

Made in Italy by Bhisim Sahani

Originally written in Hindi and translated in English by Dr Shobha Diwakar

Swinging her new suede bag over her shoulder, Meera ambled on the streets of Rome. She was jubilant and her heartbeats tickled her fancy. She halted for a minute to admire the bag she had recently purchased. She swung it off her shoulder and caressingly beheld it uttering, "Oh, How pretty!" She pampered herself, "How nice she had bought it," and swinging it back to its delightful perch, she strode on.

The last day of her stay was indeed stupendous. What a piece of luck she had obtained this bag. She was unable to find one so attractive in Paris, but yes, she had found one here. It would match all her saris. It was a light yellow suede bag, adorned with a shimmering silver brooch fastened with a magnetic clip button. It was fascinating: whether held in hand or swung on the shoulder; with a sari or with slacks. She had gathered all her courage, walked out of the hotel and bought it. Had she waited for Baldev until he returned from the meeting, it might have been too late. On the other hand, had she listened to the hotel boy, she would have been viewing some relics of the past. It was that little voice inside that kept goading her to get up and go out to explore the market and instantly she had got up and stepped out of the hotel. Yes, it was a good decision or else the hotel fellow would have kept her wandering on some endless spree.

Skirting out of her wandering fancy she perceived Pietas' all-embracing courtyard glimmering under the rays of the sun. Nearby a cluster of pigeons wafted down near an ancient fountain. Anywhere you turned your eyes, the sight presented holiday-makers. On Saturday afternoons, the streets of Rome became overcrowded. Meera lulled near the fountain wall then sat on it to rest herself. Looking around she wondered as to which ancient fountain it was, and just as soon turned away her gaze. In Rome, every nook and corner seemed to be crammed with relics and fountains, and what not. Who could go around inspecting all this? Satisfied with her sprawl and her 'booty,' she once again tenderly cosseted her new-found joy of the bag. Had she delayed her shopping even by an hour she would never have found it.

No matter how thirsty one might feel, no one lunges for a glass of water to quench his thirst as hysterically as Indians do for foreign goods on their trip abroad. Although Meera had capriciously purchased almost everything, she had set her heart upon on her foreign tour she wantonly craved to possess more. She had bought woolens from London, perfumes and night-wear from Paris, and a transistor and tape recorder from Berlin. By the time she reached Rome, her shopping list was complete, but she had not found a bag like this. Thrilling, she had found it here! What was the use of going abroad if you could not find something as beautiful as this? What then was the use of such a foreign trip?

On his last visit abroad, Meera's mama (uncle), had presented her a delightful tape recorder, an absolute new model. It was an instant hit at the kitty party. Now, Meera herself was touring Europe. She had discreetly preserved her hotel bills, air tickets, even those tickets she had bought for buses and trams. Once back in India from a foreign tour, not only foreign tape recorders, but also tiny bits of paper carried weight. "When Vimla perceives these bits of papers initially she will be crestfallen. Then her eyes will pop out of their sockets staring." Meera said to herself. "Although Vimla too has a tape recorder, which is

made in England, yet, a German tape recorder! That is just different, and this bag?" Musing thus, Meera once again cuddled the bag. "When Vimla views this bag, at first she will screw up her nose," then she will say, "Where did you buy it from?" I'll say. "From where do you think it is?" It is from Italy. See, here is the shopkeeper's bill, and I will thrust the bill before her.

Contemplatively, Meera thought about the shopkeeper, and smiled coyly. Italian businessmen are well versed with the art of flattering women, and this fellow was no doubt struck by my good looks, she smiled to herself. Good I wore a sari for my shopping. When you wear slacks in Europe, you are lost in the crowd; no one bothers to look at you, but if you drape a sari, people turn around and stare at you. What is it that they visualize in a sari? A couple of days ago a passerby stopped and came across to meet her. Speaking in broken English, he first commented on Meera's black eyes, then extolled her sari saying, "When Indian women prod along draped in saris, it seems as though waves of music are undulating, and kept repeating what not. Then taking her hand, he planted a kiss. While Meera's heart fluttered by this unexpected gesture, she blushed rapturously.

