

Duty Officer:
Duddoo Tiwari



Uday Prakash

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Duty Officer: Duddoo Tiwari

LONG GONE ARE those days when Duddoo Tiwari played *kubuddee* in the soft earth of a freshly ploughed field with Samnoo, Jaipal, Ramana, Ramesh and all the other boys in the village. Those days, at the edge of the pond built on the other side of the village, he'd take off his undershirt and loincloth and go into the water stark naked. Those days he had yet to develop any sense of shame. If the gang went to the river, he'd spend all afternoon there catching crabs or, moving the rocks, seaweed and algae out of the way, looking for fish – *telfoon* and *garanoo*. Those days no brahmanism had yet arisen in the brahman Duddoo Tiwari. He was not yet a “twice-born”, because many times, on the sand of the riverbank, he roasted sweet-smelling *kotaree* fish on a pile of cowdung patties and ate them with salt and pepper with his

friends Ramana and Jaipal. Those days he had not yet developed a sense of caste because many times he ate Samnoo's half-eaten guava, and he always smoked with all the other boys when they rolled up a *saraae* leaf and filled it with tobacco. That Duddoo Tiwari was as yet untouched by any sense of caste distinction is further supported by the fact that twice, in a field of pigeon peas, he was caught red-handed kissing Duasiya, daughter of Ganeswa, the cobbler.

Those days, indeed, are long gone. Duddoo Tiwari had an under-shirt then that was smeared with the filth of the entire world. His buttocks and knees often broke out in sores around which flies loved to buzz. His nose was always running, and sometimes he'd curl his tongue up and have a taste.

Now, however, Tiwari ji was six-foot tall. The body he had was a trademark Mahatma Gandhi one except for his arms, which were like those of the heroes in the *Mahabharat*, long enough to reach his knees. He had tiny, bluish eyes and sported a light-brown moustache

that angled downwards, and his waist was exceedingly thin. When he walked, it was as if a bamboo stick had learned how to move. Three years earlier Duddoo Tiwari had passed the higher-secondary examination, in the third division, and now unemployment filled his days.

In every language in the world there is sure to be a proverbial expression to the effect that “every dog has his day”, and in that sense Tiwari ji, too, had his.

His Dad, Shri Bhadahaa Tiwari, had such amazing and colourful dreams, in which his son played the starring role, that they would have put even Hindi films to shame. Many times Duddoo appeared to him in the uniform of a police superintendent, and his stick fell like rain on the backs of all his enemies. Sometimes Duddoo appeared sitting in a jeep, and when he got out to investigate the village’s wells, he was wearing a coat and pants! Their hands respectfully placed together, the villagers smiled and showed their teeth, hoping to please him. Sometimes the elder Tiwari saw that Duddoo had become a cabinet

minister. He wore a white *kurta*, a catechu-coloured jacket and white loose pants. Duddoo Tiwari was speaking through a microphone to the whole world, and the audience shouted, “Long live Duddoo Tiwari! Long live Duddoo Tiwari!” The elder Tiwari shivered with goosebumps.

Many times, when it was evening, Pundit ji Bhadahaa Tiwari would have Duddoo sit with him, and he would explain to him the courage and the principles one needed to accomplish something in the world. He explained that the world gave a man respect only because of his occupation and his wealth. Without that, it wouldn't matter how good he was, people would think he was crazy, and as soon as they got a chance, they'd tar and feather him.

He said, “Instead of becoming a fakir, Duddoo, it would be better to drown yourself in the river. Concerning our present age Canakya Swami said, ‘*yena kena prak re a*’, by whatever means necessary, one should acquire wealth and power. If the goal is noble, then even an

ignoble path may be taken to get there.”

When Duddoo was a boy, Pundit ji used to beat him to a pulp. For that very purpose he had set aside the Jagannathi stick. It was a special cane from the Temple of Jagannath in the holy pilgrimage place of Puri, in Orissa, and if beatings from that cane could disperse the impediments to Duddoo's fortune, good. In his childhood, when Duddoo was caught stealing peas or cucumbers from the fields, Pundit ji used that stick to beat him. When Duddoo was in eighth grade, he played hookey all year, and for that he suffered a terrifying rain of blows from the Jagannathi. If this had been the Silver Age or the Golden Age, then Duddoo would have cried out, “Save me! Save me!” But since the current age is a degenerate one, the only words that came out of Duddoo's mouth were: “Run, run! ... Dad's killing me! ... he's killing me!”

But all that is ancient history. Now Duddoo Tiwari's stars and planets had brought him to the point where he was able to fulfil to some extent the dreams of his father.

