

Chapter Twenty-six

Belwasa, October 26, 2002

The next morning, Mr. Prasad got us an auto rickshaw for the trip to Hussainganj Post Office, from where we'd leapfrog to Belwasa. Since that post office is an important part of the address P.N. Singh had given me eighteen years earlier, I asked the manager to write a note both in Hindi and English, stating our desire to go first to the post office and then work our way to the village.

Within twenty minutes, we arrived at a ramshackle building, the faded letters of the name matching the weathered look of the exterior concrete walls. This outpost post office, seemingly of another era, was closed, it being Saturday, so I decided on using the outhouse. As I came out, everything around me went topsy-turvy, and I fell to the ground—most likely from dehydration. From the corner of my eye, I saw a group of teenaged boys encircling me—a foreigner who looked Indian but spoke differently. My instincts reminded me to be brave and strong, since both Jenny and I were in a remote area of Bihar. Even in my weak state, I recalled the words of the late college student: "I'm a Bihari, yet will not go to a strange village." To top it all, I was supposed to be the one helping Jenny. As I lay there, I turned to her. "Water!" I whispered.

After a few sips of bottled water, I bounced up quickly like Muhammad Ali in his first fight against Joe Frazier. For, like Ali, I'm a fighter, and since I was in the motherland, I wanted to live up to my Rajput heritage.

"Can you show us the way to Belwasa?" I asked the group of youngsters, who'd huddled around me.

A member of the group came forward. "Follow me!"

For a while, I trailed him round a bend on the branch dirt road. Is this a trap? "You go alone," I finally said to the lad. It wasn't that I didn't trust the village people, but to be waylaid by outsiders was a different matter. So I ran back to Jenny who stood somewhat perplexed beside the auto rickshaw driver.

Within ten minutes, the youngster returned with a middle-aged man dressed in a cream coloured kurta shirt, pajama pants of similar colour, and a dark baseball cap.

"Here is someone who can help you!" the young man announced.

"Do you know P.N. Singh, son of Ashish Singh?" I asked the stranger, showing him the note the manager had written. He glanced at it and returned it to me.

"Yes, I do," he replied. "They are from my village, and I can take you there."

"What's your name?"

"I am Satinder Kumar Singh, known as S.K. Singh, and P.N. Singh is my cousin-brother."

Satinder joined us in the auto rickshaw and stood up beside the

driver, motioning him to proceed. Put-put became a zoom as we blazed down the narrow trail, the cream kurta of S.K. Singh trailing behind like a windsurfing-sail, taking us to our destination.

It was no small comfort to hear that S.K. Singh was P.N.'s first cousin, for though I had no cause to believe him based on my previous correspondence with P.N. Singh, I knew we'd be in safe hands. Besides, Jenny and I were exuberant that he'd take time off from work to accompany us to the village. At no time did I question our decision to travel with him, for the people in this rural community seemed like honest, hard-working village folk and the rumours about dacoits roaming the highways and country roads were for me a thing of the past.

Satinder kept pointing the way, his kurta still flying cheerfully in the breeze, as we tore down the country lane, to a place I knew nothing about.

Along a dirt track, deeply imbedded with bricks to prevent large potholes, the auto rickshaw driver deftly manoeuvred his vehicle over the bumps, round some crooked bends, past shrubs and thick bushes on both sides of the lane, pausing at the thousand-year-old peepal tree, whose roots Raja Singh had watered with his tears when he couldn't find his mud house. Past the greyish brown Daha River that reminded me of a sideline trench in Sand Reef during the floods.

It was a refreshing fifteen-minute ride, courtesy of the driver, with S.K. Singh pointing the way, the noisy three-wheeler simply devouring the dirt track and, as we entered a clearing and then a pathway, Satinder's kurta came to rest snugly against his back, signalling that we'd arrived.

"Park over here!" he said, waving his hand. Then he turned to us. "This is the place."

"Belwasa!" I exclaimed, trying hard to control my excitement as we both got out of the vehicle. Achieving my dream so filled me with elation, my life could have ended right there and I would have been happy, for I'd accomplished my mission against all odds.

Unfolding before my eyes was a picture-book cozy hamlet, nestled amid giant bamboos, mango and papaya trees, seemingly untouched by the passage of time. I could see only a few houses—some in bright colours, others the colour of sand—swallowed up by prolific garden crops, fruit trees, hedges, and small thatched grain sheds. Through the mid-morning sunshine, everything was bathed in gold, the verdant green vegetation adding pastoral elegance to the landscape.

I closed my eyes and stood silent for quite some time, savouring the moment, letting it all sink in.

Jenny, who had given me time to pay reverence to my ancestral home, said, "Simply marvelous! Who'd want to leave this village?"

I reflected on the fact that Raja Singh had not abandoned Belwasa, at least not willingly.

I explained to Satinder the purpose of our visit, that we'd come

from afar to see the home of my great-grandfather, who'd been plucked away from his village some 133 years ago. At that moment, I saw tears running down the cheeks of the auto rickshaw driver, as he shook his head in disbelief. It touched me that he'd become so emotional. Though he spoke little English, his facial expression showed that he was following the gist of the conversation around him.

"No one has accomplished this before. Only the bravest and strongest can do what they've done," he said to Satinder, who translated for me. With poignant interest, forgetting that he was on business, he listened in to our story, for he'd become part of our history and would surely have tales to tell his children. Since I was not anxious to return to the hotel in Siwan city, I paid off the rickshaw man with a little tip thrown in.

"Come to my place," S.K. Singh said after the driver had left.

As he walked us over to his two-storey "longhouse," I counted six other homes in between the branches of fruit trees.

"Who live in those smaller houses?" I asked.

"My married daughters," he replied.

Satinder's mansion had ornate green columns on a huge blue front porch, supporting an expansive outdoor balcony above. The rest of the stucco building was painted a crimson colour with a hexagonal vertical support structure at one end and a square one at the other. Compared to the other houses, I must admit that Satinder's house stood out as a masterpiece. For safety, the balustrade balcony was bordered with specially designed wrought iron railings, painted white.

He introduced us to his family. Several of his relatives lived in different sections of the house, and his extended family, consisting of several women, popped out from different rooms and greeted us by placing their hands on our feet.

"No! No!" Jenny exclaimed.

"That's fine!" I said. "It's symbolic of their hospitality, part of our old Indian culture that we've lost."

The little children, Satinder's son in a lungi, teenaged daughters, smartly dressed in Western clothing, the elderly—all received us with respect and reverence as seen from their eyes.

"Where shall we spend the night?" I asked Satinder.

"My home is your home," he said, and I couldn't have had a better welcome.

Later that evening, he spilled it all out. "My grandfather, Ramparichan, knew Raja Singh when he'd returned to the village," Satinder said. "He'd helped Savitri, his wife, build her house soon after the Great Monsoon and had taken her into his home when she couldn't get along with her sister-in law, Baran's wife."

Now I knew that S.K. Singh's family were Baran's neighbours and that Satinder, though no cousin, had only claimed relationship since he

wanted us to know that we were in good hands.

In conversation with him and several village-elders over a period of a week, I would learn much of my Indian family's Belwasa story during the time when Raja Singh was cutting sugarcane and later making a home in his adopted country. I was able to piece together those events from the time he went missing at the Sangam. Raja himself had heard them from Savitri, his brother, Baran, and from Ramparichan Singh upon his return to the village. Except for the double cremation ceremony, Raja had kept those details to himself. It was my duty, therefore, in those first six chapters of this book, to cover the untold Belwasa story, seventy-eight years after the passing of Raja Singh at the age of eighty-seven.