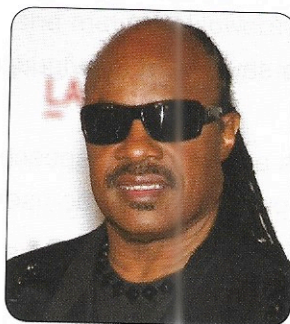
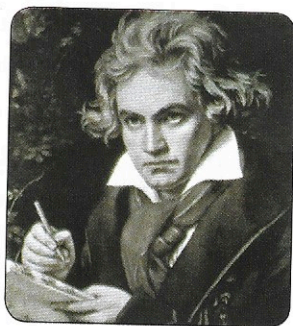


Unit 5

The Mountain Trail



What do these four celebrities from the past and the present share in common apart from being famous?

Do you know anyone who overcame a physical handicap and is living a fulfilling life? How did they manage to achieve this?

Sukhram Lodhi sat leaning against a rock, his turban over his eyes, the warmth of the sun on his bare feet. His feet told him where he was. They knew the feel of the sand and the stones, and the different kinds of grass.

Sukhram was fourteen and he knew that people were sorry for him. But he thought, if only they could guess how beautiful his world was, they would envy him. Most people

did not know about the little rustlings¹ in the grass. They did not know the feel of things, round things like eggs, and water-worn stones, rough things like rocks, or of leather, or of skins. They did not know anything about smells. They went through life with blind noses.

Sukhram spent his time herding his father's hundred goats. He knew them by the sound of their cloven² hoofs on the stones, by their smell.

But while he had been on the mountain that day Rani Lakshmi Bai, the queen of Jhansi, declared war on the English and was joined by the indomitable³ Tantia Tope. When he reached home he found his father and Rajbir saddling⁴ their horses. They kissed him goodbye, their rifles pressing into his chest as they held him.

As the sound of hoofs faded into the distance, he felt his mother beside him. She put her arm about him. 'What will we do now, *amma*?' he asked.

'We are going, son. We are going to your grandfather.'

'But it will be dark there. I do not know those fields and how shall I graze my father's goats in a strange place where it's dark?' For the first time he knew what it was to be blind.

In the morning the horses were hitched⁵ to the wagon, and the loose cattle and goats were collected for the fifteen kilometre trek. 'Come Sukhram,' his mother said. 'We are ready.'

Sukhram got up beside his mother. Suddenly he said, 'I am nothing, *amma*. I am going to a strange place that my feet do not know, and I am nothing.'

When they reached there, his grandfather had gone—everyone, all the old men and the boys as well. Sukhram alone was left. There was nothing to do but wait.

One day some soldiers passed, tired men on tired horses. Sukhram listened. The shuffling of the horses, the sweaty smell of men, told him all that he needed to know.

'Have you seen my father or my brother?' he asked.

'Who are you?'

'I am Sukhram Lodhi,' he said. 'I am blind. My father is with Tantia Tope's army.'

'We are joining Tantia Tope. We will tell him we have seen you.'

¹rustlings soft, crackling sounds caused by movement of leaves or paper ²cloven split or severed ³indomitable impossible to defeat ⁴saddling putting the riding seat on ⁵hitched fastened together

Shortly he heard more horses coming. But these were not the horses of his people. They were heavier and were not being ridden loose reined⁶. He could hear the jingling of chains, the strike of metal on metal. These were English. They must be in pursuit of the tired men who had passed him earlier.

'Have you seen some soldiers pass, boy?' It was the man on the nearest horse, no doubt the officer in command. 'I have been out all day,' Sukhram replied. 'I have seen nothing.'

Another man said, 'They came this way all right and have gone towards the hills. They can't be far away. Their horses are tired.'

'Come on then,' the officer said, 'they can't be far.'

The soldiers swirled past Sukhram. He began to be afraid for Rajbir and his father.

'Did you see the English?' his mother asked.

'Yes, I saw them, *amma*,' he said. 'They spoke to me. They were following some soldiers that were going to join Tantia Tope. Father and Rajbir are there.'

'I wish we had news,' his mother said.

'Yes *amma*, it is hard to live without news. It is hard also to be a man and to be here. Today I was ashamed. First to face our folk and then to face the English. I told our people but I did not tell the English. They did not know that I could not see. Oh *amma*, is there nothing I can do?'

That night Sukhram could not sleep. Suddenly he sprang up. '*Amma, amma*' he shouted. 'It is my brother on horse back. He is riding hard.'

He found the door and opened it. The approaching horse had not slowed down. It was Rajbir.

'What is it, Rajbir?' his mother asked.

'*Amma*, I have no time to explain. I have come to fetch Sukhram. Tantia Tope needs him.'

