

TARIQ CHHATARI

The Line

JUST BEFORE SETTING, the sun had hung peculiar banners in the clouded sky. These banners were red and also yellow. The sky seemed to be divided into twin-colored bands. A dark line could be seen where the two colors met. If you looked closely, you could also see some white shadows lurking close by. With even the slightest quiver in the white shadows, the red and yellow colors seemed to darken and a strange primeval fear seemed to percolate in the atmosphere. Never before had such strange white shadows appeared in the sky above this hamlet, nor had they ever managed to so neatly divide the sky into red and yellow bands. But today ...

This fearsome evening had not had an ominous morning. Though the sky had been overcast from the start, the clouds were not dark. As the day wore on, a large white cloud, which was white on the surface but hid an inky blackness in its bosom, had drifted up from the west and spread itself gradually over the entire sky. Till then, small tufts of clouds had been frolicking among themselves, just like the Hindus and Muslims who hopped and skipped across the line of communal differences lived and played together in the hamlet.

It was the seventh day in the month of Bhadon and the temple was being decorated for tomorrow—for Krishna Ashtami, the birth of the Lord. In the small room below the temple, the idol was being dressed in all its finery and put in the gaily colored and brightly festooned little crib. The Lord would be born at the stroke of midnight—everyone knew that, Hindus and Muslims alike.

“No, no, Hameed ... not so high,” squealed Kusum, and Hameed immediately slowed the swing. Kusum was Pandit Brij Kishore’s darling daughter. As she got off the rope-swing dangling from a branch of the neem tree, Hameed took out a handful of ripe neem berries from the pocket of his kurta and gave them to her. She loved to eat those luscious

berries, almost as much as Hameed loved to play the flute. Pandit Brij Kishore turned around as the first notes of Hameed's flute reached his ears. Kusum was filling a brass pitcher with water and Hameed was sitting at the edge of the well playing the flute with his eyes closed. Pandit-ji smiled, got up and walked to the well. Placing his hand on Hameed's head, he said, "Truly, you are Kanhaiya ... my Kanhaiya. This time, I will dress you as Kanhaiya and make you sit in the Janam Ashtami procession."

And Hameed felt as though he was sitting, not beside the well, but in the golden chariot playing his flute, and all around him were the fair maidens of Brindavan. He searched the crowd for Kusum. He looked again and saw a group of women wearing silken *ghararas* and dupattas reciting a *milaad*. Kusum was sitting beside his Amma-jaan. When several women started singing together, he could see Kusum's lips also moving. She seemed to be singing along with the other women. The flute still rested on his lips. Was he playing the flute or was it the sound of Kusum singing the *milaad*? He didn't know. Then there was a clamor—inside of him and outside. It was the sound of children's voices. Perhaps school had just gotten over and the children were scrambling home. Hameed suddenly came to his senses and began to walk behind Pandit Brij Kishore.

Hameed was the son of Faqir Muhammad. He had run away from his school at the mosque to sit in his neighbor Pandit Brij Kishore's pathshala. Pandit Brij Kishore loved him dearly, more than all his other pupils, and affectionately called him Kanhaiya. Hameed dreamt of Krishna and the Ashtami festival and rocked his thoughts like the idol of infant Krishna being rocked in its gilded crib.

Pandit-ji was standing in the sanctum in front of the image of Krishan Bhagwan. Hameed paused at the doorway and looked closely at the Lord with the flute at His lips. Pandit-ji offered water to the deity, lit the lamp and closed his eyes in prayer. Hameed said his own prayer: "Please, Allah Miyan, let the Ashtami come quickly, let me wear the tiara and become Kanhaiya and play the flute ..."

He crossed his right foot over his left and stood on tiptoe. He felt like taking the flute from the idol inside the temple and resting it against his own pursed lips. But his heart was aflutter. He could hear the sound of distant thunder. He looked up and saw banks of dark clouds rumbling and growling in the sky. Soon it would rain. It was only appropriate that it should, for hadn't Kanhaiya been born on just such a dark, rainy night. Soon the women of the hamlet would go for a ritual washing of His

soiled diapers. At last, night had come. How eagerly he had been waiting for it! Tomorrow was Janam Ashtami. His uneasiness left him and he felt light and joyful.