Closeted in her adventures of the day Meera could not but muse on the fact that when you ramble on Rome's thoroughfare graced in a sari, all eyes turn admiringly at you, so when touring Europe you must always adorn yourself in a sari. Had anyone committed the audacity to kiss your hand like this in India, ten people would have pounded him. Meera herself would have given him a piece of her mind... because... in India ... there are only quirky people. Once when she was climbing up the stairs of a cinema hall (in India), a man stuck out his hand and touched her waist in the dark. Immediately Meera's husband called the police, which created an uproar. Eventually the police officer tightly smacked the culprit's neck and scooted him off.

Here it is different. Every passerby pays you a compliment. What about **this** shopkeeper who sold bags? Did **he** pay lesser compliments?

"Madam this bag enhances the beauty of your eyes!" he remarked, and Meera flushed while her heart went flip flap.

"Your choice is excellent. This befits your height; for slim ones like you this bag is a perfect match. You should carry a bag of just this size."

Meera deliberately batted her eyelids' with ecstasy. She was aware that each time she did so her big black eyes fascinated and bewitched every onlooker.

"Perceiving your expressive eyes I knew you would buy *this bag*."

"You speak *shayari*," Meera smiled.

"Madam, the moment I set eyes on a beautiful woman I become crazy. Waves of inane sensations smother my inmost feelings." Meera giggled. The man flung out his arms as if he was an actor saying, "Truly madam, half the beauty of the world lies in the beauty of women and that too, ninety percent of it comprises the beauty of Indian women."

Once again Meera chuckled, and once again her heart fluttered. She picked up the bag swung it on her shoulder and stepped aside to admire her demeanor before the big mirror resting against a corner of the shop. Simultaneously, she whirled around to admire her personality. Contended with her image, swaying the bag, she smiled and approached the counter, paid and loftily walked out of the shop.

By now, tourists had begun to gather around the fountain. A couple of them who seemed to be Americans were clicking pictures of the ancient fountain. Two men standing close by to Meera were discussing about the lion's face engraved on the fountain. She overheard, "This was built in the third century. It's the oldest one in Rome."

Meera turned around for a moment to glance at the fountain then shifted her gaze. She wondered what people found of interest in these relics. When she was in Europe, like a fool she too had wandered here and there along with Baldev and other tourists. However, she soon concluded that she would no longer trudge along on these expeditions. In Paris, Baldev accompanied with some globetrotters went to visit *Libre*, which was packed with frescos. Meera halted at the portal and told him, "You go and see. I will wait here for you. I have not come here to break my bones; as though I have not seen pictures before!"

Just this morning the hotel manager placed a map of Rome before her saying, "Here is a church, here a relic." Spreading a typical European smile across her face Meera reiterated, "If I wished to see relics here I would have seen enough of them in India itself. I have come here to shop. You guide me as to which road leads to the market. I will manage the rest myself."

Meera's house in India was flooded with foreign pictures. Before she married, she recalled that her obsessive father too fancied only foreign stuff. Nothing less was acceptable to him. His life's mission was to buy only those items that had a foreign label attached to them; if the foreign label was missing, the thing was never bought. Her father was a government officer in pre and post- independent India. In fact, after independence, he was promoted to the topmost rank and his only mission in life was to collect foreign goods. He prided himself over six foreign cigarette lighters- each one surpassing the other. From a motor car to neckties, every item in his collection was foreign made. He possessed no less than forty neckties each one surmounting the other, and all imported.

On his daily morning walks, Meera's father stepped out of the house dressed in a suit, not forgetting the necktie. Meera too had married a government officer and at her marriage, she received an exotic foreign crockery set and a complete dinner set. When Vimla set her eyes on it, she was edged with a pang of jealousy. Now... she herself was touring and shopping in Europe.

Gently Meera unclipped the button of the bag. With a 'khat' sound the bag snapped open. She peeped inside and beheld a beautiful silky sky blue lining, which made the bag even more gorgeous. To maintain its shape it had been stuffed with wax paper. Meera slid her hand inside, drew out the paper and chucked it behind the fountain wall. At once, she caught sight of the label stitched in the right corner of the bag and stood stunned as if paralyzed. She trembled from head to toe. She could not believe her eyes. She was badly shaken up and felt her whole body was ignited. The bag was made in Hindustan! Meera staggered. "I have been cheated." The shopkeeper had cunningly engaged her in his crafty and luscious chat, and palmed off a bag, which was – Made in India! The rascal...

