



TRANSLATED SHORT STORY

AABHI

- S. R. Harnot

(Translated by Khem Raj Sharma and KBS Krishna)

About the author: S.R. Harnot (b. 1955) from Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, is a renowned Hindi short story writer. His stories bring to light lesser known traditions and folklore. Harnot's short story collections include *Akashbel*, *Panja*, *Peeth Par Pahaar*, *Darosh* and *Mitti ke Log*; and a novel, *Hidimb*. Many of his stories have been translated into English, and won international acclaim. Harnot received many awards such as Bharatendu Harish Chandra Award from All India Artists Association, Creative News National Award, Himachal Kesari Award, Himachal Gaurav Award, etc.

About the Story: "Aabhi" is taken from Harnot's latest short story collection *Lytton Block Gir Raha Hai*. It is published in the year 2014 by Aadhar Publication, Panchkula. The stories in this volume deal with issues ranging from caste and class discrimination to the omniscience of corruption to eco-criticism.

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[**Note:** *In a remote area of Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh is the Serolsar Lake. This lake is about five kilometres from Jalori Pass, a place which is 11,500 feet above sea level. Beside the lake is an old temple of Buddhi Naagin Maa¹. A sparrow, which the locals call 'Aabhi', keeps the lake clean by removing debris as soon as it falls in the water. This act of the sparrow surprises tourists and foreigners who visit this place. The following story is about this sparrow.*]

Aabhi has been busy for ages. Centuries have rolled by, but Aabhi's work is still unfinished. Its labour has, in fact, increased in the twenty-first century. Waking up before sunrise and sitting on a rock beside the lake, it would dive again and again into the water. Then it would flutter its silky wings. After completing its oblations, it would sing for some time. The melodious music of its song would immerse in the pure blue waters of the lake, and while diving in the ripples of water gets mixed in it as if awakening the sleeping lake. Aabhi feels that the lake is slowly waking up from its deep slumber. It goes to the threshold of the old temple situated at the banks of the lake and pecks the shutters and chirps, seemingly to awake the *Buddhi Naagin Maa*, who is sleeping inside. As its melodious chirping spreads throughout the jungle, the other Aabhis and birds would join it in singing the songs of the dawn.

As Aabhi completes its chores, the sun glides over the snow clad mountains and appears to reach the lake. The sun's rays are immersed in water giving an impression of

innumerable diamonds floating on the lake. This dazzle deludes Aabhi. It tries to pick these diamonds with its beak, but gets only droplets of water in its mouth. This game goes on till the sun leaves the lake, and moves along with its rays across the jungles and hills and goes over the snow clad mountains to the other side. Aabhi finally finds time to catch its breath, and relaxes on seeing that the lake is again pleasant and pure. However, all of a sudden, a stray leaf floats on the whispering wind and falls in the lake. Aabhi immediately picks it and throws it away.

But all this is only possible for Aabhi when the snow on the mountains and the lake has melted. Naturally, it feels extremely irritated by the snowy weather. The place where Aabhi lives with *Buddhi Naagin Maa* is more than eleven thousand feet above sea level. For miles around, there is no trace of any settlement. Due to snowfall, quite often the roads remain blocked. The lake freezes into an ice skating rink on which, at times, the wild animals traipse. Aabhi has seen the snow leopards turning it into their playground, and playing there with their cubs. Once the leopards leave the place, the musk deer and wild goats would come and run on the ice rink. At times, it had also seen a herd of antelopes run across the surface. Aabhi likes to perch quietly on the antelope's horns. As for the polar bear, it is in a state of perpetual excitement. The mother polar bear come along with her little snowball-like cubs to the frozen lake, and lies down for hours. Meanwhile, the cubs romp happily over the lake.

In winters, during snowstorms the lake disappears completely at times. And Aabhi is bewildered. It has no place to go, and even nobody to complain about this. It keeps wondering as to where its lake has disappeared. However, Aabhi continues to

stay there. Its only hope is the temple of *Buddhi Naagin Maa*. Aabhi perches on the temple's pointed purlin, and is extremely depressed. It flaps its wings and chirps; but, no one listens to its call. However, there is no change in the frozen lake, nor is there even a slight rustling of deodar pines or *baan* leaves, or in the ringing of bells in *Buddhi Naagin Maa's* temple.

Aabhi has taken care of this white empire of Nature for ages. Approximately for six months every year, life in this empire of snow comes to a standstill. Everywhere, be it jungle or mountain, is covered with this vast blanket of snow. Even the temple gets drowned in this snow. The divine trees in the jungle with their bowed heads seem to be facing some punishment due to a deadly curse. These are the worst days for Aabhi. Depressed and sad, it sometimes flies over the lake and at times around the temple.