Night fell. The sleep from Hameed's eyes changed magically into the lilting notes of Krishna's flute. The flute played on and on all night long and Hameed hopped and skipped in the temple courtyard like the playful waves of the Jamuna River. The premises housed the temple itself, a courtyard and a high-roofed veranda. In a corner stood a gleaming palanquin mounted on a brass-plated chariot, an elaborate four-legged affair burnished with ornate, beautifully embossed brass plates. Hameed danced over and stood close by the palanquin. He sat down and felt the aeons passing by. He felt as though he was growing taller and bigger and mightier. On his finger was a chakra that whirled with amazing speed. Hameed could feel his own being itself dissolve and merge with every atom, every particle of the universe. His eyes were open. He could see everything in the world—the bright rays of the sun and the dense blackness of the night. Slowly, the night seeped into his eyes. As the cattle made their way to the fields with bells tinkling around their necks, and the muezzin in the mosque and the bells in the temple began to herald a new day, Hameed ran to seek shelter and sleep in Pandit Brij Kishore's lap.

In the morning several well-meaning people from the hamlet assembled in the temple courtyard. Bakhshi-ji, a pillar of the local community, asked Pandit-ji, "So, who have you chosen to be the Child this time?"

Hameed's innocent pranks and guileless face danced before Pandit Brij Kishore's eyes. He said, "Kanhaiya will be Krishna."

People looked at each other. Vaid-ji stuttered, "Who? Kanhaiya?"

Pandit-ji shook himself and said, "I mean Hameed."

"Hameed?!" Several people objected simultaneously. Then there was silence. Someone broke the silence. "But the child must be a Hindu!"

Before Pandit Brij Kishore could answer, Bakshi-ji pounced, "But this is unheard of ... how can you have a Muslim child as Krishan-ji on Ashtami?"

Seth Dugar Mal cleared his throat and said, "It is all very well, Pandit-ji, that we must abolish these differences of caste and creed, but ..."

After a great deal of debate, the matter was settled. Hameed was chosen. But some people left the temple courtyard to show their displeasure.

The preparations began at noon. Pandit-ji bathed Hameed then began the elaborate ritual of dressing him. First a light dye made of indigo was patted all over his body. A lead oxide that gave off a faint effulgent

shade of pink was soaked, then ground to a paste and rubbed on Hameed's face. As the paste began to dry, a pale blue and pink powder was dusted over it. A glittering belt encircled his waist, a necklace gleamed around his throat, and a brocade tiara glowed on his head. There was also a flute in his hand and a multicolored chunri was looped from his left shoulder to his waist. Pandit Brij Kishore had transformed his Kanhaiya into the real Krishan Bhagwan. Hands folded, he bowed before his Lord.

And then the wheels of the chariot began to move. At the head of the procession walked six groups of singers and beside the palanquin Pandit-ji himself, holding a tray of offerings. The devout came in hordes, with offerings and flowers, clamoring to touch the Lord's feet and receive His blessings. By the time the procession wound its way through the narrow paths and alleys and reached the mosque, the sun too had nearly finished its trek across the skies. The muezzin was waiting for the procession to pass before he called the faithful to the evening prayer. The procession stopped beside the mosque. The kirtan singers sang with gusto. Pandit-ji blew the conch shell with all his might.

At the sound of the conch, the drummers stepped up the tempo. From the heart of this cacophony, a horrendous cry rang out as a stone, pelted from the direction of the mosque, hit Krishan Bhagwan squarely on the head and drew a blood-red line across his forehead. The blood from Krishan Bhagwan's forehead spurted, snuffing out the lamp in the ceremonial tray. The stone was aimed at Krishan Bhagwan. It wounded Hameed. And innocent Kanhaiya's blood snuffed out the lamp for the puja.

