

Shah Jahan and his private army

By- Sunil Ganguli

1. Where does the story open?
Ans: In the marketplace at Gajipur.
2. What caused commotion in the market?
Ans: Sweet-potato sellers and pumpkin vendors fought over selling spots.
3. Who got hit in the market fight?
Ans: Hazu, though he wasn't part of the quarrel.
4. What was Hazu's reaction after being hit?
Ans: He made no sound and cradled his bleeding head.
5. How did people react to Hazu's injury?
Ans: They stopped fighting and blamed him: "Why stick your head under flying sticks?"
6. What earlier accident happened to Hazu in the market?
Ans: Someone twisted a bull's tail and it butted Hazu down.
7. What bit Hazu when he went to gather edible grasses?
Ans: A water moccasin snake.
8. What did Hazu wear?
Ans: A dark cloth as a sarong and an undershirt.
9. Why did Hazu look odd?
Ans: He was stick-straight with arms/legs too long for his body.
10. What was Hazu's habit in a crowd?
Ans: Fixating on a stranger's face and staring.
11. What did Hazu do as a boy?
Ans: Sat on a palm tree staring at the sky for hours.
12. What happened after Hazu fell from the palm tree?
Ans: He stopped sky-gazing from trees and stared at the sky's reflection in water.
13. Who is Mozammel Ganda?
Ans: Hazu's uncle's friend who gave him a poultice and a cigarette.
14. What did Mozammel say to Hazu?
Ans: "You stopped the fighting with that broken head of yours."
15. How did Hazu walk?
Ans: Slowly, sluggishly; no one saw him walk fast.
16. Whose son was Hazu?
Ans: Son of a mullah.
17. Why was Hazu called useless?
Ans: He couldn't do field work or household chores.
18. What did Hazu do when sent to weed fields?
Ans: Squatted with a scythe, staring silently at weeds.
19. How many sons did Hazu have?
Ans: Four sons.
20. How did Hazu's sons treat him?
Ans: They paid him no heed and used a surly tone.
21. Who was Hazu's wife?
Ans: Sayeda.
22. Describe Sayeda.
Ans: Strong, hardworking, a born complainer who bickered all day.
23. What did Hazu enjoy?
Ans: Eating food. It was the one thing he cared about.
24. Why was Hazu unsure how to support his family?

- Ans: His parents died and his eldest brother left the extended family.
25. How old was Hazu's eldest son?
Ans: Thirteen, working as a cowherd.
26. What did Hazu tell his family about his injury?
Ans: "Who knows why someone hit me. I felt the whack... It's not so bad."
27. Did Hazu bear ill-will after being hit?
Ans: No, he harbored no resentments.
28. Who was Sheik Anwar Ali?
Ans: The Muslim local official of Gajipur.
29. Who was Visnu Sikdar?
Ans: The defeated Hindu rival of Sheik Anwar Ali.
30. What was the relation between Hindus and Muslims in Gajipur?
Ans: Mostly Hindu shopkeepers, Muslim suppliers; peace hung on a thread.
31. Who was Eklas?
Ans: Sayeda's elder brother who lived in the city.
32. What did Eklas propose to Hazu?
Ans: To come to the city with him to work and earn.
33. Why did people doubt Hazu could survive in the city?
Ans: He was a fool who couldn't work in the village.
34. How did Eklas justify taking Hazu to the city?
Ans: Even a simpleton saves himself from a burning house; Hazu could roll cigarettes for 5 rupees a day.
35. Did Hazu agree to go to the city?
Ans: Yes, he nodded and said "yes."
36. When did Hazu and Eklas leave for the city?
Ans: At night, after Hazu bound his possessions in two bundles.
37. How far did they walk to get a bus?
Ans: Seven miles to Adanghata.
38. What did Hazu do while walking?
Ans: Sauntered, watching the sky's reflection in the irrigation channel.
39. What did they see near Suleimanpur?
Ans: A procession of about 150 people with flags, shovels, and axes.
40. What did Eklas predict about the procession?
Ans: "There'll be a real battle here today."
41. How did Hazu react to Eklas's warning?
Ans: He stood transfixed, staring at the procession wide-eyed.
42. How was the procession described?
Ans: Winding and twisting like a "gargantuan serpent."
43. Where would the fight start?
Ans: Near a bamboo bridge where the procession would cross the channel.
44. What is Hazu's nature?
Ans: Innocent, passive, empty-headed, drawn to whatever is happening.
45. What does the market symbolize?
Ans: Communal tension and violence where peace is fragile.
46. What irony exists in Hazu's injuries?
Ans: He gets hurt by joining crowds, yet he can't help being in the middle.
47. Why is the title "Shah Jahan and His Private Army"?
Ans: Ironic - Hazu, a useless simpleton, is no one's "army," unlike emperor Shah Jahan.
48. What contrast exists between Hazu and others?
Ans: Others act for money/power; Hazu acts without motive or understanding.
49. What role does the sky play for Hazu?

