

PATRAS MALI - THE GUARDIAN ANGEL OF SCHOOL ORCHARDS

No NOBA (Netarhat Old Boys' Association) meeting can be over without a mention of the name of Patras Mali at least on half a dozen occasions. Except a few morons, almost every boy was tempted at least once in his six years' stay at Netarhat to steal the delicious guavas or luscious peaches and pears from the school orchards. Whenever one embarked upon this venture, one had to reckon with the legendary Patras Mali.

We were served fresh fruits — mostly apples, oranges and mangoes — daily. These were supplied by the contractor. As he shipped them from Ranchi, they were never garden-fresh. Most of us came from rural areas and were accustomed to fresh fruits straight from the orchards. Fresh fruits from the school orchards were also distributed but seldom. As it was difficult to have a large number of ripe fruits at a given time, such occasions were rare. These fruits were mostly made into jam, jelly and other preserves.

The School had two orchards, one bordering the Chalet's flower-garden and the other down in the valley. The upper one excelled in guavas. The lower one was rich in pears and peaches. In their fruiting season the trees were laden with fruits of all shapes and sizes. The ripe and half-ripe ones blushed and winked at us from behind their leafy veils. They almost beckoned to us to come and dally. It did not require an Eve's prompting for a full-blooded young man to fall to this temptation. Patras was Rizwan, the guardian angel, of these orchards.

Patras was a tribal from Mahuadand. He was a muscular man of middle height. His complexion was of polished ebony. He had a mass of curly hair on his head. He had remarkably fine features for a tribal. He had keen piercing eyes. We believed that he possessed an uncanny sixth sense which told him of our approach to his domain. He used to alternate between the two orchards to guard them in their fruiting seasons. Like most of the tribals, he was scrupulously honest and truthful. The Principal and other teachers fully trusted him and accepted his word as the gospel truth. We knew it fully well that we had no chance of reprieve if Patras deposed against us. However, these risks made the task all the more adventurous

and challenging.

All tricks in our bag were used to outwit Patras Mali. The first trick was to divide our group — generally of four boys — into two. One sub-group of two would approach Patras directly and boldly and engage him in conversation. Patras had good knowledge about the flora and fauna of the area. He was also a repository of local traditions and legends. He sang the local folk-songs reasonably well. One had to broach upon any of these subjects to make Patras sing like a canary for a long time. If you could start him on a ghost-story there was no end to it.

The other sub-group meanwhile would stealthily slip in and pluck the fruits for all. When they were halfway to house they would hoot twice or thrice to signal that the operation had been successfully accomplished. The first sub group would then profusely thank Patras, praise his knowledge highly and take leave innocently.

This ruse worked well for quite some time. However, Patras was no fool. He could put two and two together and guess correctly that the outcome would be four. He found that every such visit reduced the number of ripe fruits in the orchard. He started taking a pause now and then in his story-telling and to make a round of the orchard before resuming it again. Whenever he started his patrolling, the boys near him would shout loudly requesting him to come back soon. The boys in the grove would get the hint and take to heels. Though this saved our skins, the operation often got aborted midway.

To meet the new situation the tactics were changed. Now a boy or two would get inside the orchard, hover round the extreme edge of the hedge — there was no boundary wall; only a few strands of barbed wires had been strung along the hedge of sisal plants to demarcate the area — and make a lot of noise. Patras was bound to head towards the source of mischief to investigate. Meanwhile others could raid the trees. The 'shoot and scoot' tactics did yield fruits but the bounty was pitifully meagre. It was not cost-effective if one valued the time and effort invested. Hence it was discarded soon.

The next ploy was to hide some of his implements during our agriculture classes. When he was busy searching for them, we would get busy with our job. This trick gave birth to a couplet — parody of a famous 'Doha' of Bihari.

'Patras Mali Lal Ki Khurapi Dhari Lukai;
Sonh Karai, Bhaunhanu Hansai, Dain Kahe Nat Jai'.

(They concealed the spade of gardener Patras. When asked to tell where it was they swore ignorance, suppressed their laughter by raising their eyebrows, promised to provide clues on persuasion but again refused to oblige.)

The original couplet relates to a prank played by Gopikas (women of Gokul) upon Krishna. They had stolen his flute and hidden it. On being asked they would jest with him, tease him, promise to restore it to him but again refuse to oblige. The original couplet runs:

'Batras Lalach Lal Ki Murali Dhari Lukai
Saunh Karain Bhaunhanu Hasain Dain Kahain Nati Jae'.

The poet paints a lovely picture in this single couplet. His objective was to picturise 'Shringara Rasa'. Our objective was to obtain, in physical form, the 'fruit-rasa'.

The couplet was passed on from batch to batch in the time-honoured tradition of 'Shruti'. Patras retired long back but this couplet is still making rounds.

The finest one-time trick played on poor Patras was devised by none else than the ingenious 'Matwala'. One Sunday afternoon he noticed Sri Dar leaving the Chalet, his residence, in his van. Perhaps he was headed to Mahuadand or Bishenpur. This gave him the idea. Soon four or five of us rushed down to the valley-orchard. We kept ourselves concealed in the jungle near the orchard. Matwala went running upto Patras Mali's hut and told him that the Principal wanted to see him urgently. After delivering the message he ran back and joined us. He did not give Patras any opportunity to cross-examine him.

After a few minutes Patras emerged from his hut dressed up in his uniform. He looked around suspiciously. When he found nothing unusual, he took the track leading to the Chalet.

We gave him ten minutes to put safe distance between him and our target. Then we raided the orchard and had the pick of the season. Within half an hour or so the operation was over — the most successful one in memory.

Halfway to our houses, we found Patras returning at a great speed. We quietly took to the cover - the undergrowth provided excellent camouflage. Patras passed by unsuspecting.

We were surprised when there was no fallout of this incident. There was no questioning, no confrontation with Patras, no enquiry and no punishment. Discreet enquiries revealed that Patras did see the Principal. Sri Dar had not gone to Mahuadand or Bishenpur. He had gone to call on some dignitary camping in a nearby Bungalow and had returned within twenty minutes. When Patras reported to him, he instructed Patras to prepare new pits for planting saplings of a new variety of peach.

Moral of the story is: God Helps those who help themselves.

