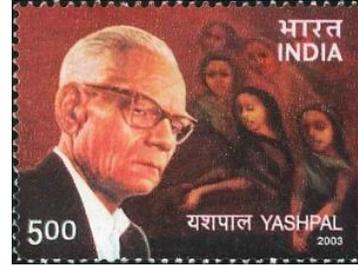


Memories of the Hills (पहाड़ की स्मृति in Hindi)

Author: Yashpal (1903 -1976)



English Translation from Hindi: Abhishek Avtans, Leiden University (2026)

(This translation tries to preserve the integrity of the Hindi text, so at times it will look too literal, but our goal is to understand the Hindi text better.)



Now there are trains, electricity, and motor vehicles in Mandi, but there was a time when none of these existed. People used to travel from Hamirpur to Mandi via Ruwalsar. At that time, trade was either carried out by mules or on the backs of men (load carriers). During those days, I went to Kullu via Mandi.

A bit away from the Mandi city, I saw a middle-aged hill woman sitting by the roadside with a bamboo basket full of apricots. Hill people often sit by the roadside with some fruits etc. and sell them to the passersby for a few Paisas (coins). The apricots were exceptionally large and of excellent quality.

As soon as I reached near (her), the woman asked a question in broken Punjabi, "Are you (a resident) from Lahore?"

Perhaps she may have thought that I might be from Lahore looking at my attire (dress). I thought (wondered) if she recognized me and gave the answer, "Yes, I am from Lahore."

Her eyes lit up with joy, and she asked, "Do you know Parasarām?"

Surprised, I asked, "Parasarām! Which Parasarām?"

She replied anxiously, "Parasarām, the contractor."

Not understanding anything, I asked again, "Which Parasarām, the contractor?"

Pointing in the direction (through her hand) I had come from, she said, "The one who got those two bridges built."

I didn't understand (what she was saying) and replied, "I don't know Parasarām. May he be someone? Why?"

She said sadly, "You are from Lahore, and you don't know/recognize him! He is also from Lahore. Parasarām, the contractor, right?"

Being a bit moved by her impatience, I asked, "Which street, which neighborhood is he from?"

With a genuinely concerned expression with a hand on her cheek, she slowly said, "Street, neighborhood...? Not a street or neighborhood, he is from Lahore. You are also from Lahore... don't you know him?"

I could not laugh at her ignorance. I tried to explain to her that Lahore is a very big city. If not more than two and a half lakh (0.25 million) people inhabit Lahore. In each neighborhood, there are so many people that they can't recognize each other. I live in Heera Mandi. If Parasarām contractor lives in Majang, then he is three and a half miles away from me, even though he also lives in Lahore, I too, and there are hundreds of thousands of people living between us.

The woman didn't understand. The joy in her eyes vanished. She placed her hand on her cheek and said softly (in low voice), "He is from Lahore. Tallis, pale complexioned, he has lovely eyes, a bit younger than you, he wears a brownish coat, he ties a silk turban, he is from Lahore."

I answered sadly, "No, I don't know him."

I squatted near her basket, while picking apricots I started putting in my handkerchief. Out of sympathy, I asked, "Why, do you have some work with him?"

Taking a deep breath, she said, "Parasrām used to build a bridge here. It's been five years since he was here. When he was leaving, I said, 'Don't go.' He said, 'I'll be back very soon, in a few days.' He didn't come back... Lahore is very far, isn't it?"

I replied, "Yes, it is very far."

Her eyes became moistened. She lowered her neck and said, "(God knows) I don't know why he didn't come back... I don't know when he will come... It's been five years, he hasn't come?" She became silent.

After a while, with her neck still lowered, she said, "I keep waiting for him, that's why I sit by the roadside. I have a lot of work to do, but when my heart feels restless, I come and sit here. Two other men came from Lahore, but he didn't come. It's been five years. She became silent.

A small girl, about five years old, came running from one side. Seeing me, a stranger, she got scared. Then, ignoring me, she hid her face in her mother's corner of Saree and clung to her neck.

I asked, "Is this your daughter?"

She nodded with her head down. Stroking the girl's head, she said, "She is also five years old. She hasn't seen her father yet. If she sees him, she won't recognize him."

While looking at both of them, I thought to myself - poets say separation is the life of love and union is the end. Does she want to end her love? Will this love last forever? Then I thought, is this woman shameless? Is this indeed her example of love, sacrifice and penance?

