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The Beast^{*}

(From the Novella *Nambardār kā Nīlā*)

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: How do you pack a fable, murder-mystery, puzzle, and myth into a hundred pages and lace it with humor? You simply cannot. This is why Syed Muhammad Ashraf's novella, *Nambardār kā Nīlā*, is an unparalleled feat in literature.

Nambardār kā Nīlā is the story of a village administrator, Thakur Udal Singh, who decides to raise a blue bull to protect his ill-gained riches and thereby creates a rein of terror that serves to make his machinations impervious to challenge. Neela the bull proves most effective and becomes a bestial incarnation of Udal Singh's avariciousness. Udal Singh's attachment to Neela has not the slightest hint of affection for an animal, but all the bearings of a man's fondness for his favorite weapon. We see that when he fears this weapon to be ineffective, it becomes worthless in his eyes. Finally unburdened of the cares of guarding his property, Udal Singh finds the time to spread his tentacles, and, as his power and wealth grow, his injustices increase. Neela's ravages against the village folks serve the purpose of terrorizing them and solidifying the Thakur's hold on the lives of his subjects.

Udal Singh's son, Onkar, hatches an elaborate plan to abduct a village girl successfully covering his tracks and misleading the investigation. However, one day Onkar's identity is accidentally revealed and the victim decides to take her revenge on him. Ironically, it is Onkar's elaborate plan itself that provides her with an unlikely accomplice from among the members of Udal Singh's family. The revenge is carried out successfully but entails tragic consequences for the victim, and carries away the lives of three people in its sweep. The murders are plotted in a way that leaves the reader with a series of clues to make his own deductions about the identity of the murderer(s). We

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find that Neela too offers a clue to the identity of the murderer. The destructions caused by the bull bring things to a head. Reacting to his unnatural diet and accustomed to unbridled conduct, the bull goes on a rampage, destroying property and attacking people. This gives rise to a wave of crimes by petty criminals taking advantage of Neela's notorious escapades and to local politicians using it to settle old scores with their opponents. It seems that even animals are plotting to take advantage of Neela's credentials in order to take over the town.

The authorities finally succumb to public pressure and order Neela killed. Udal Singh prevaricates until he discovers a new method of safekeeping his wealth. However, the destiny of the bull and Udal Singh have become entwined, and the separation of the two must carry consequences for both. It is this myth which Syed Muhammad Ashraf has created by merging the beastly characteristics of man and animal. This symbolism is underlined even in their death when the blood of the two is mixed and the disemboweled body of the man and the dying beast become the death of the same creature.

In his command over the depiction of India's rural culture, Syed Muhammad Ashraf reminds the reader of the finest works of Abul Fazal Siddiqi and Syed Rafiq Husain. His narrative is strewn with clues to a universe in which the narrative is embedded. He has pointed out the significance of using fields of red-gram (arhar dal) as a locale because of the popular belief that they engender the most horrible and the most pleasant incidents. He uses humor to balance the tragic incidents in the story, without which the story would run the risk of becoming reportage. Moreover, Syed Muhammad Ashraf's use of humor also cushions the sensibilities of the reader against the shock of horrible incidents. In at least one instance, humor also allows for the self-delineation of a character, as in the case of Thakur Udal Singh taking an omen from the chirping of a partridge. Such chirping is considered an auspicious sign by would-be thieves.

There is something like a geometrical pattern to the plot. The coordinates of the locales of different incidents and the actions of characters overlap. The retribution is exacted in locales identical to the scenes of the crime. Neela walks into the story over a breached wall and departs the same way. It is the same breach that admits the doers of evil and the agents of violent retribution. The two kidnapping incidents have identical plots. While Neela the bull supervises the sowing of sin, he also presides when the crop is ready for harvesting.

The story has a fable-like structure and its sarcastic tone is reminiscent of another famous fable, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. However, unlike the latter, the story of *Nambardār kā Nīlā* follows the traditional logic and moral of Urdu classical literature, where evil is not

allowed to remain adrift once identified. It also confirms the greater universal logic that every device of terror ultimately recoils on its perpetrator.

No doubt this is not the last we will hear of Syed Muhammad Ashraf's *Nambardār kā Nilā*.]

THAKUR UDAL SINGH had raised Neela the blue bull from a calf. His reasons for doing so were obscure and have remained a mystery.

Udal Singh was, simultaneously, the resident of a village, town and city. He had property in all three places. His administrative seat was in the village where he also had his ancestral lands and a large house. In town he was chairman of the local council and had his other residence. Finally, his business and his villa were in the city. Udal Singh gave equal attention to the cares of administration, politics and business.