WHAT HAPPENED IS THIS: a bridge was built over the Cane River. Four million rupees were spent on it, and in his speech at the bridge's official opening the Chief Minister said that the construction of this bridge over the Cane River near Punchgaon was nothing less than revolutionary. After congratulating the Contractor, he said that now communal tensions in this area would decrease, the people in the backward classes and scheduled tribes now had every opportunity to improve themselves. Now *harijan* and aboriginal children could very easily cross this river and obtain higher education in Benares, Calcutta, Allahabad, indeed, anywhere they wished. Because of this bridge the economic inequality in this area would disappear. A thunder of applause, and then the bridge's contractor, Shri Triloki Nath Arora, owner of Triloki Construction Private Limited, expressed his gratitude to the Chief Minister and to the officials in the Public Works Department and said that without their assistance this project would not have been possible. He said that the public welfare was possible

only when ministers and government officials worked together with private contractors. This bridge was an example of such cooperation. Then Shri Arora made a moving description of the country's unemployment problem and said that in order to alleviate the unemployment problem here in Punchgaon, within two weeks, he was going to build a Shiva Temple right here near the bridge over the Cane River. One priest and one sweeper would be appointed to look after the temple, and both would receive government salaries. Both positions would be permanent. Because of the goodness emanating from this Shiva temple, people in the area would begin to find gainful employment.

At this announcement by Shri Arora, Chief Minister ji himself broke into thunderous applause. When the official opening was completed, the Head of the Welcoming Committee, Shri Natthulal Sharma, Principal of the Punchgaon Primary School, thanked Shri Arora and Chief Minister ji and explained to the people that Shri Arora was so kind-hearted and full of the spirit of public welfare that

he himself had donated the cement and his company's time for repairing the school's two steps. Shameful were the accusations some local people had made in this affair against such a Gandhiwadi and enthusiast for the uplift of the people and the spread of education as Shri Arora ji. The public, students and teachers should stay away from such politics. This bridge over the Cane River was above politics.

This bridge over the Cane River changed Duddoo Tiwari's life. The Cane River was the official boundary between two districts. This bridge had now made it possible for traffic to go easily from one district into the other, so it was decided that a duty office should be set up. Vehicles crossing the bridge would be levied a duty: eight rupees for a loaded truck; four rupees for an empty one; two rupees for jeeps, cars, etc., and tractors; other farm vehicles and government vehicles would cross for free.

Pundit Bhadaha Tiwari went to the head of the village council, Shri Mohar Singh, and described his poverty to him in tearful terms. Mohar

Singh took Pundit ji along to visit the local Overseer of the Public Works Department. The Overseer took the problem to the Sub District Officer.

And that's how Duddoo Tiwari became appointed to the post of Duty Officer at the Duty Office of the Mahamana Madan Mohan Malviya Memorial Cane River Bridge. Monthly wages would start at Rs 325 and could go as high as 600. An office helper was also assigned to him.

Now Pundit Bhadaha Tiwari was intent on getting himself appointed as priest in the new Shiva Temple. If that came to pass, Lakshmi ji would start pouring down on his home like the rain in the monsoon months of Saawan and Bhadon. People were saying the position of priest in the Shiva Temple would be a government position, and he wouldn't be called a priest but an Officer of Dharma. The pay would be between 240 and 420 rupees.

THE APPOINTMENT OF Duddoo Tiwari as Duty Officer was welcomed in the village with great excitement. Pundit ji distributed to everyone special sweets, Mathura *peres*, that he bought in the bazaar in Kotma from the Mathura Mishthann Bhandar. That same day Pundit ji told Duddoo to greet personally everyone in the village. After all, a village is just one big family. Before undertaking such good work obtained by the grace of God, it was most desirable to request the blessings of the village's elders and teachers and the affection and good wishes of the others.

So that same day, making himself as small as possible and with utmost humility, Duddoo Tiwari met everyone. When people gave him their blessings, he bowed down even more in gratitude. He hugged his friends, they bearhugged him back and remarked that even after getting such an important, official post, not a bit of overbearing pride or superiority had tainted good ol' Duddoo. Actually, Duddoo had quickly become a good actor in this role of the humble, successful young man.

Time and again his stick-like body bowed, sometimes in half, sometimes down to a third. Time and again his hands joined together in the sign of humility, his eyes closed and his teeth showed. Time and again he made statements like this: “Everything is because of your grace, your mercy, Uncle.” When an elder would embrace him, he would shrink away, bow down and touch his feet.

