



What is my Identity?¹

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Translated by

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Joidhon Soren lies on a bed in one of the railway hospitals of Mahuapara. He is delirious and mutters incoherently. His eyes are fixed on the ceiling with an unblinking stare and he fails to recognize anyone in the room, not even his son or the mother of his son. He mutters one word repeatedly, “Kailash!”

Who is Kailash? He is Joidhon’s drinking buddy, a friend with whom he has spent many an evening at the local drinking den called *handi-bhati*, where poor men go to drink cheap liquor. Yes, Joidhon is an alcoholic and is suffering the after-effects of chronic alcoholism. He was brought to the hospital with a severely bloated stomach, the skin as tightly stretched as a Santal drum. After the fluids were drained out, his stomach became flat again but he was seized by sudden fits. From time to time, he would leap up and try to run out of the room. But his son and the mother of his son - that woman who had left him for another man - would hold him back and force him down on the bed again. Unable to fight their combined strength, he would glare at them balefully and utter this scream in Santali, “*Mase, mase ya, Kailash, mase, mase*. Pour me a drink and chase them out. *Mase, Mase...*”²

But Kailash could not hear Joidhon’s screams. Arrack had killed him some time ago.

¹ The original story in Santali “Oprom do Cet’ Tin...?” was first published in *Jug Sirijol: Monthly Literary & Cultural Journal in Santali*, March 2012, pp. 12-15 and later, in his book, *Sengel Buru*, SLCS, Kolkata, 2013, pp. 40-50.

² “Help me, help me, friend!” in colloquial Santali.



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This is Joidhon Soren today, the same Joidhon whose feats of strength had once been legendary in Santal Parganas. With a chest as broad as a rock, arms as hard as wooden pestles and legs as sturdy as an old thorn tree, he had been known for his powerful Herculean body. He had earned fame during the *Khasi-hapara*, a popular football tournament where teams from many Santal villages had competed for the final trophy: a goat or *khasi*. Joidhon had been the most formidable player of the *Khasi-hapara*. None could overthrow him. He had once broken an opponent's leg simply by crashing into him during a game – that poor fellow still walked with a limp! As a student at the Industrial Training Institute or ITI, Dumka, he had played as a defender in the college football team and his opponents had stayed away from the goal-post whenever he was near it.

In his own village of Sangrampur, he had been known for other qualities too, particularly his helpful nature. He had always been happy to lend a hand with work that required strength and tenacity, such as digging the boundaries of paddy fields and the beds of ponds after a long spell of summer. He had helped neighbours to plough their fields with aggressive bullocks. He had helped to carry huge sheaves of paddy to the threshing floor after harvest. Whenever a log of hard knotted wood had to be split with an axe, his help had been invariably sought. Unlike other young men, he had not shied away from field work even after becoming a student. It is possible he might even have gloried in the chance to display his superior strength in front of admiring onlookers. The story of how he had once stopped an angry bull from stampeding by grabbing its horns had become legendary. Such had been the nature of this young man from Sangrampur village.

Sadly, that same Joidhon Soren is known today as an alcoholic; the strength of his Herculean body has been drained out with the liquor and only its outer frame remains.



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On completing his technical training at ITI, Dumka, Joidhon had been recruited at the Mahuapara railway workshop in West Bengal. Many Santals had also joined the same workshop that year. It was said that a team of railway officials from Bengal had visited ITI, Dumka, after being tipped off that the local Santal adivasis were honest and hard-working. Almost the entire batch had been recruited.

So Joidhon had started a new life in Bengal. A wit has called this world the “*Hujjat-e-Bengal*”³ and it was indeed a strange, problem-prone place for the Santals. A saying goes that the wheels of a train turn both ways, yet it continues to run. In a railway workshop too, some worked while others stayed idle.

While most of the Santals managed to fit into the alien world of the railway workshop, some could not tolerate the language habitual to it. Since their own speech was gentle and courteous, they were repulsed by the filthy expletives tossed around so casually by many non-Santal workers. After a few months, some of them decided to return home. They reasoned, “There’s plenty of land at home, so why slog like beasts here? Let’s return home and plough our own fields? Why live among these *dikus*?⁴ Why hear their filthy abuses all day long?” Joidhon was among those who stayed and continued to work.

