

DASTAN DITTU SINGH MAJHABI DI – STORY OF DITTU SINGH, A DALIT SIKH

(As the play begins, the village Sarpanch¹ and Dittu Singh enter, arguing with each other. The Sarpanch is wearing a white shirt, pyjama and a black jacket, while Dittu Singh is dressed up as a worker. He has tied a scarf on his head.)

- Dittu Singh : Tell me Sarpanch. Once it has been decided that the village common land will be used to construct toilets then why are you panicking now!
- Sarpanch : This decision had come from the higher authorities. The villagers were not in agreement with it. The previous government had appeased your Dalit² community for votes but now the villagers have decided to build a Gurudwara³ here.
- Dittu Singh : Gurudwara?
- Sarpanch : Yes Gurudwara. Don't forget that a new government is in place now. Earlier decisions will not be implemented. The foundation stone will be laid by the new MLA⁴. For constructing the Gurudwara, everyone in the region will do voluntary service.
- Dittu Singh : Region?
- Sarpanch : Yes, Gurudwaras are constructed this way only. Moreover, this is a historical Gurudwara. Not the sixth but the seventh master of Sikhism set their foot here.
- Dittu Singh : How did the seventh master come here?
- Sarpanch : The way they come, why do you bother about it?
- Dittu Singh : This is your sham. You don't allow the Dalits to use the farms for their nature's call. You don't allow toilets to be constructed. Where do we go then! So listen, we will queue up in front of your bungalow. We will use the new toilets you have built for yourself, you wait and see.
- Sarpanch : Is this your threat?
- Dittu Singh : You can take it that way!
- Sarpanch : With a few votes in hand, these Dalits have the courage now to speak up! We will see you.

(He leaves the stage, the narrator enter from the other side.)

- Narrator : The argument that you just witnessed, you must be thinking that this is just like any other fight between the land owners and Dalits. This fight is bound to happen because for centuries those oppressing would want the oppression to continue. But now this cannot go on like this. If this has to change then it will change, whether it is the Captain or Badal at the head of the government. The play that we are presenting to you now could be the story of this village or the story of Dittu Singh. The story is of the time when on one side every village was celebrating the birth centenary of Shahid Bhagat Singh and on the other side elections were on for the state assembly. The characters of this play are – Dittu Singh, Sarpanch, Sardar Bikramjit Singh and Sardarni, who is a daughter of a Comrade.

(The play starts. Dittu Singh is humming a song – 'tu maghda rahin ve suraja kamian de bihade'. He sits on one side, Sardarni comes from the other side.)

¹ 'Sarpanch' is an elected village head.

² Untouchables in the traditional Indian caste system.

³ A place of worship for Sikhs.

⁴ Member of Legislative Assembly, the elected legislature of the state in the Indian system of government.

Sardarni : Oh Dittu, what are you thinking, your mind does not seem to be in the work you are doing.

Dittu Singh : Me? I am thinking what am I? What are other Dittus like me? And Sardarni-ji, please do not address me as Dittu, I am Haridutt Singh.

Sardarni : Haridutt Singh?

Dittu Singh : Yes. Neither Sardar Haridutt Singh nor Dittu Singh.

Sardarni : But I like calling you Dittu.

Dittu Singh : OK, if you like calling me Dittu then you can call me that way but Dittu is no longer the Dittu of before.

Sardarni : That I can make out. You are always thinking about something. And why do you always have the radio around your neck now?

Dittu Singh : This is my life line. I get all the news from it and the power of the news makes a human to be a human.

Sardarni : Human?

Dittu Singh : Look Sardarni-ji. When you came to this house, the whole village was abuzz saying that Bikramjit Singh married a daughter of a Comrade. And now Dittu Singh will benefit from it. Comrades don't believe in caste discrimination or the divide between the rich and the poor and initially I thought that way, but then...

Sardarni : But then what?

Dittu Singh : But when you took responsibility of the house, you also followed the life style of the elder Sardarni of the house.

Sardarni : Life style? Which life style?

Dittu Singh : My association with this house goes a long way back, with the house as well as the farms. But since I saw the play on Bhagat Singh, I have started understanding a lot of things.

Sardarni : What have you started understanding, tell me too.

Dittu Singh : Questions used to come to my mind earlier also about what are we. The results of the assembly elections were being declared. The ones winning as well as those losing...from Gurdaspur Bajwa Sardar, Randhawa Sardar, from Amritsar Majithia Sardar, from Taran Taran Kairon Sardar, from Ludhiana Charcha Sardar...Garewal, Gill, Shergill...from Muktsar Brar, Mrar, Badal Sardar...all of them are big landlords and the rest are just nobody! Actually the question about myself also came to my mind when I went with Sardar-ji to Kila Raipur games. The dogs race was on and the announcer was saying that Garewal's dog is in the first place. I saw that the person taking care of the dog was just like myself Dittu Dalit – he feeds the dog, cleans up its poo but the name being announced was that of Garewal Sardar. Then the question came to my mind – Dittu what are we?