Whenever there are clouds in the sky, the branches of the trees peer out of that dazzling whiteness. As the snow seeps down, these branches seem to be breathing. Even in the shadows of harsh sunlight, the hullabaloo in the jungle irritates Aabhi. Various kinds of sounds . . . as if thousands of soldiers have blown the bugle for a war. This is the season of melting and falling of snow, but nobody listens to Aabhi. It laments over its separation from the lake, and sometimes stays morosely silent. The deep grief of separation is ever present in its songs; but who will recognise its pain? At the temple, Aabhi complains; however, no one listens to its appeals – not even *Buddhi Naagin Maa*, who has apparently gone deep into the inner sanctum of the temple fearing the cold winds.

Once the snow melts, the frozen layers on the lake start fragmenting. Aabhi feels that the lake is trying to show its presence from beneath those layers. It seems as if the lake has woken from a deep slumber. The frozen white blanket slowly slips away, and glass like icicles float on water. Aabhi perches on some of these icicles, and feels extremely blissful. For a few moments, it twitters on the surface of the lake. Deodar, *baan*, and rhododendron lift their heads towards the sky as if they had completed their penance and are thanking God. When suddenly the temple bells ring or a stray vehicle's piercing horn on the road reaches Aabhi's ears, it readies itself to set out for work.

Aabhi sometimes feels that *Buddhi Naagin Maa* does all these things for its comfort. It is the Goddess that brings snow; freezes the lake, and makes it like an ice rink so that for six months not even a whit of grass can fall in it, and no one can dump garbage in it. The Goddess sees to it that no one disturbs the solitude of the lake, deodars and the residents of the forest. She causes such heavy snow to fall far and away so that the roads are blocked and no one can reach that place. Thus, *Buddhi Naagin Maa* too can spend her days in peace – as no one can turn up at her temple and worship her to fulfil their selfish desires.

Aabhi does not want anyone to pollute its lake. It does not want anyone to dump rubbish in the lake and hence muddy it or spoil it. These six months of the year, it remains busy from dawn to dusk. It fights with tourists who come to this place, quarrels with the wind, clashes with the trees of the forest, as it wishes to keep the lake water as clean as pure water. As soon as any whit of grass falls in the lake, it would immediately pick it with its beak and throw it on the bank of the lake. People have

started throwing various kinds of rubbish in the lake. They do not know the value of water of lakes and rivers. They do not know the freshness of breeze. They have not seen the penances of the deodars. They could not even feel the fragrance of the red rhododendrons. They do not know what disasters they are causing by bringing garbage from the plains to these hills.

Now Aabhi has started fearing humans more than the falling leaves. It is disturbed by the behaviour of these people. The whole day people keep coming to this place. Some eat while sitting in the shade of the trees – and leave the place littered with polythene bags, empty chips packets, and water bottles. In the bushes near the temple, some of them would do all kinds of disgusting activities and clutter the place with various kinds of garbage. They do not even fear the divinity of the deodars. They are not concerned about the nationality of *baan* tree. They are not even embarrassed by the presence of *Buddhi Naagin Maa*. Aabhi just keeps watching all this. It is impossible for Aabhi to find a solution to these problems. This new worldliness bewilders it. This intrusion to its solitude is almost intolerable for it. However, what can it do? All it knows is doing its duty.

For Aabhi, the plastic covers have become an absolute scourge as the floating debris of empty plastic bags and bottles on the clear waters of the lake are not fallen leaves or whits of grass. These do not grow on the trees of its own jungle. These do not fall from the branches of deodars, pines, *baan*, or rhododendrons. These are not even straws from the grassy hills, in whose grottos Aabhi could build nests and hatch eggs.

This is the debris from a different world or from a strange jungle, that emerges from the satchels of humans.

Aabhi frets and chirps loudly. Many Aabhis come there on hearing its chirping. They know why it had called them. Although they work in various places, they now know that they have to work in unison. In pairs of twos and fours, they fly over the surface of the lake. Bringing their wings together, they want to lift the debris. Despite their best efforts, they are unable to do so. They sit on the dome of the temple, and start chirping. This chirping is not natural. In this, there is angst at the purity of the lake being polluted.

The people who come here, do not realize that these little Aabhis have been serving *Buddhi Naagin Maa* and the lake for the past many centuries. They do not know that their activities are destroying the jungle and the hills. They do not even know that the din of their vehicles had put an end to the solitude of the wild animals; and in fear they have hid themselves in distant caves. They do not know that the *Buddhi Naagin Maa's* eyes are getting besmeared due to the petrol and diesel fumes. They do not know that these deodars, engrossed in penance, are in the last stages of their lives and would anytime be dashed to the ground. They do not know that the *baan* tree is no longer as green and beautiful as it was earlier. For them, the flowering of rhododendrons is of no importance. They are unaware of this fact that even the milkmaids of nearby villages have stopped coming there with their baskets to pluck the rhododendron flowers. These milkmaids are frightened that they might fall prey to these human faced wild animals.