'Tantia Tope? You are taking Sukhram to the war? What can Sukhram do?'

'Yes. What can I do?' Sukhram asked.

'I'll tell you on the way. Come here.'

⁶ loose reined with a light pressure on the reins

Sukhram went towards the horse and felt for his brother's leg. He held the stirrup⁷ with one hand and put his foot into it. His brother had his left hand. He was up.

'Hold fast, Sukhram. We are going to ride.'

He had hardly got hold of his brother's waist when the horse was off. They were galloping. It began to rain. Where were they going? What was he to do? What use could he be to Tantia Tope? The ground grew rougher. There were loose stones.

Suddenly he sat up straighter. He could smell the mountain, his mountain

'We are nearly there,' Rajbir said. He pulled up.

'I am back,' Rajbir shouted. Sukhram felt his brother's arms around him. He lifted him down. 'Is Sukhram there?' It was his father's voice.

'I am here, father. Brother has brought me.'

'Where's the boy?' It was Tantia Tope.

'We are here,' Rajbir said. 'Explain what you want of him. I have said nothing.'

'Listen, Sukhram,' Tantia Tope said. 'We are a hundred men. The English are to the north and a big storm is driving them back.'

The English do not know we are here and are retreating towards the river crossing that we are holding.'

'I understand,' Sukhram said. 'They will be caught between two fires.'

'Yes,' said Tantia Tope. 'But something has gone wrong. A force of English has got to

⁷**stirrup** a pair of device, attached to a horse, in the shape of a loop to help the rider get on a horse



the top of the mountain by another way. We command the crossing but they command us. We are going to attack them tonight but there is only one path from this side. It is very small, a goat track, and the night is so dark that we can do nothing. Your brother said you could lead us up the mountain.'

'Me? Lead Tantia Tope's army?'

'Yes, you, Sukhram,' his brother said. 'You know the path.'

'Yes, I know the path.' Of course. Had he not been up it almost every day of his life?

They set his feet on the path where it began. His father was behind him; then came Rajbir, and then the others, a long line of men on his goat trail, all following him up his mountain. He was leading the soldiers.

His feet knew each stone and root, each bend, each rock. He recognized the scents of the mountain, the trees, the little breezes, the small eddies⁸ of air—here it was warmer, there it was colder.

'This is a trail for goats,' his father whispered. 'I never knew you came up here. I would never have let you come. If you slipped ...'

'I'll not slip. It is my mountain trail.'

He laughed to himself. In a sense it was a good thing that it was dark. Had there been more light, perhaps the men would not have climbed. But they could not see. Among them all, because he was blind, only Sukhram Lodhi could see.

'We are nearly there, father,' he said as he came to the face of a cliff. He felt for a finger hold in the wet rock and gave the command to climb. Soon he and his father were on the top. Man after man passed, breathing heavily. There had been no challenge. Tantia Tope whispered instructions. The men spread out.

Sukhram's father pushed him behind a big stone. 'Stay there, Sukhram. We'll come back for you.'

He must wait now. He could feel them leaving him—feel them creeping towards a camp of sleeping men.

There was a shout and then another. Then everyone was shouting and shooting. There were cries from the wounded. Shots and more shots, a hoarse cheer from Tantia Tope's men and the shout: 'They are running!'

⁸eddies circular movements

There was a terrific burst of fire. Sukhram could smell burning cordite⁹. A single shot and then nothing till he heard his father call him. 'Sukhram, are you there?'

'I am here.'

Someone took his hand. It was Tantia Tope. 'I want to thank you,' he said. 'Without you this could not have been done, and had it been a fair night, I do not think it could have been done. I do not think we would have faced that climb, had we been able to see.'

They were all around him now, pressing against him and taking his hand.

They had tears in their eyes. 'If it had not been for you ...'

'They will make songs of this,' an old man said. 'Ballads of Sukhram Lodhi in our local *bundeli*¹⁰ dialect. It was the will of God that you should lead us up the mountain trail.'

Yes, it must have been the will of God that had guided his feet in unaccustomed places, for he had never been up to the top of the mountain before. His goats had been—he knew that, for he could feel their foothold¹¹ in the rocks.

But Sukhram had never been. He had never dared. Not to the top.

ANIL CHANDRA

⁹cordite a smokeless explosive used in ammunition ¹⁰bundeli from Bundelkhand, a region of Madhya Pradesh, India ¹¹foothold a place where foot can be lodged for support

Appreciation

1. Answer after reading the story for the first time.

a. How would you describe the story?

- i. A true account
- ii. An autobiographical extract
- iii. A fictitious tale set against historical events
- iv. A folk tale

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