One day there was a theft at his village abode. About half a kilo of gold, twenty kilos of silver utensils, and ten thousand rupees in cash were stolen, along with a good thirty or forty pieces of gold jewellery pawned to him in pledge for loans. Driving from town in his jeep, he arrived like a whirlwind and had the guards of the village house thrashed so severely that they had to seek medical help. Crying bitterly, they eventually confessed that the night before they had sat down to smoke with some men who had arrived from another village with a wedding party. The guards had exchanged their bidis with the visitors' cigarettes and after smoking them they had lost consciousness. The guard dogs were also found dead behind the house, their mouths oozing a blue fluid. They had been fed slivers of meat laced with vomit nut. When accusations were leveled at the village the wedding party had come from, the family in question denied having any connection to the men who smoked cigarettes. They said that they must have been members of the bride's family, some distant relatives from out of town who had come to observe the ceremonies.

Thakur Udal Singh could only gnash his teeth in frustration. He waited impatiently for the night. When it was dark—which quickly follows evenings in a village—he had the gates of the house locked. Then he went and removed the planks from the third step of the staircase in the building which stood on the periphery of the courtyard at the other end of the house, and he satisfied himself that the other three oil canisters filled with gold jewellery were untouched. These had once belonged to debtors who had pawned them to him but they had lost them for the non-payment of interest. The lot now belonged to him and it contained

around eleven kilos of gold jewellery. To leave it in the city villa would have been tantamount to bartering away his night's sleep for fear of the tax authorities. In the town residence, the secret chamber—made by the mason whose clothes were recovered by the lakeside a day after the construction was completed—was too small even to hoard the riches Udal Singh had acquired from his position as the chairman of the Town Council and from operating the cold storage in the city.

Ninety percent of the potatoes kept in cold storage had been bought by Udal Singh. In the account books, however, it was listed in the name of the village farmers. Once, an income tax officer summoned the farmers to the city office to investigate the matter. The farmers verified that all entries in the account books were correct. These were the same farmers who pawned their gold with Thakur Udal Singh every monsoon and winter in order to get money from him to provide for their families.

Two days before the farmers gave their statements in the city, the Thakur had those same farmers assembled in the courtyard of the village house. He had brought along a city lawyer to prepare them for the cross-examination that awaited them.

The Thakur showed the farmers the blue and red receipt books and asked, "Do you recognize these?"

The farmers answered with one voice: "No, we don't recognize them!"

The city lawyer looked askance at the Thakur and began puffing more quickly on his cigarette.

The Thakur gnashed his teeth and told the farmers that they did recognize them because their thumbprints were on them. Then he made all of them put their thumbprints on the books.

In the Income Tax Office, the farmers said with one voice: "Now we recognize these books and all the potatoes in cold storage belong to us. These books are called account books and they carry our thumbprints!"

Baffled by their statement, the income tax officer sent for his inspector from the other room. The inspector then explained: "Sir, I've investigated the matter for several days dressed as a farmer in the vicinity of the cold storage. All those potatoes belong to the owner of the cold storage. These farmers have been coached."

The officer returned to his chamber and recorded the farmers' statements on paper. All of them repeated the refrain: "We are farmers. We grow potatoes. Potatoes are cheap when the crop is harvested so we put them away in cold storage. After some time has passed the potatoes are taken out and sold at a good profit. And, indeed those are our thumb-

prints on the red-and-blue account books.”

The expression on their faces was more or less truthful. Every single word uttered by them was also true. The only piece of information that might have been added to their statements was that when the crop was harvested, Udal Singh bought it from them at throwaway prices because they owed him interest on their loans.

The tax officer studied the farmers' faces and, after completing the paperwork, he felt satisfied that all the necessary steps had been completed before the case-file was closed: the case was investigated, suspicions were brought forward, witnesses were summoned to be cross-examined, statements were recorded, and the verdict was announced.

After stepping out of the office, the Thakur had bowed from the waist, his hands clasped together in an expression of gratitude, and offered his regrets that the officer had been unnecessarily put to the trouble of recording so many witnesses' statements in the case. The officer had also bowed to him in return and replied: “It was only my duty!”

The Thakur continued visiting the village for several days after the theft. Come evening, he would plant himself in his reception room where he continued to gnash his teeth and curse the guards who had accepted the drugged cigarettes from thieves.

