart-wrenching when Bhagu pulled the child away from his dead mother and requested me gently to go home.

I thought that Bhagu, finding his world dark and gloomy now, won't care for anyone. But the next day, I saw him looking after the patients with even more dedication. He saved hundreds of lives from being extinguished, without caring for his own. Now, inspired by Bhagu, I worked more sincerely.. After finishing my work at the quarantine and hospital and even during my spare time, I would visit the slums which were breeding grounds of the disease as sewage drains were closer and filth was piled up around them.

After some time, the environment was completely free from infection. The town was washed and cleaned. There was no sign of rats anywhere. The few cases that were reported got medical attention immediately. There was no danger of the disease spreading any further.

The town resumed its activities normally – schools, colleges and offices re-opened.

What moved me was that whenever I walked past the marketplace, people pointed at me and looked at me with gratitude. Newspapers carried my photograph with words of appreciation. This overwhelming praise and honour made me a little arrogant.

Then, a felicitation ceremony was organized in my honour to which prominent people and doctors were invited. The Minister for the Municipal Corporation inaugurated the programme. I was seated next to him. My neck was heavy with garlands and I felt like a respectable person. I looked this way and that smugly.

"Overwhelmed by gratitude, the committee has decided to honour you with a small token of a thousand rupees in recognition of your complete dedication in the service of humanity."

All those present praised my colleagues and me. They said it wasn't possible to keep a record of the number of lives I had saved because of my hard work during the epidemic. Days and nights didn't matter to me. My life was devoted to the well-being of the nation, my wealth to be used for the common good. I had entered the hub of epidemic to offer the elixir of health to dying patients.

The honourable Minister then stood near the left corner of the table. With his cane, he pointed at the black line on a chart hanging on the wall, to invite the attention of the audience. The line fluctuated but inched higher every moment towards the axis of recovery during the epidemic. In the end, he also pointed out the day when fifty-four patients were placed under my supervision and all of them recovered. This was a hundred percent success and the black line had reached the top.

Then the Minister paid generous tribute to my courage. He said that the audience would be delighted to know that Bakshi-ji was conferred the honorary rank of Lieutenant colonel for his service.

The hall echoed with a loud applause of admiration.

In the midst of the applause, I looked up in pride, offered my vote of thanks to the secretary and other dignitaries and delivered a long speech in which, besides other things, I pointed out that we had paid attention not only to the hospitals and quarantine camps but also to the slums. The poor mostly fell prey to this killer disease as they were unable to protect themselves. My colleagues and I located the place of origin of the disease and made all efforts to eradicate it. After our work at the quarantine and the hospital, we spent our evenings at those horror spots.

That day after the programme got over, I reached home with my head held high like a Lt. Colonel, decorated with garlands and a thousand rupees in my pocket. Then, I heard a faint voice.

"Babu-ji, many congratulations to you."

As he congratulated me, Bhagu kept his old broom on the top of a filthy tank nearby and removed his turban cloth to show his face. I was stunned.

"Oh, it's you, Bhagu bhai!" I could hardly speak. "The world may not know you, Bhagu, but don't worry, I know you. Your Jesus knows you. You are the perfect disciple of Father l'Abbé. May God bless you!"

My throat went dry. The image of Bhagu's dying wife and their child flashed before my eyes. It seemed my neck would break under the weight of garlands and my pocket would burst with the weight of my wallet. Despite receiving so much honour, I suddenly felt worthless and lamented this admiring world.