

THE BLIND SPOTS

By Ashok Patwari

I am not just amazed, but shocked to realize how inconsiderate and insensitive, I have been all my life!!

While anchoring and navigating the rocking chair with my back, I am postured in such a way that the moment I opened my eyes I noticed my feet staring at me. My right foot in particular, peeping out of the pashmina shawl which Mamta had put on my body while I had dozed off to sleep after a hearty lunch. It is strange though, when I opened my eyes after a brief nap, I feel as if I have woken up after many years of deep slumber, like Rip Van Winkle ! As if I am trying to discover myself after a long break. But unlike Rip Van Winkle I am neither unhappy not to find my dog by my side after waking up because I never had one, nor do I have the satisfaction he had of sleeping through the hardships of the American Revolution. For me it is a different corollary. I feel static, unvarying like an Egyptian mummy - silent, motionless waiting to be recycled and used in the after life ! But my eyes suddenly felt a strong glare when somebody switched on the light in my room. I opened my eyes and looked around. Everything is the same as before, same room, myself and my familiar surroundings. Nothing has changed except that when I had dozed off it was afternoon time and now it is twilight merging in to darkness.

May be the tasty *biryani* has gone to my head and caused this grogginess or clouding of my senses...! Otherwise why would I look at my feet with such a strange expression as if they don't belong to me. May be it is not really cloudiness, because my mind is clearer than before I dozed off. This unusual experience of a lighter head is similar to the dramatic restoration of my vision after my cataract surgery..... ! Then why do my feet appear alien to me when I have a clearer vision and my mind is not weighed down? Why is it so ?

The very look of my frail dirty looking wrinkled feet gives me a feeling as if I am peeping in to a mirror and seeing myself. It appears I have never looked at them so closely. They look unkempt, abandoned and even maltreated. I notice it again ! For years I had forgotten about it,

soon after healing of the wound took place and it stopped hurting me - the second toe of my right foot hiding under the big toe as if apologetic for having a deformed nail like a parrot beak. But why should my second toe be ashamed ? It is me who should be having that feeling because it was because of my recklessness that a heavy weight fell on my right foot and my toe was crushed under it. That time I cried, my eyes watered like a tsunami but my foot remained calm. The doctor didn't even let it move when the antiseptic dressing was applied. I remember vividly, the doctor almost throttled my foot with his hand to make it immobile to clean it and to apply dressing. And despite inflicting injury, pain and deformity to my toe I never said sorry to my foot!

I have no doubt this pair of soft natural boots, my two feet, are a part of my own body. They have carried me and my weight on their shoulders all these years. May be at some stage they even felt crushed and crumbled under my weight whenever I neglected my weight control. They must have creaked, cried and moaned ! But I never noticed that, never heard any complaint. But even to listen to a deaf and dumb person you have to at least look at him to understand the sign language or the expressions. But I don't remember having ever carefully looked at my feet. I did injure my one or the other foot at times in my childhood but my eyes always looked at the injury rather than the feet. In my daily routine even if I had tried to look at them it was not possible to see them properly because it was just for a moment when I wiped them after a shower. The other missed opportunity was the time I used to put on my socks. While doing so, the focus always was to ensure that I was putting on the right socks and there were no holes in the socks which my maid servant might have missed while putting my clothes in the cupboard.

This is atrocious !

How could I spend hours looking at the mirror to set my hair, to trim my moustaches, to carefully assess for any increase in the size of a mole on my left cheek which has been there for ages. I don't remember how much time I might have spent in pulling out those naughty grey follicles, propping out like a culprit from my dark eyebrows, with a tweezer which invariably

plucked black follicles instead of grey. My struggle with grey hair follicles would often continue till my wife would enter the room and casually say “What are you doing with this tweezer..?”

I am aware that I have been a very busy professional all these years. But how come I never cared to closely look at my feet and see for myself what is the state of my distal body parts. It is a shame no doubt and now I feel guilty for my insensitive attitude.

