

This story is fictionalized from an anecdote of Moreswar Damle from the book Savarkar Smruti (Memories of Savarkar); Lakshmi Process Studio, Kolhapur; pages 5-6.

Patent Patriotism

In 1925 the Government had permitted Savarkar to live at the Damle residence in Shirgaon as there was an outbreak of the plague in Ratnagiri city. The Damle family was very honored and happy to be of service to so great a man, but it was not without its problems!

Savarkar was never one to rest and take it easy. He believed that everyone should do something—be it big or small—for the country. That was patriotism. He certainly considered spreading literacy to be very patriotic. Being Savarkar, he had roped the four Damle teenage boys into teaching the basics of the language to their four illiterate servants every night after dinner. Both, the teachers and their pupils were quite aghast and frequently kicked up a fuss—but were no match for Savarkar’s determination!

This night the servants were particularly tired. They had done a lot of heavy lifting cleaning out and rearranging the sheds. Squinting at the slate and making sense of the squiggles on it was the last thing on their mind. They were all, servants and the boys, gathered in the yard behind the kitchen.

“Moroba, not tonight—no,” said Bhiku. “Tonight I am too, too tired.”

“It won’t do, Bhiku,” Moroba said. “I would much rather sleep myself, but . . .”

“*Arre* baba, what is this life! After all that extra work we did today, you still want to beat some knowledge into our brains?”

“*Tchhe!* You think I don’t have better things to do?”

“Well, then?”

“Let me thi-i-i-ink . . .” said Moroba pensively, scratching his head. “We have to give some excuse to Tatya!”

“*Arre O,*” cried Khandu, “this is no time to think. Let us just rush off to sleep before he finds us. He won’t wake us up, surely?”

“I’m not so sure he won’t!” said Gajanan. “But good idea! Let’s go.”

And they dashed off. Hardly had they gone a few feet when the boys heard their mother calling out to them. “*Poranno,* Tatya is looking for you! Where are you?”

“We’ll be right there!” yelled Moroba. He clapped a hand to his forehead. “That’s torn it! C’mon, Khandu, Bhiku, Babu, Mahadev, grab your slates and pencils. We’ll get the books.”

“Oh ho ho-o-o! Rama, Shiva, Govinda *re-e-e-e!*” they chorused sadly.

A few minutes later teachers and pupils were gathered on the front veranda. Savarkar was already there, checking his watch. “You are all late today. Let us not waste any more time.”

The four servants sent an appealing glance at the boys. Narayan, the youngest, braved a last ditch attempt. “Tatya . . .”

“Yes, Narayan, what is it?”

“Today the servants are very tired . . .”

“And how about you?” asked Savarkar.

“Me too, Tatya, and . . . and . . .”

“Go on.” Savarkar said calmly.

“Well, we are all fed up of this daily chore! The servants and us, too”

“Hmm!” said Savarkar, taking a quick turn up and down the veranda. “Okay, put your slates aside for a bit and sit down.”

Everyone complied with great alacrity. It seemed they were going to escape, and very lightly at that!

“So you are all tired and fed up,” said Savarkar. “Tell me, do you think the patriots locked up in the Cellular Jail had the luxury of saying so?”

Everyone shook their head silently.

“It was their patriotism, their participation in the freedom struggle that brought them to that horrendous fate. Let me tell you the fate of some.” Savarkar gazed into the distance, his face deadpan. “Chatar Singh was kept in a small cage—just like an animal. It was hardly big enough to lie down in and barely three feet high. He lived like that for two years plus.”

Everyone was horrified.

“Ullaskar Dutt lost his mind. He was such a bright cheerful man, so talented. Young Parmanand was whipped bloody with twenty lashes. Bhan Singh was beaten until he vomited blood. There were days when at least one or the other was dying—from untreated sickness, from hunger, from flooded lungs after a forceful feeding, from being beaten. The days were dark and darker.”

There was a pin drop silence. Only the chirruping of the crickets rang out deafeningly.

“And yet—*yet* did anyone complain and sit around twiddling their thumbs? No!” Savarkar looked intently at them, one by one. “We spread the love of Hindustan, secretly of course! We even started a learning center; Nalanda University we used to call it. So many convicts learned to read and write, sometimes in two-three languages. . . . They didn’t get fed up. Learning and knowledge are very important.”

There was a restless shuffling of feet.

“Even in the inhuman conditions of Andaman we achieved so much; what can we not achieve here? Should we let a little inconvenience come in our way? Can we not exert ourselves a little for our Mother India? Is it really that much of a hardship for you all to give up some time to teach and learn? Is it a chore, and a boring one at that?”

“No, no, Tatya,” they said in one voice, much abashed. “We’ll not complain again, never.”

Teachers and pupils grabbed their books and pencils and got to work. They had never thought of it like that. However had Tatyá survived it all—and still remained so full of vigor to work for Hindustan!

- Anurupa Cinar