

# CONVERSATION DURING PANDEMIC



by

**ASIM KUMAR PAUL**

I was walking upon a long way  
And found in front of me  
Some people, looking shabby,  
Sitting on the footpath,  
Their eyes were searching something,  
Dark, anxious, pointing  
To anyone who were passing by.  
Then came two youths  
And gave them food packets.

The entrance to the railway station was filled with police vehicles, armed guards protecting the place were moving around, some were patrolling and some were at duty post at the gates. All ticket booking counters were closed. Silence everywhere.

“Yes. I feel the lockdown.” I uttered myself.  
I entered the BSNL office and paid my broadband dues.  
I stood outside of the office.

A rickshaw-puller arrived with his rickshaw painted with red hue.

It began my day. No one could understand what I feel. What pulled me?  
It was a hand of the rickshaw-puller. A pause.

“You think I am a stranger. Hey, I am not.”

“What do you think? Get in my rickshaw.”

A thinking came in mind, let the events begin and  
everything to be taken gracefully. And I jumped into the rickshaw.

#### RICKSHAW-PULLER

It is hard to believe a man like you  
Of age above 70 comes out in this  
Time of lockdown, when old men  
Have to stay at home.

#### ME

Yes, I know. Situation changes me.  
I alone cannot change the world - I mean  
Situation changes the world. Thanks  
You come. And I find a lonely rickshaw.  
And I am the lonely passenger.  
I have nothing to do  
If I have a high fever and painful headache  
And then I have to go to a hospital.  
And I have to surrender completely to fate.

RICKSHAW-PULLER

Don't say so.  
I hope you will be healthy  
There will be no mishap.

ME

I do not want to make everything dull.  
Younger generations in my family are helping me.  
I just make a little thing to connect with them.  
It is a big loop of solvent gesture.  
It is cool.  
I cannot change the desperation.

2ND SCENE

Black is fading away. Light is soft.  
Morning.

Sounds of an alarm clock. A mild coughing sound mingles.

Gagan, 55, has infection with cough in winter season. A tiny hut. mud walls. This cottage falls in line of other houses, if a camera roams and takes whole of the environment and it is very pleasant, in morning light that rolls around the village. And sound of tweeting of birds heard. his wife, Siya, 48, opens window, making fresh air move in the room. Morning light comes through window. Gagan sits in the bed, amidst a pile of woolen garments and quilt. Bedroom getting brighter in sunlight and we hear:

SIYA

What you wish, dear.

*Gagan finds some kind of song that sings on going like a river as usual.*

GAGAN

“I am thinking of my daughter and how she spends there for two weeks as duty nurse in a ventilation ward. I am worried about her. I fear of not getting well with her job, and waiting when she returns for two weeks to stay with us for next duty she'll take charge.”

SIYA

Yes, I also think about her marriage. The man she chooses is not discovering himself as husband, or some other private matters hinders his decision. And whole thing gives me pain. Point is this time is not big time. I am living in anxiety on both sides - her marriage and The time of pandemic. We can not figure out their decision.

## 3RD SCENE: Migrant labor

Extn. Train - day 21st January 2020

A super first train is running, landscape moving, noisy sounds of friction between train's wheels and the iron rails, amid chirping of birds. Cool breeze flowing through windows of a sleeper class compartment.

A sturdy man (45) wearing a pajama and a simple shirt sits at a side berth seat, eyes are outside of the window.

Another aged man (67) next to him at side upper birth is also sitting opposite seat to the former and looks at the man in front of him.

AGED MAN  
Hello, are you alone?

STURDY MAN  
Yes,

AGED MAN  
From where are you coming?

STURDY MAN  
Chennai

AGED MAN  
Is your home there?

STURDY MAN  
No, no. I went there for work. I am originally from Mollakhali, North 24-parganas, West Bengal

AGED MAN  
I am also from East Medinipur, West Bengal  
What's your name?

STURDY MAN  
Sanatan Sarkar. Why you go to Chennai?

AGED MAN  
I am Abhishek Bera. I go there for attending a social function. Now I am returning home.

SANATAN SARKAR  
I'm also returning home. In July 2019, I along with other three villagers of my locality first went to Andhra Pradesh to work as seasonal labor during paddy cultivation, and we the four do it just completing our land farming in our village and then go out for some extra money that is needed for maintaining costs of groceries, clothing, tuition fees, etc. and the paddy field I own gives only rice and vegetables for the year only.

ABHISHEK BERA

Harvesting has finished in last September. Why do you return in January, 2020?  
Where are other three villagers with you?

SANATAN SARKAR

They returned in the end of last September. I remained here in Chennai for more extra money as marriage of my daughter has fixed in March 2020. During working in a farmhouse in Andhra Pradesh, I expressed my problems to the farm owner who helped me to get a job in a factory owned by his friend at Chennai. And I worked for three months at a stretch in the factory and with some savings I am now returning home.

Sanatan Sarkar stops speaking. He keeps looking outside the window as if life has turns and sanctions,

Abhishek Bera is very esteemed to know more, he takes a glance at his fellow traveler, and finding Sarkar in his own moods, Bera does not initiate any questions and he thinks it will be wise to settle Sakar's emotions and feeling those are now in warm trajectory. Practically both are in same state of moods.

Tea vendor comes voicing, "Garam Chaye. Garam Chaye. Ruppes 10 per cup."

ABHISHEK BERA

Have some tea, please.

Bera calls the tea vendor and orders for two cups of tea, not waiting for response from Sarkar.

Sarkar does not say no, he spreads his hand and takes the cup of tea from the vendor.

After sipping a few sips in their respective tea cups. Sarkar draws two ten rupee notes, by the time which Bera makes payment of the vendor as he already holds one twenty rupee note for payment.

ABHISHEK BERA

How much paddy land do you have cultivated in Andhra Pradesh?

SANATAN SARKAR

The owner of the farmhouse has paddy field nearly of two hectors, like Jamindar of our old time. He has also tractor with a driver for tilting land. A huge pumping machine he owns for watering the land. We are twenty labors mostly from Wet Bengal. And they are very expert in putting paddy seedlings in prepared wet mud with three fingers. And we will do it all in one month for whole of two hectors of paddy land.

ABHISHEK BERA

How is payment made?

SANATAN SARKAR

Payment is made on lump sum of amount of rupees per hector and that amount is nearly forty five thousand and more. Harvesting or post-harvesting payment is not included in it and that is also another calculation. This is our team work. This time I have taken a team of 20 labors who are very skilled. We try to finish the whole work up to transplanting in period of one month. And take the payment. If we finish the work in less time, we also get engaged in another farmhouse for cultivation and this will be additional benefit to our income.

**ABHISHEK BERA**  
What about feeling and shelter?

**SANATAN SARKAR**  
The owner of the farmhouse provides us three things free of cost. One is shelter with cooking utensils, second is cooking gas and third is rice and wheat flour.

.....To be continued