While I am still grieving my neglected feet, I suddenly remember my office attendant, Tiwari. I don't exactly recollect his first name even though I used to sign his attendance sheet every month. Now with my clear vision after that tasty *biryani* and relaxing nap when I can clearly see my feet, I see the fourth dimension of my life, clear images, characters, events and feelings which perhaps never surfaced so high in my mind. With every turn of my thought process the faces change, pictures swivel backwards and fade in to a dot, and another dot appears in front of my eyes gradually becoming bigger and bigger and taking a new shape like the images in a kaleidoscope, a familiar face and the background of places I can recognize ! And somewhere from the occipital lobe of my brain a saved image of Tiwari appears on full screen with a close up of his face followed by his long shot displaying him in his office uniform sitting outside my office, alert and energetic as always. He was a soft spoken, short statured, light complexioned man with a paunch. Tiwari was from Uttarakhand and served me as office attendant for the last 10 years of my government service before I retired. I hardly spoke to him when I was in active service. One of the reasons for this lack of active communication with him was his unusually good performance as an office attendant. He was punctual, disciplined, knew pretty well when I like to have a glass of water or a cup of tea, was methodical in placing the in-files at the right place on my table and quite intelligent to know where to take the out-files. His performance was above average and may be that was the reason I never got a chance to speak to him. Not even once was there a need to express my dissatisfaction with him. But in my capacity as his boss was it not my duty to acknowledge and reinforce his good performance, compliment him for the good work he did and encourage him to do better. I used to do it with my own

colleagues and other junior civil service officers but why not with an office attendant. Why did my human resource management skills vanish when it came to lowest cadre of employees? Why do we always want to look up, why don't we see what is on the ground ?

It is quite painful for me to recollect my behavior towards Tiwari when I am reclining on the rocking chair and auditing my past performance. I claim to be sensitive but I ask myself why I have not been sensitive to every human being I worked with. I distinctly remember the day when I relinquished my office after superannuation. It was a big day for the whole office as they organized a farewell party for me. I felt big and important that day as the party was organized in a five star hotel with lavish drinks and delicious food. And the gifts - I had never seen such expensive gifts being given to somebody who is leaving for good. This obviously reflected the regard and respect I commanded in my fraternity. My voice choked with emotions when I thanked my colleagues for such a lovely treat.

On the same day, in the morning of my last working day in the office, I had noticed Tiwari quietly entering my room with folded hands and carrying a single red rose wrapped in cellophane and a good wishes card for me. He put the stuff on the table, looked at me for a second as if expecting a response, and then softly said “ *Sahab ji, aapne bahut maan diya, pyaar diya, seva karne a moqa diya, ishwar aap ko sada khush rakhey* (Sir, you gave me a lot of affection and recognition, and opportunity to serve you. May God always keep you happy)”. I didn't say anything, just nodded as if I have approved what he has said and looked at the files on my table which I wanted to clear before relinquishing my office. Moments later I did notice a movement in my field of vision when he again folded his hands and quietly went out of the room, but didn't say anything. I am trying to figure out today how much that rose must have cost him. I saw a bouquet shop selling that type of fresh roses packed in a cellophane tape for forty rupees and the good wishes card would have been for at least thirty rupees. Now I am trying to calculate. How much seventy rupees mean to a person whose monthly salary is only five thousand rupees. Did I really appreciate his sentiments and reciprocate the way a sensitive man should ? Of course I didn't. Because seventy rupees is a petty amount for me. I am sure Tiwari

must have expected a better response from me. Did I hurt him? Yes, I did and I didn't even register it that time. Sad ... very sad... I not only treated my feet differently from rest of my body but considered lowest rank officers in my office as different human being... petty... loathsome ! Shame on me !!

Amidst the trance of my journey through my past I feel some irritation in my right hand. Yes, it may be an insect, a mosquito or an ant, biting my hand. But I am unable to throw it away. Helplessly I am looking around for help to get rid of the insect. At the height of my helplessness and severe pain my left hand quickly removes the insect and rubs off the site of insect bite which gives me some relief. Honestly, I feel like giving a pat of appreciation to my left hand for helping and comforting me. But how can I do it? I can't do it because my right hand is paralysed ! I had a stroke few years back and now I am unable to move my right hand. My left hand often supports my right hand whenever need be but I must confess my left hand is always sluggish. It was soon after I recovered from the initial critical phase of stroke when I was shocked to see my paralysed hand. And a greater shock for me was to realize that my left hand wasn't as strong as my right hand. My doctor friends tell me that it is not in our control and depends upon ones handedness., our brain itself decides which hand is the dominant hand. Since I was a right handed person my left hand was destined to be a weakling. But then it was my own hand in any case. I should have tried to make it stronger. But I let it remain weak as it was. I am astonished to observe significant gained in strength in my left hand during last two years after the stroke . Well it is a part of my body, why did I neglect it for so many years !!