Aabhi's problems have started increasing now. There was no problem in lifting the straws and leaves from the lake, but what about those strangers who come to the dark jungle with bright lights? The sharp axes and saws on their shoulders frighten the whole jungle. The trees tremble at the sight of the reflections caused by the axes and the corrupt souls of the jungle mafia. Even the winds get lost somewhere in the cloud-ridden white valleys. It seems a scary darkness has enveloped the whole jungle. No one lives there at that time. The God hides himself in heaven, somewhere in the sky. Even *Buddhi Naagin Maa*, the mother of thousands of snakes, is scared of the sharpness of those axes and has hidden silently in the inner sanctum of the temple. Instead of chirping, the birds perch on treetops and shut their beaks and watch morosely in fear.

Aabhi sees this mafia-rule in the deep dark jungle. In a moment, even the jungle seems scared by the fearsome noise of axes and saws. Then many deodars are killed. The *baan* tree would fret at being cut into numerous pieces. On hearing these frightening shrieks of death, sometimes wolves from afar howl, and sometimes the snow-leopards roar terrifyingly as if praying before Lord Shiva of Mount Kailash: Hey Shiv! Where is your Trishul? Why don't you get angry now? Why don't you perform *tandav* and destroy the cruel jungle mafia?

In the silence of the jungle, Aabhi listens to the heart-rending echoes of mafia's guffaws. Along with this laughter, a weird smell of dynamite and cannabis spreads in the air. Aabhi tries to escape the stink of poisonous arrack and crinkling currency, but the smell haunts it. In the dense darkness, it pecks and chirps at the threshold of *Buddhi Naagin Maa's* temple; but the Goddess does not listen, as she is in deep slumber or her

limbs have become weak or her divinity has dissipated. Then, in that darkness Aabhi swirls many times over the lake. Suddenly, it seems as if innumerable fireflies have settled over the lake. Aabhi knows these fireflies as it lives with them. However, it cannot help wondering why these fireflies have come to the lake so late in the night. When it approaches them, it realises that they are not fireflies – but the embers of cigarettes and *beedis*. In the dense darkness, it attempts to lift these, and in the process burns its beak.

Aabhi sees that some groups of strangers are frolicking amongst the deodars. They are carrying away the dead logs of deodar and *baan* trees on their shoulders to the awaiting trucks on the road. Aabhi cannot sleep the whole night. Even the lake cannot sleep. Deodars, *baan*, and rhododendrons too are unable to sleep. Wild bears, goats, snow-leopards, peacocks, partridges, cock, and monal, stay awake; and all these creatures just attempt to hide themselves somewhere afar. However, groups of baboons and monkeys seem to await the dawn. They search for edible leftovers amongst empty liquor bottles.

Aabhi does not know how to complain, or write a petition. It does not know who is the watchman or the guard of this jungle. It also does not know who is the range officer of this particular jungle area, and the *Pradhan*ⁱⁱ of the Panchayat. It does not even know any policeman or *thanedaar*ⁱⁱⁱ. It does not know who the Forest minister of the state is. All Aabhi knows is that it has to bathe in the clear waters of the lake before dawn; to perch on the threshold of *Buddhi Naagin Maa's* temple and sing; and pick any leaves or whits of straw that might fall in the lake so that the water of the lake does not

get dirty. Thus, the Goddess can drink pure cold water whenever thirsty; and the sun, along with the morning, can hide its jewels in it; the moon can dive in it; the innumerable stars of the sky can bathe in it; tigers, bears, and other wild animals and their young can come and drink water to their heart's content.

Buddhi Naagin Maa is helpless. She finds herself bound in countless chains. She is irritated with the fumes of incense, and the lamplight. She is disgusted with the cheers and praises of the public; and is frustrated with the supplicants. She is scared of the hidden demons inside the souls of her devotees. She has started fearing the silences of the night, but she is still hopeful that these Aabhis are her public trusted lot who would never give up. They would clear every straw or leaf that would fall in the lake, and not let it be polluted.

But Aabhi is extremely worried today. It has seen something fearsome near the temple. It could not sleep the whole night. It saw that some people had attacked a female snow leopard with something. In the silence of the night, the deodars had also listened to this thunderous attack. The other Aabhis, bears, tigers, antelopes, peacocks, monals, jujurana (western tragopans) have also heard this attack; and even the hills and the valleys have heard this. They all are as bewildered as Aabhi is; and on waking up, they trembled with fear as if under constant threat. Aabhi knows that sooner or later, this disaster would befall all of them.