- Ans: A source of wonder; he finds meaning staring at it or its reflection.
50. What does Hazu's character highlight about society?
Ans: How society treats the innocent and useless, and how violence erupts around them.
51. Where did the commotion break out and between whom?
Ans: The commotion broke out in the marketplace at Gajipur. It was between the sweet-potato sellers and the pumpkin vendors who were sparring over the choicest spots to set up shop.
52. How was Hazu injured in the marketplace fight?
Ans: Hazu was knocked on the head by someone's stick during the fight between the warring factions. Blood started pouring from the open wound on his head.
53. Mention two past incidents that show Hazu's bad luck.
Ans: 1. At Gajipur market, a bull whose tail was twisted butted Hazu and knocked him over. 2. At a lake, a water moccasin bit him while he gathered edible grasses — the first such bite in Gajipur.
54. Name the district where Hazu lives.
Ans: Medinipur
55. Why did Imtiyar think the hotel job was perfect for Hazu?
Ans: Imtiyar said not everyone is fit for every job. The job only required Hazu to stand in a spot and bow respectfully to guests, which he thought Hazu could do.
56. What did Imtiyar do before taking Hazu to the hotel?
Ans: Imtiyar rushed out and bought Hazu two pairs of pants and two long shirts at the Intali Bazaar. Then he escorted Hazu to the hotel.
57. What were Hazu's duties in the white men's room at Hotel International?
Ans: Hazu stood at attention along one wall. When a gentleman opened the door he bowed low. If a guest wanted to wash hands, Hazu stepped forward with towel and soap.
58. What were Hazu's work hours ?
A: Hazu was on duty from one in the afternoon until eleven at night.
59. What memory did the line of ants trigger in Hazu?
Ans: Hazu remembered the procession he had seen in Suleimanpur when he was on his way to Calcutta with Eklas. It followed the bank of the channel and crossed a bridge.
60. How did the ants react to Hazu's water mark?
Ans: The row of ants stopped at the line of water. A few ants moved out in either direction, one or two scurrying back as if to consult the rest.

1. Sketch the character of Hazu. Why is he called "useless" by his family and society? [5 marks]

Answer: Hazu is the central character of the story, portrayed as an innocent simpleton unfit for the harsh rural world.

Physical & Mental Traits: He is "stick-straight with arms and legs too long for his body." He walks sluggishly and has a habit of staring at the sky or its reflection in water for hours. As a boy, he once sat on a palm tree all day staring at the sky until he fell.

Uselessness in Work: Hazu cannot do field work or household chores. When sent to weed fields, he just squats with a scythe and stares at weeds silently. His wife Sayeda calls him useless because he "can't even tend to the crops."

Innocence & Passivity: He gets hit in market fights and butted by bulls but harbors no resentment. He is drawn to crowds and violence without understanding danger, making him a constant victim.

Family's Attitude: His four sons pay him no heed and speak to him in a surly tone. His wife Sayeda, though strong and hardworking, bickers all day about his uselessness.