The next day, on the other side of the river, a piece of tin was set on some wooden stakes. On three sides screens were made with pigeon pea stalks. This hut was Duty Officer Duddoo Tiwari’s office.

The next day an armchair and a desk were requisitioned from the Punchgaon Primary School and set up in this grand office.

The next day Duddoo Tiwari had a nameplate made that he hung on the outer wall of his office and that read:

DUTY OFFICER
SHRI D. TIWARI

The next day Ram Naresh came, who had been appointed office assistant. Thus, this “Transport Duty Office” began to operate in a regular fashion.

When a truck came and stopped because the barrier was down, Duddoo’s pulse would quicken. A huge, strapping driver would get out, enter the office, see Duddoo Tiwari sitting in his chair, salaam, pull eight rupees out of his pocket and put the money on the table. Duddoo Tiwari would ask for the number of the truck, write out a receipt, and sign his name at the bottom: *D, dot, tee ... ai ... doubleyou ... ay ... ar ... ai D. Tiwari*. Some truck drivers were uncivilized and would yell out from the truck, “How much, yar? Be snappy!” To Duddoo Tiwari such behaviour was insulting. After all, this office and this position carry a certain dignity. So in as loud a voice as the driver’s he’d say, “Assistant, see if the truck is loaded or not.” Then he’d wait a moment before adding, “And if it’s loaded, see if the merchandise is illegal or not.”

Gradually, his “assistant” and most of the drivers became familiar with Duddoo. From the truck itself the drivers would yell out, “Tiwari ji, namaskaar!” Duddoo would smile and respond. One driver gave him a calendar of coloured photographs of Parveen Bobby, which he hung up in the office. Because of the opening of the checkpoint, the barrier, and the fact that trucks and vehicles had to stop there, on the other side of the road a greasy spoon and a stall for paan, cigarettes and biris opened. A number of drivers arrived there exhausted and covered with the dust of their long journey. They’d park the truck right there and take a bath in the river. They’d order a meal of bread and lentils at the greasy spoon. Then they’d have some liquor and go to sleep right there in their trucks.

So Duddoo Tiwari’s name became well-known and the respect he commanded increased. His hut, that is, his office, sprouted more calendars and pictures.

Duddoo Tiwari made it clear to Ram Naresh that every day he was

to take a damp cloth and wipe the “desk” clean as a whistle. Not even one drop of tea should be visible. One day Duddoo bought two glasses in the bazaar. One he set aside for drinking water, etc. The other glass he set on his desk, filled it a quarter full with sand from the riverbank, filled the rest of it with water and stuck in it two beautiful, red hibiscus flowers. Thus began the decorating of his desk.

That same day he told Ram Naresh that every morning when he came for duty, he was to bring flowers and arrange them in the glass.

A few days later he brought a towel and placed it on the back of his chair, and a few days after that a thin cotton pillow graced his chair in the form of a cushion. Now, day and night he was obsessed by his chair and desk. He steadily kept adding things to enhance their appearance. One day he installed a paperweight on his desk. Then, with a razor blade, he cut out of English magazines colourful photographs of the sun setting in the ocean or a river; he applied a flour and water paste to the other side of them and attached them to his desk.

Now, respect for him at home had also increased. Everyday Pundit ji asked him how things were going at the checkpoint. That's what Pundit ji called it, while Duddoo wanted it to be called his "office". One day, in a low voice, he expressed his wishes in this matter to his father. Pundit ji understood how he felt so he was able to suppress the spasm of laughter that was rising up through him like a geyser.

Duddoo always wore clothes that had been washed and ironed. Terry cloth pants and a terry cloth shirt. Black shoes.

Now whenever his friends Ramana or Samnoo addressed him, as they always had, with the words "Duddoo bastard", he would smoulder inside. This started happening about six or eight weeks after he became Duty Officer. Now all his childhood friends seemed ill-mannered, rustic, good-for-nothing and uncivilized. Talking with them was no longer enjoyable. When they were kids and would jump over the Garna Nala to go to the village's rustic primary school, they would often skip school and instead hide in the hemp fields and eat cucumbers or corn or

sometimes smoke *biris*. Those days Ramesh was his best friend.

Just two days ago Ramesh had come into his “office” and sat up on his desk. Some drivers were there having Duddoo Tiwari make out receipts for them. Ramesh just kept jabbering away, always calling him “Duddoo bastard”. Out of Ramesh’s mouth poured a steady stream of fertile, foul, suggestive language produced by the village’s creative folk artists. Duddoo, inside, was boiling over. Ramesh’s sitting on his desk, affectionately calling him “Duddoo bastard” and filling the office with a flood of foul language went well beyond the bounds of decorum the office demanded. It would not have a good effect on the truck drivers. Tiwari ji’s dignity and the respect due his position were in danger.