The mother leopard, stumbling and crawling in extreme pain has reached the edge of the lake. It is a place which is completely dark. Aabhi sees that the leopard is breathing with difficulty, and four-five cubs are suckling her. These cubs do not know

that humans have attacked their mother. A river of blood is flowing from a wound in her back. Some of the cubs are stained with this blood; however, their mother's love has freed them from fear. Aabhi approaches the mother leopard quietly and checks her breath. There is extreme pain in the leopard's eyes. This pain is not due to fear of death, but for the life of her cubs. Helpless and sad, Aabhi is a mute witness to this play of life and death.

Many people have started searching for the leopardess. They are carrying axes and guns on their shoulders. Due to dense darkness, they do not come to the spot where the mother leopard is lying. Aabhi knows that they will drag the leopardess away. Its heart is sinking. It wants to cry out, but it seems as if something has caught its beak. It wants to flutter its wings, but it seems as if someone had clipped them. It is worried about saving the leopardess. Will it be able to do so? Can Aabhi give life to the cubs? It musters courage; opens its beak with difficulty; and spreads its wings. The flutter of its wings is the silent language in which there is a painful appeal. Slowly innumerable Aabhis reach there. Aabhi initiates the process of hiding the leopardess. It brings and drops a whit of grass on the leopardess. Within no time countless whits of grass get accrued on the leopardess. After some time, a heap of grass is deposited there. But what should Aabhi do about the cubs, still running hither and thither!

Aabhi can see even at night. It sees that two-three people who were meandering nearby have returned. They did not see the leopardess. A fat and dark-skinned man staggered towards them. An untidy bag is slung across his back, and he has an axe on his shoulder. His hair stood up like green grass singed in the fire. He looks more like a

statue than a human, with eyes sunken underneath black and white eyebrows. He has knotted his long unkempt hair with a dirty black muffler behind his head. His face is hardly visible with his beard and moustache. When he breathes out, the whiskers sway slightly up and down. He has a huge paunch; as he has used something like a drawstring in place of a belt to tighten his jeans, his paunch seems divided into two. The pockets of his jeans are swollen suggesting that there are many things in them. He wore black rubber shoes in which he had tucked in his pant's cuffs.

As he moves a little forward, he steps on dried leaves. An unusual rustling sound fills the air as if it is not dried leaves crushed under heavy shoes but some creature writhing and screaming in pain. When he lifts one of his legs to brush off the leaves and dried grass that are stuck in the shoe, he slips and falls down. He loses his grip on the axe and it falls far away. The torch rolls down the slopes, and it seems as if someone is fleeing after stealing the light. Now he has neither axe nor torchlight. He becomes weaponless – just like Aabhi. He steadies himself for a moment; but stumbles, and sliding on his back reaches the bank of the lake. For a second time, he steadies himself and starts climbing. His breath becomes heavy. A pungent smell comes from his mouth due to which the Aabhis feel queasy. After taking a few steps, he stands taking the support of a deodar stem.

He then takes out a pack of *beedis* and matchbox from his pocket. He is so drunk and unstable that despite using a number of matchsticks he is unable to strike fire. After a long time, a blue streak of fire with a frightening sound spreads on the heap of twigs. In this light, his face looks like a chopped and charred *baan* trunk. After taking a few

deep puffs, he throws down the half-smoked *beedi*, and restarts his search for the leopardess. As he takes a few steps, he suddenly hears a crackling sound.

The dried leaves and grass have caught fire. He wants to run backwards, but it seems as if the intoxication has paralysed his legs. With difficulty he manages to go back and tries to stamp out the fire with his right foot; but fails. Gradually, the tongues of flame start conversing with the wind. He again tries to extinguish the fire; but fails and falls down. Within seconds, his clothes catch fire. His comrades hear his shrieks and rush towards him. They try to put out the fire, but run backwards from the scene on seeing the wrath of the fire. He keeps screaming for help, but in vain. The wind is blowing towards him, and soon he turns into a ball of fire. Lifeless, he falls in the lake with a sickening thud. There is a huge splash in the lake. *Buddhi Naagin Maa* wakes up from her deep sleep and from behind the doors, watches him sinking and floating in the lake. The tongues of fire float on the lake for sometime. Aabhis see the burnt man disappear in the deep lake, and notice the appearance of umpteen ripples on the surface. After some time, bits of his burnt clothing start floating on the lake.

His comrades are still running. They are not concerned about their dying friend; they are only worried about themselves. They want to be saved at any cost, and want to live. But they feel that innumerable tongues of flames are chasing them, escaping from which would be very difficult.

Suddenly, Aabhi starts chirping, and then the other Aabhis also join it. The deodars, *baan*, pines, and rhododendron trees start awakening. The animals come out of

their dens. The birds too leave their nests. They feel that it is morning. All of them start singing the song of dawn.

Aabhi is again busy, picking those burnt bits of clothing spread on the surface of the lake.

Notes

ⁱ Old Snake Mother Goddess

ⁱⁱ President of Panchayat

ⁱⁱⁱ Taskmaster

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