One day, as he was seated there, he heard a commotion outdoors. He came out and saw a female of the blue bull and her two calves running around panting in the courtyard, their hooves raising clouds of dust.

After the wheat had been harvested, the fields became an open expanse and offered no refuge. The dogs chasing the mother and her slow-moving calves must have forced the poor creature to run towards the village.

The cow jumped over the breach in the village house wall and got out, but after moving a few steps she looked back and whisked her tail sharply. As she turned towards the village house again, the dogs gave chase, and she finally escaped in the direction of the fields. Her wide-eyed calves, who were the size of large dogs, were caught and tied to the neem tree.

One of the calves circled around the tree continuously. When the rope got wrapped around the trunk and became twisted, his eyes bulged out from the constriction and he began circling in the opposite direction. His head was bleeding from constantly butting against the trunk. After some time, as the sun was beginning to set, the calf fell down. He heaved

a few quick breaths, vomited blood, and died. The legs of the other calf had been tied up, which kept him from striking his head against the tree.

The villagers had arrived by then and one old man commented in a grief-stricken voice: "O my mother! Mother goddess has been killed!"

When he heard that, Udal Singh's eyes glinted with anger. He shouted at the old man to shut up and told those assembled that if the animals had not been secured, they would have entered the houses of the poor village farmers and crushed their little ones under their hooves. The villagers gave thanks to God that because of Thakur Udal Singh the lives of their children were spared that day.

Thakur Udal Singh had seen the vigor and strength of the dying calf with his own eyes. After inspecting the marks left on the neem trunk by his skull, the Thakur decided that he would raise the surviving calf himself—his reason being that, in the first place, the calf was the mother goddess; secondly, he could gore any strangers and crush them under his hooves; besides, it wasn't costly to feed him since he could be grazed in the Thakur's own fields; and, finally, the animal had no fondness for meat slivers.

Some of the time he kept the bull in the village, and the rest of the time in town. With only five miles separating the village house from the town residence, it wasn't inconvenient. Udal Singh named the blue bull Neela, and people called him Neela of the Thakur.

Raising the bull posed many problems in the beginning. He was an animal of the wild and would not accept fetters. He was starved, which somewhat reduced his ferociousness, then he was overfed. This method evidently suppressed his wild nature. The villagers and the townsfolk found in the beast an object of amusement. Thakur Udal Singh always kept him tethered. For breakfast he was fed greens, for lunch a mix of coarse grains, and for dinner he was given a diet of molasses and whole grains. Sometimes he also ate soup, when pure mustard oil was fed to him through a hollow bamboo tube. Within two years his chest filled in with flesh, his body became well-rounded and his horns crescent-shaped. A thatch of white hair also appeared on his forehead.

One day Thakur Udal Singh realized that Neela only accepted his halter-rope out of habit. He was strong enough to fly away with the rope, and the yokel at its other end, with just a leap. "Will he run away if I remove the rope?" he wondered. Then he remembered something that brought a smile to his face.

That night, when the Thakur lay down in the courtyard of the village house, he again recalled last year's election for the chairmanship of the

Town Council. Out of the fifteen members elected to the Council, seven were in his camp and the rest were in the camp of his rival, Mahmood. Thakur Udal Singh had been elected unopposed to the chairman's seat for the last twenty years. The vote by the Council members was a mere formality. But the times were changing and strange incomprehensible slogans were being heard, such as, "Why must we have the Thakur time after time!" and "Say nay to one continuous regime!" or "Give us a break and send the Thakur packing...!" and so on.

Although five days still remained before the election of the chairman, the rival camp had already started celebrating victory because they had the support of the majority of the members. The Thakur became incensed whenever the noises of their celebrations reached him. He would lie on the bare charpoy on the roof of his residence without sleeping a wink.

Three days before the election, Jhamman Jatav, a member of the Council, disappeared. A report of his disappearance was lodged with the police by Thakur Udal Singh. In it he alleged that Jhamman Jatav secretly supported his candidacy and that his rival, Mahmood, had learned about it and had him kidnapped and killed. Mahmood for his part also registered a report with the police in which charges of a similar nature were leveled against Thakur Udal Singh, and Jhamman's support of his own candidacy was alleged.

The police investigation shifted into top gear. That is, both of the accused were threatened with the confiscation of their estates and told that the deceased must be produced at all costs before election day. Both parties promised the police their full cooperation.

