

Tea named 'Desire'

Tea is chai in Hindi
And *chah* in dialect
Which merrily translates as 'desire'.

Sold at every chowk in disposable earthen cups
This 'desire' keeps bubbling in a large kettle —
To serve one and all.

With parched human lips
In the most intimate moment of togetherness
On a freezing winter night
At the *dhaba*
Or in the cosy warmth of the kitchenette
What we sip together is a medieval romance
Of a knight in armour
Down on one knee!

These sagas are a reminder
That once upon a time, cups operated in a frame
They too had a rigid class structure
And they even had a caste system —
There were cups without handles for the menial
staff
And the bone china sets which could never reach
The vegetarian kitchen.

There were
Cups on the higher shelf
And then the fallen ones

With a crack in the heart
And mud stuffed in their mouths
To plant a seed (the seed of karma, if you may)
The cups without ears were called cup *bina kaan*
ke,

Cups gone deaf to pleas, angry and annoyed
They were often used for storing oil gone black
After too much frying.
Defly saved was this burnt, black oil for gifting
away
On Saturdays
To the maid for a healthy massage for her kids.

There was tea with a creamy layer,
And tea as lean as dishwater
Nevertheless
After a round of sighs
And the wishes gone by,
What now remains as the essence of it all
Is masala tea in a cha-bar,
Slowly sipped to savour
Life's flavour,
Whatever it may be.

Bus Ticket

In a bus stuffed to the hilt
Many things progress without moving an inch.
Eyes converse and nod
And bus fare travels
From one hand to another.
The chain of hands not known to each other
Create the world's most unique bridge!
How? I wonder.

I remember the poet, Biharilal, as I speak.
Not the couplet but the context —
In an assembly packed with people
Two lovers are far apart
Their eyes meet in joyous union
Across the buzzing crowd
Two pairs of familiar eyes
Thus secretly converse
This is the peak of romance
Or so I thought
Until I noticed how
The meeting of hands unknown
In city buses, builds a camaraderie
To create a romance still deeper,
A romance primordial
Of the human with humanity.

Laughter

Laughter is a real daredevil,
Comes gushing forth anytime, anywhere--
Against all odds
At unearthly hours of night
Unconditional, unprovoked!
Even in a Dictator's courtroom
It breaks out
Clapping, it cries out,
"The King is nude, The King is nude!"
Like the wine in a skull
It swirls and morphs
In the Tantrik's den,
This laughter thrown out like an old challenge
There glistens the laughter of fire
In the tired ashen blue of dead remains
Even in the mind stilled by *viraag*,
A blessed dispassionate state of being,
It gushes forth
Like the plunge of the Ganga
From the matted hair of Shiva's head!

[translated by Vinita Sinha]