



The restless traveller: A vignette

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He was walking through an impassable thorny way. At one stage he turned back and saw millions of steadfast gazes fixed upon him. An incandescent lustre of seething excitement and expectation radiated from those gazes. It filled the traveller's heart with an intoxicating pride. With a smile of profound satisfaction, he asked in fraternal confidence, "Bhai! Where did you get such a powerful gaze?"

Millions of lustrous eyes replied, "O brave traveller, we got it by looking at the long stretch of road you have travelled!"

Someone's sorrowful yet tender glance sent him a message, "Hai! This treacherous road leads a youthful traveller only to inevitable death!" Millions of others cried loudly in desperation, "Shut up! You coward! This is the eternal and true path of the soul of humanity."

With both of his eyes wide open, the traveller deeply drank in the beneficence of the million gazes. Just as a per-

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fectly tuned veena comes to life at the touch of a finger, the dormant truth of the traveller's heart also responded with an animated resolve: "Fare forward!"

The sylvan expanse filled the traveller with its impulsive youthfulness and announced, "Let me put on your forehead the mark of youth's sovereignty! This makes you immortal with everlasting youth." Distant skies stooped down to kiss his head in benediction. The distant horizon showed him the blurred outline of freedom. The wayside trees waved their branches at him in greeting. Across the entrance to the free country, the fiery awakening call of the flute attracted the traveller like a captivating deer. Guided by the tune, he started running towards the path to freedom, shouting, "Ho, where is your grand gateway to freedom? Open the doors, open the doors—show me light, show me the way!"

The mantra of universal beneficence engulfed him and said, "It's still far away, keep walking!"

The startled traveller said, "Hey, you are the one I want!"

The unknown companion replied, "To get me you have to cross that lofty portal ahead."

The restless traveller quickened his unrelenting pace, and said, "Yes *bhai!* That is my destination!" The unbounded sky momentarily peeped through a parting in the distant forest, and millions of young voices from behind him thunderously echoed his resolve, "We too have the same destination; move forward *bhai*, be in front of us—we too are following your footprints."

Showing the pride and satisfaction of a pioneer, the traveller reminded them: "But, this road leads to death!"

Agitated, the fiery youth roared back, "We don't care! This is not death; this is the beginning of a new life."

Far behind, a group of feeble-hearted, older people was shivering in fear of death. Sitting astride on their shoulders, someone with a grimacing face mocked them, "Look at me, I am Death. I am here!"

Nearby, a fragrant pyre had been lit to create an illusion for the dim, old eyes! Trying hard to suppress derisive laughter, someone drove them to the burning pyre and said, "Lo and behold! That is your path to salvation. Why do you risk your lives on this long and rugged track at such an advanced age? It is just a matter of time before the restless traveller and those who are following him are killed."

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Raising both their hands up above, the elderly people said, "Yes sir, of course!"

A mischievous voice repeatedly cautioned, "Oho fools, never beg for anything! They will slowly burn you to death in the pyre."

Their shepherd suppressed another bout of laughter and advised them, "Na, na, don't listen to them. Their path is a frightful and long one, and is filled with troubles, obstacles and misery. Your liberation is close at hand."

The restless traveller was still following the tune of the entrance-flute, overflowing from the land of freedom.... The phantom called Horrors of the Road now started to torment him. The traveller could see trace of a few faint footmarks still pointing the way forward. The phantom held out a skull to the traveller and said, "Look, this is what happened to those before you on this path."

PLACING THE SKULL on his head, the traveller announced: "Aha! They are the ones who have called me! I too want such an end. My death will not be my end. Instead, I will live among those countless youth walking behind me."

When the phantom asked him, "Who are you?", the traveller replied with a smile, "I am the eternal seeker of liberation. Those whose skulls are strewn here are not dead either; each of them has invigorated me with new energy, new life, and a new glow. The clan of the liberated souls has become immortal."

The phantom trembled and desperately cried out, "Don't you know me? I am bondage personified. Whatever you say, my goal is to



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destroy you; to put freedom in chains is my goal. You have to die at my hands!"

The traveller paused and replied, "Kill—tie up—but you can never really confine me. Death cannot destroy me! I will keep returning!"

The phantom blocked his path again and declared, "As long as I have any strength left, I will kill you every time you return. If you have the strength, kill me; otherwise, you have to endure my torment."

Far off, from the wide-open terrace of the state of freedom, the past martyr-travellers of the road appeared in the effulgence of eternal youth and welcomed him! The traveller asked them, "Does the significance of life lie only in giving it away?"

A free soul on the free terrace replied in a voice full of tenderness and empathy, "Yes, *bhai!* For ages life has sung the paean of such death. The significance of your death lies in rejuvenating millions of lives. Your death achieves its immortality and eternal consciousness by arousing others to life!"

The young traveller bared his mighty chest and stepped forward. "Swing your scimitar," he said. The youths who followed him hoisted the lifeless body of the restless traveller above their head and cried out loudly, "Come back again!"

From the far-off horizon, a symphony of voices rang out,

Your kettle drums have delighted the far-away lands with their solemn beats,

Here comes and gathers around your seat, a group of the valorous! ■

Selected by Mini Krishnan

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