During the day, Thakur Udal Singh helped the sub-inspector in charge of the case investigate the matter at his dining table. Past midnight, when he arrived at the village house, he got busy in the basement supervising Jhamman Jatav's beating with a stick wrapped in cloth.

The day before the election, he explained matters to Jhamman thus: "You do not fully understand the benefits you will enjoy by voting for me. For one, after becoming chairman I will appoint you the member in charge of the Sanitation Committee where you will have complete say in staffing matters. The duty of installing water-taps in the town will also be entrusted to you. You just have to make sure that out of the hundred units approved, at least fifteen are installed. There is also the daily budget for sprinkling the road-side drains with limestone. You can use these funds for religious purposes, such as making your daughter's wedding dress and arranging the wedding feast etcetera. In any case, the daily sprinkling of limestone in the drains causes sedimentation which is unsanitary."

He also told him that some city louts had wanted to kidnap and ravish his daughter, and that they had been stopped from carrying out their plan with great difficulty by his making clear to them, in no uncertain terms, that Jhamman was his man. That, in fact, they had been told that Jhamman was not just the Thakur's man, he was as dear to the Thakur as his own blood brother for he was his supporter and would certainly vote for him. During the conversation he gave Jhamman to understand that the louts had only been held back because of his persuasion, and that they had proposed that if Jhamman didn't agree to support the Thakur wholeheartedly, they would slash Jhamman's throat and dump his blood-soaked clothes in the ruins behind Mahmood's house.

Upon hearing that, Jhamman was concerned about his neck and, finding it whole, bowed to the Thakur.

Lying in the crisp air in the courtyard of the village house, the Thakur recalled that night, delighting in the memory of the moment when he had made a snap decision. He had suddenly spoken to Jhamman in a changed tone: "Jhamman, do you think that I have brought you here to win your vote for my election? No! No! No! Far from it. Don't even let such thoughts enter your mind ...What? Still not convinced?"

Standing there silently, Jhamman kept trembling with fear. Then Thakur Udal Singh put a very profound and saintly expression on his face, and addressing him in an artificially heavy voice, he said: "Come Jhamman! Let's take you to your home! Tomorrow you can vote for whomever you choose!"

Jhamman kept staring at him confused. The Thakur untied his legs and arms, and throwing a towel over his head to cover his eyes, he took him in his jeep to the grounds where Eid prayers were held behind the town. After removing the towel, Udal Singh kept staring into his blinking eyes until Jhamman could finally see him. Jhamman found himself free of fetters after three days and nights. Rubbing his eyes, he looked at the Thakur and saw a halo around his face like the one seen in the images during Ram Lila. The Thakur was still holding one of Jhamman's arms and wondering to himself whether or not he should let go of it and say something. But Jhamman was so thrilled at escaping with his life that he didn't even realize he was still in the Thakur's grasp. It was nearing dawn. A partridge chirped in the nearby jujube tree. Considering it a good omen, the Thakur released Jhamman's emaciated arm in which he could feel the pulse gradually becoming slower. Finding that he could bend easily now, Jhamman thought that the best use he could make of his hands was to clasp them together and bow before Thakur Udal

Singh, which he did.

After voting for Thakur Udal Singh in the election, he recorded his statement at the police station, attesting that he had always supported Thakur Udal Singh in his heart. The fear of the Thakur's rival, Mahmood, caused him to run away to Delhi where he spent three nights and days at the Nizamuddin station before returning home. The police sub-inspector filed the report and also mentioned in a bold inscription in the margin, the valuable cooperation he had received from Thakur Udal Singh, now also the chairman of the Town Council.

As he reminisced about that time lying on his charpoy in the courtyard, the Thakur's sense of pleasure redoubled from the thought that even a year old memory could bring so much joy. The gentle drafts of wind blowing from the fields were singing lullabies in his ears. After shouting a barrage of expletives at the guards to make them sit alert at their posts, he regarded Neela with a look both affectionate and possessive, and went to sleep.

The first thing he did when he woke up the next day was look at the sky to determine how much time remained till dawn. When the murky light of the false dawn had spread, as it did the previous year when he had released Jhamman's arm, he listened hard for any partridge chirping. No partridge called but a rain-crow did screech. Making do with that for a propitious omen, he went forth and untied Neela from the neem tree. The bull remained standing there, without shifting even a little.

The Thakur called out loudly to his younger son, Onkar. Seeing Neela standing free, Onkar, whose eyes were bloodshot from last night's drinking bout, became sober in no time. He looked askance at his father. Without showing any unnecessary emotions, uttering each syllable softly but firmly, his father said: "Last year, I had tamed Jhamman by the same method...."