The Bengali workers in that railway workshop were very cunning. They chose the easy jobs for themselves and passed on the difficult ones to migrant workers, like the Biharis

³ This Urdu term is used in regional parlance to indicate the ‘union’ culture of Bengal and the resultant problems faced by the public.

⁴*Diku* is a term applied by many tribal/ adivasi groups of Jharkhand to Hindus of the better class, often in a derogatory sense. It does not include Muslims or dalits.



and the Santals. Some Bengali workers managed to get by without doing any manual work; they shared their incentives with the migrant workers who willingly worked for them. These poor migrant workers accepted additional work because it earns them a little extra money on the side, which they usually spent at the local *handi-bhati*. There were many such pubs around the railway workshop. There were also many small traders and moneylenders in the nearby marketplace. For the drinking man, there was always ready cash but it was usually the migrant worker who was the best ‘potential customer’.

As time went by, Joidhon adapted to his new life and even grew fond of it. This was not merely the result of his increasing skill at work; he also started playing for the railway football team and became popular among the avid football fans of Bengal. His exploits on the football field were greeted with enthusiasm: “*Ei chele ta, ki darun phutbol khele!*”⁵ Hence, he soon found many friends at the workshop; at the same time, he also picked up a few drinking buddies. Among them was Kailash, a migrant from Bihar of the Musahar caste. In his eating and drinking habits, Kailash was not so different from most Santal drunkards. Like them, he too enjoyed a spicy dish of pork while guzzling cheap liquor at the *handi-bhati*. Soon Joidhon and Kailash were inseparable. At the workshop, they worked side-by-side. They earned a lot of extra money by accepting additional work. Joidhon, in fact, was capable of doing the work of four men all by himself. But where did all that money go? Yes, most of it flowed into the local *handi-bhati*, where these two friends drank arrack every evening.

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Five years passed and Joidhon was married to a young woman named Sarojini Besra. She was from a well-to-do Santal family, also comely and well-educated with an M.A. degree.

⁵ “That young fellow, how well he plays football!” in standard Bengali.



The match surprised some people since Joidhon was only a technical hand in a railway workshop. Perhaps, Sarojini was attracted to his 'secure' government job and his rugged and virile personality. Also, like other women in her position, she hoped to mould him into her own genteel ways after marriage.

At first, Joidhon and Sarojini were ecstatically happy. They seemed to have discovered a vortex of passion and could scarcely keep away from each other. A year after marriage, Sarojini gave birth to a child, a sweet-looking boy whom they named Munna. As time passed by, the storm of their passion subsided. Sarojini changed into a doting mother whose attention became fixed on her child and she failed to reach out to her husband. The birth of a child can disrupt the rhythm of married life in strange ways and so it was with them. Oppressed by a sense of emptiness at home, Joidhon sought the company of his drinking buddies. He started returning home every night drunk.

Sarojini was agitated by this change in her husband. She blamed his friends and started viewing them with deep aversion. In the days that followed, she tried every feminine wile to coax her husband back. But it was too late. Joidhon had become a compulsive alcoholic and preferred the company of his drinking buddies. Sarojini slowly realized that Joidhon could not be trusted with their future, so she started looking for a job and, being an educated woman with an M.A. degree, she soon got appointed as a teacher in a good private school nearby. All this was done without Joidhon's knowledge and, not surprisingly, it led to their first serious fight.

On learning of his wife's job, Joidhon was filled with anger and shame. He thought, "She's doing this to spite me. She wants to show people she's smarter than me. She wants to shame me in front of the world."



Understanding the state of his mind, Sarojini tried to reason with him gently, “Why does my working outside home bother you so much? Nowadays men and women are working like this everywhere. Look at the *dikus*. Don’t they work side-by-side for their family and their children’s future? The world is becoming very expensive now and we both need to earn for Munna’s future.”

But Joidhon was not appeased. Though remaining outwardly calm, his sense of injury and shame grew. Men feel threatened by wives who climb the social ladder faster than them and Joidhon was no exception. As time went by, the gulf between them widened until they barely spoke to each other. If Joidhon spoke, his words were barbed with cruel taunts. Sarojini bore all this in silence, but a seed of bitterness was sown in her heart, which rapidly grew and soon bore fruit.

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Human beings are subject to strange foibles. We seek a partner to suit our own ways, but soon realize that the only true meeting is the meeting of minds. This happened with Sarojini. After marriage, she realized the widening gap between her and Joidhon. She felt the need for another man with whom she could share all her thoughts. It was during this time that a young *diku* man joined the school where she worked. His appearance was smart, his manners very pleasant and he was still a bachelor. Sarojini and the *diku* teacher were drawn to each other. They started spending more time together.