Sardarni : Ok, that don't think that much, have some tea. Put forward your bowl⁵.

Dittu Singh : Give me that tea container, now I will not drink tea in my tumbler.

(He takes the tea container. The Sardarni is watching him – Dittu sits on a high place and takes out a cup and plate from his bag, pours tea into it and drinks it.)

Sardarni : Oh great Dittu, you have done a wonderful thing.

Dittu Singh : You can think it that way.

Sardarni : What?

Dittu Singh : Sardarni, a pant is a pant but when worn crumpled it is looked down upon even though it does its work of covering the body and a pant worn ironed adds to one's pride.

⁵ Dalit are expected to carry their bowl, to avoid touching the utensils of the upper caste.

(Dittu drinks tea. The Sarpanch and Sardar enter from the other side.)

- Sarpanch : See, this time the Akalis have been wiped out from the Malwa region.
- Sardar : Sarpanch sir, this is due to the kindness of the Premis⁶.
- Sarpanch : Actually, this was managed – during heavy rain, the booths were captured to put in bogus votes.
- Sardar : Although Navjot Sidhu and Sukhbir Badal were also in the fray, but the Captain took away all the honours.
- Dittu Singh : *(Humming to himself)* Spiritual camps mushrooming everywhere – Beas Camp, Sirsa Camp, Namdhari Camp, Nanaksari Camp. Spiritual leaders commit all the fraud, while the followers pray to god. Oh Spiritual One, there is none like you...
- Sardar : So Sarpanch sir, what will be your strategy now? Now are you with the Badals or with the Captain?
- Dittu Singh : *(Humming to himself)* He is worshipper of the rising sun....that is how grants are gobbled up. *(Looks at the Sarpanch sarcastically.)*
- Sarpanch : OK Sardar-ji, I will take leave. Will let you know whatever program is decided. We all together will do the best for the village's interest. We will also have to feel the pulse of the new government. *(He goes away.)*
- Sardar : What has happened to our Dittu Singh?
- Sardarni : He is under the spell of Bhagat Singh. Today he refused to drink tea in his usual bowl, instead he used a cup and a plate, sitting upright and not on his hunches.
- Sardar : Then you would have served him biscuits also.
- Sardarni : Right. The Sarpanch seems to be coming here more often now.
- Sardar : He respects me.
- Sardarni : Respect, my foot. He is out to demonstrate his opportunism. Our Dittu understands him very well.
- Sardar : Dittu and him have never got along well. And Dittu has now become a big mouth. I have been giving him some leeway. We has been working for us since he was a child. He has served my father well. My sister always asks about his well being when she calls from Canada.
- Sardarni : She loves him very much. Whenever she comes, she brings lots of clothes for Dittu.
- Sardar : That she does for all the Dalit community here. I don't have any objections to it. I am all for the Dalits to wear the colourful clothes of Canada but I do say that a servant should be treated as a servant only. It is important to keep them where they are right now.

(The phone rings.)

- Sardar : Yes, I am speaking. Ok, the Rotary Club meeting is on. The new MLA is also coming. Yes, yes I will come. Why wouldn't I come. *(Laughs)* New rulers, new games. *(Keeps the phone down.)* OK Deep, I would get late coming back home.
- Sardarni : I could guess as much. A meeting will be held, festivities will follow, liquor will flow and everyone will ogle at Mrs Walia's charms. If I say something then instantly you will blame it on my Communist blood. Though you will not pin it on the false ego of the Sardars. That of a Sardar as well as that of a man.
- Narrator : This bickering that you just witnessed is not just between husband and wife but is more fundamental. At some point in time Sardar Bikramjit Singh was a student leader. He would participate in international conferences. Now he is a dejected

⁶ Followers of Dera Sacha Sauda are called Premis.

communist. Just like many other communists after the fall of Soviet Union. Whenever their conscience is pricked, they taunt others. Dittu understands all of it.

(Dittu enters muttering to himself.)