I asked, "How much (for the apricots)?"

She said, "No, what money; you are from Lahore, what money from you?" and filled my handkerchief with as many apricots as it could hold in the cup of her hands.

I understood that the woman wouldn't take money. Her sad face was piercing my heart. It felt cruel to leave. I had to get up thinking that my mule carrying the luggage must have gone ahead (far). I took out a half-rupee (50 paise) coin and tried to give it to the child with affection. The woman refused, but understanding my sentiment, she allowed her daughter to take it.

Leaving them, I went to stay in a Dharamshala (religious guest house) in the village. In my imagination, I kept seeing the hill woman sitting by the roadside, waiting. It seemed as if she would spend the rest of her life waiting there.

The next morning when the sunshine came, I went out for roaming. My feet on their own led me to that same road. Turning around a bend behind the rocks, I saw the woman weeding in her fields. Hearing the sound of passersby, she would glance at the road. It seemed that a faint flame of hope kept her weary and tired body alive. This faint flame was the hope of Parasrām's return.

Upon seeing me, a faint smile appeared on her face again. Putting her hoe from her hand aside, she said, "Are you returning to Lahore?"

I gave the answer, "No, I just came for a walk."

I went into her fields/farm and I asked, "How many days/long did Parasrām stay here?"

The hill woman replied, "Eight months. He used to say: I will return very soon, but he hasn't come yet. Who knows when he will come? The girl has grown so much."

I asked, "Why didn't you move/go to Lahore with him?"

Placing her hand on her cheek, she said, "Yes, I didn't go. Parasrām asked me to come, but I didn't go. Look, how would I go? How could I leave everything here? Those in front are apricot trees, those are pear trees, those are apple trees, and those two walnut trees. I have never gone anywhere from here. Once, when I was little, my maternal aunt took me to her village down there. Her house is very far. It may be ten kos (1 kos = approx. 3 kms). There, everything is so different, no hills, no sound of the Beas river, no such trees, it feels/seems very dry. I got a fever there, then my paternal uncle carried me back here on his back. As soon as I came, I became better. I have never gone anywhere. Lahore is very far; perhaps people get sick there. I fear a lot about Parasrām. Who knows how is the condition? At our place, people rarely get sick. Even if they do, then Hardu Julaha (weaver) cures them with his spells/charms. Is there a good healer in Lahore?"

I answered, "Yes why not!, there are many."

Moving/shaking her head with satisfaction, she said, "Good."

Hesitantly, I asked, "Weren't you married before Parasrām came here?"

She said, "Yes, I was married long time ago. My husband took me to Taku from here after marrying me. I didn't like it there. I got sick. There my co-wife used to beat me a lot. I came back here. My husband/man used to come here and stay sometimes. He passed away three years after our marriage. I stayed near my mother. I had said to Parasrām- "Everything is here,

don't go anywhere". He used to say – "I would come back soon. It's been five years; he hasn't come yet". Look, when he may come. My mother has also passed away two years now."

On the fourth day, in the early evening, I passed by again from there. She was working in her fields with her head down. She went humming something. I stood for a moment, watching, perhaps she was humming a song of separation, or she was remembering the last days (past). In her attention/thoughts, I did not find it appropriate to disturb her. So, I returned.

I stayed in Mandi for the whole week. Before leaving/moving for Kullu, I went to see her once more. She was absentmindedly weeding in her fields. Her daughter was running around, throwing out the grass she had pulled/plucked from the fields.

I said, "I'm going today."

She asked eagerly, "Lahore?"

I said, "Yes, I'm going to Kullu, from there I'll return to Lahore."

With great humility, she said, "Please say my message to Parasrām for sure. Say, I keep staring at the road the entire day; it's been five years, now you must return. Your daughter keeps calling for you. Will you tell him?"

I said, "I will definitely say to him."

Longingly she said to her daughter, "Look, Bābū (gentleman) is going to your father. Say *Salam* (hello) to the Bābū. Bābū will send your father."

"Alright!" I said and returned back, and then I could not look again. It seemed as if her eyes were piercing the back of my neck. I felt restlessness/uneasiness in my mind/heart. I cannot say whether it was anger toward Parasrām, compassion for the hill woman, or jealousy of him.