

## **THE LAST LETTER! 'ANTYAKSHARY'**

The Zee T.V. has popularized the term 'Antyakshari'. It literally means 'the last letter.' It is memory-contest. Two teams participate in the game. The initiating team recites a verse. The second team has to recite another verse in reply. The binding condition is that the verse-in-reply should begin with the last letter of the previous verse. If the first verse ends with 'D', the second one must start with 'D'. No exception is permissible. If the second team is not able to come up with such a verse within the specified time-limit, the first team is asked to come up with one. If it does so, it scores a point over the other. In the T.V. Antyakshari the verse is replaced by the film-song. It has become one of the most popular T.V. Shows.

Our school days were devoid of T.V. In fact T.V. had not made its inroads in our country in those years. Hence we amused ourselves with the real Antyakshari. This was quite a popular pastime with the school-children in Bihar and U.P. In Netarhat it was taken up with gusto albeit with a difference. Elsewhere any poem or verse would do in reply provided it began with the proper cue, the last letter of the previous verse, but not so in Netarhat. Elaborate rules were framed by Kantiji, our Hindi teacher, to regulate these competitions properly. To score full marks a poem had to fulfil the initial condition and at the same time had to be of good content and quality. The rendition and recitation also were taken into account while giving marks. Couplets from 'Hanuman Chaleesa' and other such works got hardly 20% marks. If one decided to recite a 'Chaupai' from Ram-Charit-Manas to gain full marks, he would have to recite the full set of 'Chaupais' covering the incident or the message fully. The rules were made stringent to encourage the students to read and memorize poems of good literary quality. This helped to increase our Hindi vocabulary also.

Unlike English alphabet, the Hindi 'Varnmala' (alphabetical set) has 59 letters — if we include the commonly used 3 joint letters also. Any verse can end with any of these 59 letters and hence it was necessary for a team to have in its joint memory bank at least ten poems beginning with every letter. In this way the team - com-

prising of 5 to 10 members, had to have at least 590 poems up their sleeves. Not an easy task.

After the rules of the game were formalised the series of formal and informal competitions started. The informal competitions were between two groups of one class or a house. It was mostly impromptu. The formal competitions were between houses or classes and were deliberate and planned affairs. Date and timing were set in advance. Teams were selected and announced. Serious preparations were undertaken by the participating teams. There was a great rush at the Hindi poetry section of the library. These competitions were witnessed by the entire school community - the students, teachers, Matajees and even the employees who helped us in our daily chores. Good performance on part of any participant was universally applauded. No rewards or trophies were awarded to the winners. Though the popular acclaim was the participant's only prize, it was much coveted. Nothing could be better!

The preparation for these formal competitions was planned meticulously. Each member was allotted four to five letters. He had to memorise poems of good quality beginning with these letters. An attempt was made to locate such poems which began with these letters and ended with letters like 'Ta, Tha, Da, Dha' which would make the task of the other team difficult. According to Hindi poetics it is considered inauspicious to begin a poem with letters of harsh tones 'Mahaprana Varna!'. Fortunately the modern poets did not abide with this classical dictate and with some efforts it was possible to locate a few such poems.

'Bachchan' was a great favourite with the participants. Regulars like Matwala and Umashankar Mishra had mugged up his whole works like "Madhushala", "Madhubala", "Madhu-kalash", "Milan-Yamini" and "Aakul-Antar". The Rubais of the first two works ended with the letter "La" again and again. Many a time one "Rubai" was answered by another "Rubai". As a result the letter "La" dominated the scene for quite some time.

"Dinkar" was another favourite. His poems are full of vigour. When rendered by participants with proper intonation and gestures they enthused the audience which would take up the refrain and join the reciter. It broke the monotony and made the atmosphere livelier.

The question — whether poems and lyrics of various sister - languages or dialects spoken in the Hindi belt e.g., Maithili and Bhojpuri, could be used in these competitions gave rise to quite a controversy. If the point was conceded, it would have given an edge to boys of these regions over others. On the other hand who could deny the fact that Vidyapati, the classical Maithili poet, had an honourable place among the ranks of Hindi poet-laureates. His poems were included in our Hindi text-book also.

Kantiji found a mid-way solution. He gave the ruling that only the works of known and recognised poets could be used. Folk songs were not permissible. This put the controversy at rest.

The historical 'Antyakshari' - which lingers in the memory of all the alumni of the first four batches, took place between our Vidyalaya school team and the Vikas Vidyalaya team. Vikas Vidyalaya is a public school located near Ormanjhi on Ranchi-Patna Highway. It was established a few years before Netarhat School. Kantiji's younger brother, Shri Kamlesh Kanti, was a teacher there. After retirement our school Principal, Sri Jeewan Nath Dar, had become its principal for some years.

We were told that a big group of Vikas boys were to pay us a visit. Besides sight-seeing and informal interaction some friendly competitions were also to be held. Since it was our first interaction with a group of students belonging to a traditional public school, we eagerly looked forward to it. There was also a desire to match our wits against them in order to find out who fared better.

A number of sports competitions were held. We won some and lost some. The score was almost even. Since we considered 'Antyakshari' our forte, we looked forward to it eagerly. It was scheduled to be held in the last evening of their stay.

All of us collected in the enclosed shed of the Workshop, which was used as the auditorium. Two teachers each from both schools were selected to act as judges. There were ten participants in each team. The competition was to last one hour.

We won the toss and generously asked Vikas to open the match. Their Captain started the competition with great elan. The first thirty minutes passed off smoothly. The tally was even, no team had scored over the other.

In the second part the veterans of our team decided to launch the assault. One after another their recitation started ending with letters "Ta", "Tha", and "Dha". Vikas fellows were not unprepared. They faced the assault gallantly. But they had not reckoned with our repository on this score. After a dozen such showings, the Vikas bank went bankrupt.

The Netarhatians could smell the blood now. They closed in for the kill. The thirteenth poem recited by our team also ended with letter "Tha". There was no spontaneous response from the Vikas team. Instead there was feverish consultation among them. Team members whispered into each other's ears. It seemed that they were trying to form a verse on the spot. The audience held its breath and trained its ears expectantly towards them. Before the bell could ring to signify the end of the allotted time, Vikas Captain gave his nod to one of his team members who got up to give the reply.

"Thehro, Thehro, Woh Ata", he started with aplomb. The audience roared in derisive laughter. The next lines were drowned in the laughter. The Vikas team did not realise what a faux pas they had committed. To escape the defeat they had incorporated the word "Thehro" and fixed it before the opening line of Nirala's poem "Bhikshuk" (the Beggar). This poem was in our text book and every Netarhat boy knew it by rote. A month ago, a mono-act play based on this very poem had been staged at this very location.

Needless to say the judges rejected the reply. Netarhat team came up with a suitable rejoinder and was awarded the scoring points. After this the field was theirs. They romped home with laurels.

For many days to come "Thehro, Thehro" (Stop, Stop) became a byword to signify some one's blunder. Even now if you use it among the old-boys belonging to the first four batches, it is certain to draw a hearty chuckle.