Finally, he stood up. Holding onto his chair, he assumed an unyielding posture. His face became like a rock, and in a very serious and loud voice he said, “Ramesh ji, this is not your house, this is an office.” Then he continued in English, “An office. And duty ... is duty. Ramesh ji, you get out!”

Ramesh was beside himself. For a couple of minutes he couldn't figure out what had happened so suddenly to Duddoo bastard. Then he turned around and saw Ram Naresh, the assistant, trembling where he stood. Then he remembered that Jaipal, Samnoo, Ganesh and all the others had said that Duddoo had changed. Ramesh wanted to say something, but the shock was too great. He quietly stood up and left.

After that incident Duddoo Tiwari told Ram Naresh that if any kid came from the village, he was supposed to stop him outside the office and ask him what business he had there. If it was nothing important, he was to tell him then and there to go back to the village. He was to say that Duty Officer D. Tiwari didn't have any spare time for just hanging around.

The decorating of Duddoo Tiwari's desk continued. Now it had an ashtray. A penholder had also been added. A square sheet of glass provided a smooth writing space. One day he announced to his father that his desk was better even than that of the Overseer. All he needed now

was an electrical connection so that he could add a table lamp. Sometimes work there required his presence all night long.

Duddoo Tiwari no longer visited the ordinary people in the village. Sometimes he'd go to the Thakur Saheb's mansion and play cards or whatever. Most of his socializing was with the people in the bazaar town. Some were workers in his department, some were shopkeepers. Most of Tiwari ji's old friends in the village didn't have jobs, and the back-breaking labor of farmwork had caused them to become stupid, ill-mannered and rustic.

And then this happened.

ONE DAY, AT TEN O'CLOCK in the morning, a jeep came and stopped in order to cross the bridge. The driver motioned to Ram Naresh to lift up the barrier so they could pass. Ram Naresh asked Tiwari ji. Tiwari ji told him to go see if the jeep was a government one or a private one.

It belonged to the owner of the liquor distillery in the town of

Jaisingh, and in it were sitting the Block Record-Keeper, the Deputy Tehsildar, the Excise Inspector and the Patwari, the Area Record-Keeper, Ramnath Mehto, all drunk and disagreeable from too much tainted country liquor.

Ram Naresh looked and reported that the vehicle seemed to be a private one and some drunkards were sitting in it. Duty Officer D. Tiwari immediately declared that the barrier would not be lifted until the road tax had been paid.

Meanwhile, the jeep's horn, like a dissonant reed instrument, was being blown impatiently.

Seeing that the barrier wasn't being lifted, the Block Record-Keeper yelled out, "Arey, who's the deaf bastard sitting in the shack! The jeep's throat's getting sore, and the son of a bitch isn't raising the barrier!"

The Excise Inspector was inebriated from the orange wine he had drunk, and his throat was so out of control that he hit a thousand notes while saying, "Abay, lift it, you bastard, lift it!"

Patwari Ramnath Mehto was of the *kori* caste from the nearby village of Bichiya. He got his position because of the state's reservation scheme. All his superiors and overseers were in the jeep. Would he ever get another opportunity like this to display his loyalty and dedication? He got out of the jeep and headed for the office of the Duty Officer.

All their voices had reached the ears of Duddoo Tiwari. If he had been alone, it wouldn't have mattered. But this was a frontal attack against his authority and honor, and it was being carried out in front of his assistant Ram Naresh and the owners of the greasy spoon and the paan stall across the road. In his skinny body anger could sometimes explode as if he were a reincarnation of the ancient sage Durvasa. That's what happened this time.

Then he heard someone else's voice, that of the Deputy Tehsildar, saying, "Look, Patwari, drag that bastard out of there. We've been here for ages."

Duddoo Tiwari hunkered down in his chair even more. Adopting a

very serious, objective, detached attitude, he looked at Patwari Ramnath Mehto, uncapped his pen, opened the register and said, “What is the number of your jeep? Are you carrying anything illegal? Pay the two-rupee road tax, and the barrier will be raised.”

Patwari Mehto burped loudly. The Duty Officer’s Transport Tax Office became filled with the smell of country liquor. Then the Patwari approached his table, stood up straight and said, “Look here, Duddoo, we’re not paying one paisa of any tax-fax! We are all on government duty! The jeep, too, is on government duty! So raise the goddamn barrier!”

Duddoo Tiwari responded that the jeep was a private one; it was not owned by the government.