Neela the bull suddenly discovered a pleasant change in his life. The thick object that used to constrict his neck had disappeared and he could walk around freely. In the past, when he wished to go faster, he had to drag with him the weight of the person holding the rope. Now everything was light and effortless. Instinctively he felt apprehensive that the change might have affected other things in his life as well. But when he received his morning greens, his lunch mix, and his dinner of molasses and whole grains as before, he felt frisky and went on a romp of the village house. He also stepped outdoors for a while. The villagers were startled to see

him roaming free. Some were alarmed, while others felt happy at the thought of his freedom. After some time, Neela returned to the village house and stood in his place under the neem tree. When the sunlight traveled to the spot where he was standing, he felt an invisible noose tightening around his neck. It was the time he usually dragged his long rope to the other side of the tree where the shade had moved. But when he headed towards the shade now, he discovered that there was no noose around his neck. Pounding the ground with his hooves, he reared and lightly butted the neem tree. It was the first beat of his freedom dance.

The Thakur had slowly familiarized Neela with a few people. This inevitably led to his treating others as strangers. When the Thakur received the news in town that the night before Neela had broken the back of Shamu, who was stealing away a branch from the *sbeesbam* tree after jumping over the wall of the village house, he became so thrilled that he danced around his residence with joy. He arrived in the village and personally fed Neela a whole liter of mustard oil through a hollow bamboo tube. After drinking the oil, Neela began frolicking around. When the Thakur returned to his reception room, he found that a crowd had gathered there to complain about Neela. He put only one question to them: "Did Shamu break into the village house at two in the morning with the intent of doing tree worship? Answer me! Why are you silent now?"

Indeed there was no easy answer to the question because two o'clock in the morning is not a suitable time for any kind of worship rituals. "He is the incarnation of the mother goddess!" the Thakur said. "He will sort out the affairs of the wicked as they deserve!"

The people got up and began emptying the room. From the corner of their eyes some old folks saw Neela stomping on the ground and raising dust outside. A few people also made obeisance to the reincarnation of the deity.

The Thakur felt quite pleased with this unique arrangement for guarding the gold stashed in the village house. Neela sometimes also spent the night at the town residence. It was a calculated move on the Thakur's part to impress the terror of the bull on the villagers and the townsfolk alike. Neela wasn't fully mature yet and was therefore not ruttish. He followed the Thakur around like a dog, fore and aft, left and right.

The Thakur's village farmlands and his pawning and usury services

were all thriving. Because of Neela, there was no longer any fear of thieves. It sometimes happened that he even attacked those who came to the village house or the town residence to be paid. Among them were the harvesters due their sheaf of wheat and the laborers coming to receive their grain in payment for plastering the roof. The Thakur would eventually pay them their dues after they pleaded and importuned him awhile and praised Neela's effectiveness and his efficacy in glowing terms.

After he was relieved of the cares of the village and town, the Thakur focused his attention on his city business. It had suffered neglect because of the tragic theft at the village house. Soon the city business also began prospering.

Neela usually followed a routine. That is, he remained in the village and helped himself to any standing crop he happened to pass, because an animal cannot make a distinction between one person's property and another's. Sometimes on his way to the pond from the village house, he had to make his way with his horns among any people he met in the alleyways. Occasionally, he also kicked them on impulse, which sometimes resulted in torn clothes and injuries. It is not hard to surmise, however, that if he had made his way among the people with his hooves, it would have resulted in a greater number of injuries. Also, it begs explanation for the way common people take it as their birthright to walk in the middle of the street.

When Neela was in town, he would occasionally break into some neighbor's house and, after breaking clay pots and other possessions, he would return cavorting about. In response to the complaints, the Thakur always said that Neela never broke any brass or copper pots, he only broke pots made of clay. He wanted the people to appreciate Neela's great sense of discernment, but people were beginning to get annoyed with Neela, especially in the village where they had even begun locking their rickety doors. In the town as well, the moment people sighted Neela they hid away any valuables and promptly shut any doors that might be open. The Thakur took great offence at the way people had started behaving. He often wondered what kind of people he had chosen to live amongst, who showed neither the least sense of humor nor the smallest amount of good spiritedness.

One day Gulfam the greengrocer came to the town residence in tears, threw himself at the Thakur's feet and clung to his legs. He told the story that he had set up his guava stall when Neela appeared and, without any

provocation, gobbled up five guavas. Then, as Gulfam pushed him away, Neela crushed the rest of the fruit underfoot. When stopped, he reared and attacked Gulfam, tearing off his shirt and injuring his arm. Gulfam had come to demand compensation for the damage.

