

From Bihar to Tihar

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 juggernaut

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Dedicated to the toiling masses

Everyone has his or her own story but one person's life is often another person's fiction. If you are to understand me, then you must enter my world, see things the way I see them. I welcome you to accompany me in the political journey of an ordinary student from an ordinary village of this 'not so ordinary' country.

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Prologue

It was my fifteenth day in Tihar. The Delhi High Court had granted me bail the previous day, but I had to stay in prison for another day because of unfinished paperwork.

After lunch, a constable came to my cell. Despite the security provisions, some constables in the jail did manage to slip through the restrictions and talk to me.

‘This is your last day. Today you’ll be released.’

I got up from the bed and walked to the door of the cell.

He said, ‘I’ve come to you with a question. But first I’ll tell you a story.’

The story went something like this...

Once upon a time there was a king. The king loved his people and was very popular. The people loved their king, the kingdom was very prosperous and everyone was happy. The king had one daughter. But he was now getting old and was

beginning to worry about his kingdom, his people, their well-being, his successor – he had a lot to think about.

Who would rule after him and who would marry his daughter? He wanted to find an answer to both these questions. He decided to look for a clever groom for his daughter so that he would take care of her as well as of the kingdom. He considered many princes, met them and talked to them but didn't find any of them suitable.

One day, one of his courtiers suggested holding a competition. 'You get your daughter married to the winner and also hand over the kingdom to him. After that you can rest in peace.'

The king liked this suggestion. All the neighbouring kingdoms were informed that a competition had been organized to find a suitable match for the princess and a successor to the king. There was a waterfall up in the hills flowing down to a lake which was infested with crocodiles. The competition involved jumping into the lake from the falls and coming out safely.

Princes from all castes and religions came from far and wide for the competition. It was a golden opportunity. All the participants lined up and walked up to the waterfall one by one. But on reaching the spot and looking down from the great height of the falls, they became terrified. The knowledge that the lake was full of crocodiles added to their fear.

One after another, all suitors refused. Only one man had

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the courage to jump, and he succeeded in swimming out of the lake and reaching the designated place. Ecstatic, the king got his daughter married to him and gave him his entire kingdom to rule. Soon after, the old man went away into the forest.

As soon as the old king left, the new one had a huge throne built. It was so high that he needed to climb several steps every day to sit on it.

‘So Kanhaiya, the question is, if a man such as this one put his life in danger and won the competition with his intelligence and quick thinking, why did he do something so irrational as soon as he became king?’

Part 1

Childhood

1

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Kanhaiya Kumar.’

There was a wooden table between us; he was sitting across me on the other side.

‘Father’s name?’

‘Jai Shankar Singh.’

‘Mother’s name?’

‘Meena Devi.’

There were only two other people in the room with me in the Lodhi Road thana. But the short, sharp questions of my interrogator in khaki uniform made me feel trapped and claustrophobic, as if I was in a crowded cell with no room to breathe.

‘What’s the name of your village?’

‘Masnadpur, Bihat.’

‘How many brothers are you?’

‘Three. One older than me, one younger.’

A third person entered the room. Walking in, he rapped me on the head and made me stand up. 'How come you sat down? Chalo, get up, *desbdrohi saale!*

'How many sisters? Married?' The other man continued with his questions. I answered as calmly as possible, focusing on his nameplate so I could memorize his name.

'Only one sister. She's married.'

He took out my confiscated phone and dialed a number. I couldn't tell who he was speaking to but could hear that he was asking a few questions. Then he told the voice on the other end that his son had been arrested.

It was my father. Suddenly it was as though the cramped room I was in was filled with my family – my mother, my village and my people, all of whom had seemed far away only a few hours ago. I started to worry about my father, who has a heart condition, and the terrible effect this news could have on him. I thought of my mother, with whom I had not spoken in many months. I thought of my village, which was bound to be affected by the news that one of their boys had been sent to prison.

JNU, my studies, my friends, student politics – these were what formed my daily world and occupied my thoughts. But the cops' questions had forced me to think about the past that had shaped my present, my village, my parents, my siblings. And as it became clearer and

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clearer to me that I had not just been brought in for a conversation with the thana cops, that I was in fact about to be arrested, it was the faces from my childhood that returned to me most vividly.