- Dittu Singh : Go ahead, build everything for yourself. Don't leave anything for the poor.
- Sardarni : What happened Dittu, you are so angry?
- Dittu Singh : Yes I am angry. I have just heard that special schools are being opened in Chandigarh – smart schools which will have arrangements for world class education. Every student will be given a computer. Oh these high class people! They will make 'ideal schools' for their own children. From our children schools, even the floor mats will be taken away . Bricks will be taken away from the walls. Oh you rulers! This is what your highly paid officers think in your governance! Oye pimps, sometime use your brains to think how children of poor people should be taught! How do you make studying simple and interesting so that they do not run away from school! Teaching computer requires a qualified teacher....Madame, last time the sister from Canada was telling how the teachers there were specially selected to teach their children.
- Sardarni : So what kind of education do you want?
- Dittu Singh : This is so straight forward. Every child must equally study whether the child is rich or poor. They should have similar schools, similar books, similar school dress. No one should differentiate between them – who is rich and who is poor. The sister from Canada was saying that France started the convention of such a school uniform. Such experiments have happened in the field of education and we remain where we were before as if we have sworn not to progress....And yes Madam the Sarpanch has once again put roadblocks to prevent construction of toilets in the village common land.
- Sardarni : So why does your representative Shingara Singh not speak up?
- Dittu Singh : He has been bought over by the Sarpanch. Every time the bowl licker is up to a new trick.
- Sardarni : Bowl licker? Why do you call him bowl licker?
- Dittu Singh : His entire character, his thinking is like that of a bowl licker. Whenever upper class people drink something, he will lick their cups like a starved person, like a dog licks used utensils for crumbs. It is important to identify them.
- Sardarni : Dittu, I heard that this time your community people took money for their votes. Is this true?
- Dittu Singh : Yes. I said this is not right. They ask me why? This is the time to pin the Sardars.They need us today and we will take our pound of flesh. And this bowl licker became the middle man. These are the people responsible for our impoverished state to remain the same. When our community demanded that our taps should get at least four hours of water supply each day, then people like these spread the propaganda that we must be thankful for even one hour of water supply and that currently we don't drink water from a tap, so why now. People like these are enemies of our progress, hence important to identify and dissociate them from our community.
- Sardarni : They don't you dissociate them?
- Dittu Singh : Madam, this is not easy as it seems. They present themselves as elders of the community. These maternal and paternal uncles throw the weight of their experience around and take the fizz out of the youth. The youth must, with folded hands, tell these uncles that your time has gone, just let go now.

(Sarpanch enters.)

- Sarpanch : O Dittu, you are sitting here hiding under the Sardarni's shawl!
- Sardarni : Sarpanch sir, mind your language! He is sitting in his house. This house belongs to him as much as it belongs to us. He shares every brick of this house with us. But tell me what wrong has he done?
- Sarpanch : My bungalow is surrounded by his community people and this is all his mischief.
- Dittu Singh : No bungalow has been surrounded, just that we have queued up to use your toilet. I had already warned you in advance about it.
- Sarpanch : I am the village head and not god who can meet all your needs. I was elected the village head and your community people also voted for it. I spent a lot of money on you people. If now the landlords do not allow you to use their farms for your nature calls, why should I be held responsible for it? I am the elected head but not the owner of the village. Millions in the country do not have a toilet in their houses, so do they go and surround the house of the elected heads? This is the limit of hooliganism.
- Dittu Singh : Ok then you tell me, what should landless poor do?
- Sarpanch : What can I say, ask the poor people why they are poor? And listen I cannot accept this hooliganism. Tell your community people to stop queuing up in front of my house. I have also informed the police. Then don't blame me for any excesses. Using my toilet....the cheek of it. The landlords prevent you from using their farms for your nature calls, so does it mean that you go and surround the house of the elected head! Go anywhere and hide behind a shawl for your nature calls.
- Dittu Singh : I will tell you one thing. I have heard that in Bihar, the tribal people have taken up arms to start an operation to save their jungles and the police can't do a thing to stop it. Our operation will be called "Operation nature's call". Let the police come and round up the Dalit women on their nature's call.
- Sarpanch : O Dittu, I know you are doing all this with the support of the communists. The communists are like that only, neither live peacefully nor let anyone else do so. They always raise the bogey of the rich and the poor. Listen, the poor will always remain poor, this is their destiny. Did we tell them to be born in poor homes. They could have been born in rich people's home. Go ask your fathers and mothers why they give birth to you. I am telling you again that this hooliganism will not do. He says he will start "Operation nature's call".

(Sardar enters from outside.)

- Sardar : Dittu, what is this ruckus that you have created. I got a phone call from the town that your Dittu Singh has misguided the Dalit women to surround the bungalow of the Sarpanch.
- Dittu Singh : Yes that has been surrounded. First the Sarpanch must provide account of the money given by the government for constructing the toilets and tell us why they have been constructed as yet.
- Sardar : But you cannot do all this from my house. Go to Sarpanch's bungalow and ask. You leave this house before the police arrives.
- Sardarni : No, he will not go anywhere.
- Sardar : What did you say! You have the guts to oppose me in my house.
- Sardarni : Yes, guts that I should have shown long ago. I remember my father telling me that my Sardar was once a leader of the student movement. He used to participate in strikes and demonstrations. He used to stand by truth and rights of people but now has forgotten that. The Sarpanch must first tell why the toilets have not been

made. He must promise that the toilets will be made. He has to give a written statement. Till then Dittu will stay in this house.

(Dittu shows a sheet of paper to the Sarpanch. Sardarni stands behind Dittu. Sarpanch seems shaken and afraid. All freeze.)