Quickly Meera glanced at her watch. It was just a few minutes to one. The shops closed at one, and today was Saturday. Meera contemplated, "What if the shops shut down by the time I reach? Why didn't I first peep inside the bag? I was captivated by his chirpy talks and he cheated me. 'Desi stuff,' and that too, in two thousand liras! Shall I carry this to Delhi? Shall I dangle this and step out of the plane? The rouge, the scoundrel. Baldev had warned

me not to get infatuated by these Italian shopkeepers and I merely got led away. Like a blind fool, I paid so heavily for this 'fatichar' (third rated) bag."

Stamping her foot Meera got up and proceeded to the shop muttering all the way, "How dare he refuse to take it back? I'll report the matter to the embassy. How will he get away? I won't leave him." The shopkeeper was raising some hoarding when he heard the thud of footsteps. Perceiving Meera a big professional smile spread across his face.

"The sun has risen twice today," he rambled stretching out his hands. "I was aware madam that you would return. Beautiful women visit Mario's shop again and again."

Meera chagrined, hotly broke out, "Why didn't you tell me this bag was made in India?"

But Mario did not understand what she meant. Graciously he said, "Madam this bag is very beautiful. Do you wish to buy another? Today I have sold fifteen bags," he proudly added.

"Sorry I don't want this bag. I don't wish to buy it," she charged pungently.

'Madam, madam, oh, oh, you don't want this beautiful bag. Is there anything wrong with it? Shall I change it?"

"You have cheated me?"

Mario continued to laugh and placing his hand across his heart said, "Come to my shop and I will cheat you not once but ten times. Mario loves to cheat in this manner and grinning, once again, outstretched his hands.

Meera was nettled. She quivered and chided him, "Why didn't you tell me this bag was made in India? Please take it back and refund my money."

"Madam," Mario flapped again. "Take the money as well as the bag as a Lilliputian gift from me."

"No, no, I don't want this bag."

"Madam I have sold fifteen bags today. Customers love this bag made in India." Mario chirped.

"Maybe you did, but I do not want this bag."

"Madam, do you really not like this bag?" Mario said with *amour propre*, a little puzzled.

Meera almost truckled but spoke firmly, "Whether good or bad, I don't care. I will not take this bag."

Baffled, Mario kept goggling at her. Once again, Meera twirled the bag in her hand and stared at it for a while. Who knows he may really have sold fifteen bags today. "The bag is not as bad as I consider it to be. The color is also... not so bad after all... and ... it is not too bad to look at." She churned over the thought pensively then plausibly said, "Can you do me a favor?"

"Madam...?"

"Cut off this label, which is stitched inside with a pair of scissors and replace it with another that has the logo, "Made in Italy." Then I will take it."

Mario carefully scrutinized Meera's countenance, her sari, the 'bindi' on her forehead, and simply kept staring at her.

Meera was agitated, “Flip it, flip it and stitch a ‘Made in Italy’ label.”

Mario hazily smirked and ducked behind the counter. He snipped off the ‘Made in India,’ label and ripping off a “Made in Italy” label from a cap, glued it inside the right corner of the bag.

“Now that you have extracted one ‘Made in Italy’ label, take out three to four extra ones and give them to me. I will pay you separately for them,” said Meera with a disencumbered smile.

After a while, slinging the bag on her shoulder, Meera walked out of the shop, but no sooner was she out of earshot she boomeranged, “Had I not seen this label then, this change would not have been possible.” Then insolently rebutted, “Damn it now everything is being made in India!”

This story was originally written in Hindi by the renowned novelist and short story writer **Bhism Sahani** (8 August 1915 - 11 July 2003). The story appeared in *Charchit Kahaniya* (2007).

Sahni was a writer and playwright in Hindi literature. He was an actor also. He is best known for his novel and screenplay for the television serial *Tamas* (or *Darkness*)—a powerful and passionate account of the partition of India. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1998 for Literature, and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2002.

Translator: **Dr. Mrs. Shobha Diwakar**, was Head, English, C.P. Mahila Mahavidhyalaya, Jabalpur, M.P is retired now. She was appointed in the guest faculty, Dept of PG Studies & Research in English, Rani Durgavati Vishvavidhyalaya, and supervised M Phil theses. She was also Honorary Prof. of English, St. Aloysius’s College [A] Jab.

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