Within a short time, Sarojini’s friendship with the *diku* teacher had become a subject of gossip in the neighbourhood. How long can stories of this nature escape the gossip-mongers? It is sad but true that most people savour them, passing them around freely after garnishing the truth with some fiction.



How long could a story of that nature remain hidden from Joidhon? One fine day, it reached his ears and he tried to drown his anger by drinking even more liquor. That evening, when Sarojini stepped into the house, he started thrashing her with a stick. All the while, he roared with drunken fury, “Slut, are you working for this, dressed-up like a tart? I know about you now! You’re working only for your pleasure, not for the family! You can’t fool me anymore, you bitch! I warn you, if you step out again, I’ll break your legs!”

Perhaps, Sarojini had already prepared for this day. So she instantly caught hold of the stick, and spoke in a loud, ringing voice, “Put down the stick, Joidhon! I warn you, I’ll report you to the police if you don’t! If you go to jail, no one will bail you out! You will lose your job! I warn you!”

Joidhon was startled by Sarojini’s aggressive tone. He had not expected his docile wife to react in this manner – she had even threatened to report him at the police-station and take away his job! Sarojini’s threats had the desired effect. Joidhon immediately receded into silence and remained silent for many days. But he also nursed his fury in silence, like fire smouldering inside a volcano.

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Sarojini went about her work as usual. She continued her friendship with the *diku* teacher openly, for now her sense of fear was gone. It is rightly said that the one who can overcome fear is the real winner.

As for Joidhon, he started drinking to the point of stupefaction. Men often drink to find courage. When in a drunken stupor, they lose all fear and confront their worst enemy



without a tremor. Joidhon's Santal friends taunted him in this manner, "*Henda ya*,⁶ Joidhon, how can you tolerate all this? If our wives behaved like this, we would thrash them black and blue! But you don't seem to mind even when your wife lives with a *diku*!" On hearing their words, Joidhon felt a sense of burning shame, as though his blood were boiling inside a volcano of fire. But he had nothing to say to his wife. He only waited for a chance to catch her alone with the *diku* teacher.

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Joidhon did not have to wait long. One day, after he left for work, Sarojini invited her friend over to help with some paper correction. They sat in the main room, sipping tea and chatting casually. Suddenly, Joidhon entered the house and, in an instant, all three were thrown into a state of indescribable frenzy. That instant, Joidhon lost all control over himself. He pulled down a heavy wooden rod and started raining blows upon his wife and the hated *diku* man. The volcano inside him erupted with terrifying violence.

Sarojini managed to escape from the house and raise an alarm among the neighbours. With great difficulty, they restrained Joidhon. While struggling in their grasp, he thundered, "Leave my house, you bitch, and don't come back! I'll kill you both if I see you!" In the midst of this mayhem, a little boy stood behind the door and watched in stunned silence. It was Munna, their ten-year old son. Today, perhaps, he is beginning to understand what really happened between his parents that day.

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⁶ "*Henda ya*" may be roughly translated as "Hey buddy" in English; it is a colloquial term used commonly among Santal men while talking to their own peer group or their subordinates/ servants. An equivalent term used for women is "*Henda na*".



Today, as Joidhon struggles for life inside a railway hospital, his son also struggles for an identity in the world outside. Sarojini has come to visit Joidhon at this final hour, but in the company of her *diku* husband. She is seeing Joidhon after five years and today her eyes reflect only deep compassion. She also ponders over her son's words, "I'm told that father broke down after you left, and spent his days and nights in tears. He knew he had sinned against you... maybe, he wanted to pay for it with his life!"

The person most affected by this turn of events is Munna, who is in his fifteenth year. He is preparing for the Matriculation Examination. As the brightest student of his class, he has outscored all other students in the class test. But he faces defeat in the test of life. No one guesses his inner turmoil, as he struggles to break free from the tentacles that bind him. He is filled with uncertainty.

For, as his father lies on the death-bed, Munna keeps asking himself this question, "After my father's death, what will my identity be: the son of Joidhon, who died an alcoholic's death or the son of Sarojini, who left her husband and married a *diku*?"

Translated from the Santali original by Ivy Imogene Hansdak

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