On the spacious canvas of thirty five years of civil service my memory is making free hand strokes of colours like an amateur painter creating blurred images of people and places overlapping with each other. And the very next moment these blurred images transform in to a collage of familiar faces - people I have worked with, people I liked and disliked , those I always hated to see and those whom I considered my role models. In the cacophony of my abstract thoughts and the people I remember, I am wondering about another issue. Why it is so that we always respond first to those who seek attention, those who are more fussy, more

demanding and for those we have a preference for whatever reason. Murthy was my Personal Assistant for many years before he was transferred to another ministry. No doubt he was extraordinarily brilliant in his work but my dependence on him was exceptional. During his tenure I entrusted everything to him because I believed that he was very intelligent and hard working. In this course, my other Personal Assistant Gupta Ji was always neglected by me without even testing his ability and intelligence. May be this was one of the reasons that Gupta ji was often missing from his seat and didn't come up to my expectations as and when I gave him some task in any emergency situation when Murthy was not available. But when Murthy was transferred and Gupta Ji took over from him, I realized that after all he was not as bad as I had considered him. Was it his fault or my administrative incapability not to optimally utilize his potential? Was I responsible for gradually pushing him down to inefficiency?

The wilderness of my thoughts is driving me down to another memory lane ! My family, my close relatives, friends and my well wishers - people with whom I have spent my whole life. And in that horde of people one face enters from a corner and gradually occupies whole of my visual screen. It is the young and innocent face of my niece which strikes my eyes repeatedly and takes me back with time when she stayed with us. She came to live with us after both her parents met with a fatal car accident. I was not only her guardian and uncle but the only one to take care of her after my brother and his wife left her an orphan. Both myself and my wife tried our best to raise her as our own child. My niece is a sober girl by nature, a soft spoken and affectionate child who never demanded anything and gladly accepted whatever we got for her. May be it was her inherent nature or may be because she was conscious and mature to realize that we were her not her real parents, she always appreciated our feelings for her and never complained. Both my sons, in contrast, were always too self centered, demanding and attention seeking. At several occasions my niece had to forego her wishes or we neglected her in order to please my sons. I do remember instances when I failed as a father to treat her like my own daughter for one or the other reason. At times I did feel guilty of giving special attention to my own children and ignoring her but her smiling face, camouflaging her sentiments, always helped me to overcome that feeling. But the reality remains that she was a blind spot for me !

It is always painful to accept ones shortcomings when you are not in a position to rectify them. You can't go back with time. My eyes are closed but my mind isn't. Sudden avalanche of memories is revealing my blind spots. By now I am realizing that inadvertent neglect is no less than being unfair to somebody. I was unfair to many people, even discriminatory towards some - like Tiwari, Gupta Ji, my niece and I don't remember how many more..... ! Like many other people I was always confident that I am using three mirrors - two side mirrors and a back mirror. I felt confident that I can visualize everything around me. But I did not realize that there are blind spots beyond these mirrors. These blind spots were always around me in my professional, social and personal life. But at that time I didn't try to see them or even think about them..... !

I didn't realize it is already super time. I would have kept on counting these blind spots if Mamta hadn't pulled me out of this whirlpool, " Uncle, here is your favourite tomato soup".

I look up to Mamta with a smile on my face and gratitude in my heart. Mamta is my niece ! I am comfortably staying with her for the last three years. She brought me to her home six months after my stroke when both my sons were about to shift me to an old age home since they were unable to cope with the difficulties faced by them in looking after an old invalid man !

Bio:

Ashok Patwari is a Pediatrician and Public Health Researcher by profession. Apart from his professional contribution as Professor of Pediatrics at Lady Hardinge Medical College, New Delhi and as Research Professor in International Health at Boston University School of Public Health, he has also served World Health Organization in India and Philippines.

He has been writing Urdu short stories for a long time. A collection of his short stories in Urdu titled '*Kuch lamhey kuch saayey*' was awarded by Delhi Urdu Academy in 2005. He has also

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