Chaos broke out. Loud, hysterical voices crying for blood besieged the homes of Muslims. People swarmed towards the mosque. Pandit Brij Kishore plunged through the crowds to find a young man hacking away at the door of the mosque with an axe. He snatched the axe away. The air was rent by the cry: "*Nara-e-Takbir ... Allah-o-Akbar!*" He ran towards the sound and saw Seth Dungan Mal and Ramanand trying to pacify the crowd.

"Brother, what is this? We are brothers, aren't we? We were born on this soil and we shall ..."

"And we shall die on this soil!" came the scream.

Brutish rage and terror took over. Seth Dungan Mal and Ramanand were killed. Now there was no stopping the mobs. No one knew what would happen next. Pandit-ji ran towards the house of Banda Khan from where he could hear jubilant cries of "*Jai Bajrang Bali!*" He found Banda

Khan's doorway spewing flames and heard the piteous cries of women and children trapped behind that wall of fire.

Pandit-ji looked at the mob. Fear and horror were in their eyes. They seemed to be asking: "What's happening? This shouldn't be happening." But still, it was happening. It was as though something was going on right in front of their eyes without their wanting it to. But how? And why? What was this force that was invisible yet caused all this ...

In the midst of it all, Pandit-ji noticed that several people were looking up at the sky. The sky that sheltered them was today adorned in the most peculiar colors. It was streaked with red and also yellow. A dark line could be seen where the two colors met. If you looked closely, you could see some white shadows lurking close by. The red and yellow colors seemed to darken with the slightest quiver in the white shadows and a strange primeval fear seemed to percolate in the atmosphere. Never before had such strange white shadows appeared in the sky above this hamlet, nor had they ever managed to so neatly divide the sky into red and yellow bands. But today ...

Pandit Brij Kishore ran towards the palanquin. A man had picked up the axe from beside Krishan Bhagwan—the ceremonial axe with which the Lord slew Evil—and he stood waving it before a terrified Kanhaiya. Every year, the sharp-edged axe was kept in the palanquin and, at the end of the Ashtami procession, Krishan Bhagwan slew the evil Kansa, thus symbolizing the victory of good over evil.

A muffled cry escaped Pandit-ji's lips, "What is this ... this is Krishan Bhagwan ... our Kanhaiya."

Har Prasad had just sung the *aarti*. Now he spoke in a dull, flat voice, "No ... this is Hameed. Faqir Muhammad's son." Several people spoke up, "Yes, yes, this is Hameed, the son of a Musalman. They have insulted our Krishan Bhagwan. They threw a stone at the palanquin. It hit Bhagwan-ji. Look at the blood dripping from his forehead. And now these cowards are hiding in their homes."

The man with the axe swung it in the air and roared, "We will avenge this outrage. Today we will ..."

"NO ..." Pandit-ji shouted and lunged at the axe. The man threw Pandit-ji down from the palanquin and struck Hameed a mighty blow.

Resplendent, glowing, Krishan Bhagwan fell ... scattering the shining tiara, the spangled necklace and the glittering waistband. A thin red line formed on the ground. Some people stood on one side of the line, some on the other. There was clamor on both sides. It was difficult to tell whether the noise was greater on this side or on the other. □

—Translated by Rakshanda Jalil

Glossary

Aarti (*ārtī*): part of the puja, when the ceremonial lamp is lit and offerings are made to the deity.

Bhadon (Bhādōṅ): the month of the rains.

gharara (*gharāra*): elaborate two-legged garment with an excessively flared hem, worn with a short top and dupatta.

Krishna Ashtami (*ashṭamī*), also Janam Ashtami (*janam ashṭamī*): Eighth day of the month of Bhadon when Lord Krishna is said to have been born to Janaki and Vasudev. However, due to a prophecy that the child would destroy his evil uncle, the King Kansa, Vasudev hid the infant in a basket, swam across the swollen Jamuna River on a dark rainy night and gave him to Yashoda to raise and rear in safety.

milaad (*milād*): abbreviation of Milādu 'n-Nabī, when congregational hymns are sung in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, interspersed with prose passages on his life and teachings.