The Thakur listened to his story with great attention. In fact, he interrupted him several times and made him begin his narration again from the start. In the meantime, the Thakur sent out his servants to gather some men from the neighborhood and some from the market. After all of them had arrived and were assembled, and Gulfam had repeated his story for the seventh time, the Thakur asked him with complete indifference: "Did you pay the stall license fee today?"

"No, Thakur! I would have given it to the contractor when I had finished. That would have been in the evening."

"Tell me that you understand that the daily license fee must be paid for the privilege of selling in the market and sitting in a public place!"

"Yes, Thakur!"

"This means that if you didn't pay the fee, you were sitting in that place illegally? Speak! Answer me!"

Gulfam kept silent. He would not have comprehended this point of law even under normal circumstances, let alone at a time when he was injured and his fruit had also been destroyed.

"Say something, my friend, say something! I'm offering you full opportunity! I'm not one of those people who become so blinded by wealth and power that they never allow a poor man to speak before them!" After saying this, the Thakur felt it necessary to study any new expressions playing on the faces of those assembled there. The expressions were more or less as he had wished. Experience had taught him that it was sometimes advantageous to keep one's silence for a while. Therefore, he fell silent. He also lowered his head like a man of modesty and meekness. A few moments later, he said in a soft but decisive manner: "You stole the market license fee for today!"

After another pause he said in an even softer but firmer voice: "How many guavas were eaten by Neela? Ten, eight, four or five? You have repeated this seven times. I have heard it six times with my own ears. Since these fifteen people have arrived, you have changed the number several times. Tell me how many guavas were eaten, seven or six? Answer me in front of these fifteen men! I have given you nine opportunities! Say whether or not it's true. Answer me!"

Gulfam said: "Perhaps Neela ate fifteen guavas! Or perhaps seven! Or maybe nine! Or possibly two!" Everyone broke into laughter. Gulfam kept

looking at them helplessly.

“All of you have witnessed how many times he changed the number. How can one believe anything he says? Specially under circumstances when he is also guilty of stealing the license fee!”

“Neela kicked my arm and bloodied it!” Gulfam began sobbing.

The Thakur looked around at everyone as he spoke: “Tell me truthfully, would this lad have survived to tell the tale if my Neela, who is the size of an elephant, had kicked him? Does he have any proof that Neela did it, when he himself confesses to pushing Neela twice without provocation?”

“I only pushed him after he ate my guavas!”

“Which guavas? The ones you cannot even count correctly before these judges?”

Now that the fifteen people had been declared the judges, it was natural that they should seriously and impartially study the case in front of them before passing judgment. Even the faces of some of them reflected judge-like graveness and severity. Each of those fifteen judges asked fifteen questions of Gulfam. He gave the wrong answer to every single one of them. That is, the judges found the answers most unsatisfactory. During this time, the Thakur didn't say a word. There was no pressing need for him to speak. When he said something, it was confined to a word or two spoken in favor of Gulfam who was being vigorously questioned. His impartiality and self-abjuration made a very favorable impression on the judges. All of them reproached Gulfam heartily. When the assembly wrapped up, a unanimous verdict had been reached that Gulfam was not only guilty of stealing guavas from people's gardens, he also had the temerity to steal the license fee when selling them from his market stall. That day the victim of his transgressions was a poor cow-like animal whom he accused of attacking him when the creature had only come out to take some air in the evening and was walking on the left side of the road without impeding traffic, according to traffic regulations. It was certain that Gulfam, in the custom of vicious urchins, threw a number of green and hard guavas at him to take some pleasure from the exercise, which must have caused injury to the poor animal. Gulfam must do a hundred sit-ups as punishment and ask for the Thakur's forgiveness. As Gulfam was doing his hundred sit-ups, the Thakur stopped him at ninety-eight and addressed the judges: “Have compassion now. Let this be enough. You know I have a tender heart!” Hearing his tear-filled voice, they stopped Gulfam.

When Gulfam stepped out after gathering his broken stall and the

remaining guavas, he met Neela standing at the door pawing the ground. The worthy judges called out to Gulfam: "O villain! At least give some fruit to the poor, dumb creature now!" The villain put down his stall and dried his tears. Picking up the guavas with both hands, he held them out to the poor, dumb creature. ■

—*Translated by Musharraf Farooqi*