Patwari Mehto said, “It’s a government one because I say it is, and if you keep jawing away any more, I’ll grab you by the throat and bury your head in the sand, you son of a bitch!”

“The barrier will not be raised. That would be a violation of the law.”

Patwari Mehto turned over the table, grabbed Duddoo Tiwari and dragged him out of his office.

“Hit the bastard!” yelled all the officials from the jeep, and Patwari Mehto lifted up Duddoo Tiwari by the waist and threw him down on the road.

Assistant Ram Naresh watched silently.

The Duty Officer used all the strength he had, but Patwari Mehto had consumed ghee and fresh milk given him free by the farmers; he had eaten flat bread of barley and one-hundred percent pure wheat; from the aboriginals and landless laborers he had had fresh chicken – he had the strength of an ox. Not to mention the power he got from the national drink. “So you won’t open the barrier, you bastard, eh?” And then Mehto’s shoes rained blows on the Duty Officer’s face, chest and head as he lay on the ground. Duddoo Tiwari called to his assistant for help, but Ram Naresh, on the pretext of having to defecate, had taken refuge in the bushes growing along the riverbank.

Duddoo Tiwari's face had swollen up. His elbows and patches of his back were raw. His terry cloth pants had torn at the knees, some of his shirt buttons were broken, and in the meantime the barrier had been lifted, and the jeep had zoomed away.

It had been a supreme humiliation. Who knew where assistant Ram Naresh had gone? Duty Officer D. Tiwari prepared a report on the entire incident. He listed everything that had happened, but this especially: a *kori* had used his shoes to hit a trustworthy agent of the government who was only protecting the law and who was also a brahman. Action on this matter should be taken immediately.

Then he prepared another report in which he recommended that because of his unreliability, lack of discipline, and carelessness in his work, Assistant Ram Naresh be immediately relieved of his duties.

He signed both reports, picked up his bicycle and headed for the Office of the Overseer.

The Overseer wasn't in his office. He was at home, sleeping. It was

learned that he had given a firm order that no one was to disturb him at home. He had just had a party with the Block Record-Keeper, the Deputy Tehsildar and the Area Record-Keeper, Patwari Ramnath Mehto. After they had eaten and drunk their fill, the others had left in their jeep, and the Overseer Saheb needed his rest.

Duddoo Tiwari felt a dark storm approaching. Every pillar around him was crumbling like sand. He had been humiliated in public. He had been completely unarmed, and Patwari Mehto had kicked him. He had hoped that as soon as he reported the incident to the Overseer, high-level action would be taken, the affair would go straight to the Government and the Police, and for interfering with, making illegal demands on, and physically attacking a loyal, dutiful government worker, the Duty Officer of the Transport Tax Office at the Mahamana Madan Mohan Malviya Memorial Cane River Bridge, the Patwari and the Block Record-Keeper would be suspended.

Here, though, the situation was different. Now his own position was

in danger. They were the Overseer's friends, and if they complained, then ... ?

D. Tiwari's shoulders drooped, and pale despair flooded his face. He was returning home. Then he remembered that four or five years ago he had gotten into an argument with a shopkeeper, and the shopkeeper had beaten him. No sooner did that news reach the village than everyone gathered together. Samnoo, Ramesh, Jaipal and Ramana got out their fighting sticks. The shopkeeper's house was surrounded, and he was forced to apologize.

When Duddoo Tiwari reached his village, everyone already knew that Patwari Mehto had beaten and kicked him. His father was sad and said to him, "Your honor is in your own hands, Duddoo. Don't ever act in such a way that this will happen again. Today these villagers, who were jealous of our good fortune, are just delighted. Not only that, your good friend Ramesh has been reenacting with joy just how Patwari Mehto beat you up and kicked you. Raising a ruckus now won't help.

Those officers were drunk. It's an internal matter among government officials. Say you're sorry and let it go.”

Duddoo Tiwari had hoped that some villagers would come and ask how he was, and then the whole village would be united by the outrage. But no one came. He lay alone on his cot and stared out into space. He couldn't sleep. He had become alone. Completely alone. Behind Duddoo Bastard the whole village had rallied, but on the side of Duty Officer D. Tiwari there wasn't even a bird.

The next morning when he was on his way to his duty at the checkpoint, some children playing in a lane saw him and chanted loudly in unison:

Duddoo Tiwari

Officer wallah

Hit by the shoes of

Mehto Patwari!

and then they ran off laughing.

Duddoo Tiwari's legs became heavier with each step, and an endless silence rang in his ears.

About the Author and the Translator

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