Conclusion: Society calls Hazu "useless" because it values only labour and money. His innocence and dreamy nature have no place in a violent, utilitarian world, making him an object of ridicule and pity

2. How does the story depict the communal tension and violence prevalent in rural society? [5 marks]

Answer: Gangopadhyay uses the setting of Gajipur to show how communal tension and violence are a normal part of rural life.

Market as Flashpoint: The story opens with sweet-potato and pumpkin sellers fighting over selling spots. The petty quarrel turns violent with sticks, and innocent Hazu gets hit. This shows how economic rivalry easily becomes physical violence.

Hindu-Muslim Divide: Gajipur has Hindu shopkeepers and Muslim suppliers. Peace “hangs on a thread.” The rivalry between Muslim official Sheik Anwar Ali and Hindu Visnu Sikdar reflects the political-communal divide that trickles down to common people.

Cycle of Violence: Near Suleimanpur, a procession of 150 people with “flags, shovels, and axes” appears. Eklas immediately says, “There’ll be a real battle here today.” The procession is called a “gargantuan serpent,” symbolizing recurring, endless violence.

Innocents as Victims: Hazu, who has no communal hatred, is repeatedly drawn into violence. He stands “transfixed” before the armed mob, showing how individuals are consumed by collective hatred.

Conclusion: The story portrays rural society as a place where violence is routine. The ironic title *Shah Jahan and His Private Army* mocks how imperial glory has decayed into mobs with axes, where every man is forced into a “private army” of his community.

3. Discuss the character of Hazu and show how he represents the innocent victim of a violent society. [10 marks]

Answer: *Shah Jahan and His Private Army* is a renowned short story by Bengali author Sunil Gangopadhyay, published around 1986. The story highlights the contrast between historical grandeur and the struggles of ordinary people. Sunil Gangopadhyay is a shining star in Bengali juvenile literature. In his writings, the imagination, dreams, self-respect, and conflict with reality of a child’s mind are expressed with great fluency. “*Shah Jahan and His Private Army*” is one such child-centered story, where a subtle aspect of the human mind is revealed through an ordinary boy’s desire for leadership and his attempt at self-assertion. Along with entertainment, the story carries hints of a deep understanding of life. Hazu, the protagonist of *Shah Jahan and His Private Army*, is not a hero but an anti-hero whose innocence exposes the cruelty and violence of the society around him.

Hazu’s Physical and Mental Make-up: Hazu is described as “stick-straight with arms and legs too long for his body.” He wears only a sarong and undershirt, and walks “sluggishly.” Physically and mentally, he is unfit for the hard rural world. His habit of staring at the sky from palm trees or its reflection in water shows he lives in his own dream world. He is a simpleton, a “fool” in the eyes of society. He has no ambition, no malice, and no understanding of the world’s violence.

Hazu’s Uselessness in a Utilitarian Society: He is the son of a mullah but cannot do field work or household chores. When sent to weed fields, he just squats and stares at weeds. His four sons and wife Sayeda treat him with contempt because he contributes nothing. Sayeda says, “My man... can’t even tend to the crops.” In a society that values only labour and money, Hazu’s innocence has no place. He is called “useless” by his own family.

Hazu as a Passive Victim of Violence: Violence follows Hazu even when he seeks none. In the market fight over selling spots, he gets hit on the head though he wasn’t involved. The crowd’s response is telling: “Why stick your head under flying sticks?” – society blames the victim. Earlier, a bull butted him down and a snake bit him. He is magnet for harm because he cannot read danger. Yet he “harbored no resentments.” His passivity makes him an easy target. At the end, he walks unknowingly towards a “real battle” near Suleimanpur, staring wide-eyed at the procession “like a gargantuan serpent.” He is drawn to violence without understanding it.

Irony of the Title & Hazu's Role: The title *Shah Jahan and His Private Army* is deeply ironic. Shah Jahan had a real army; Hazu has none. He can't even save himself from a stick, yet the story links him to an emperor. This irony shows society's attitude: it expects even the weakest to fight in its battles. Hazu is drafted into "private armies" of communal riots, market fights, and family quarrels though he wants none of it.

Conclusion: Hazu represents every innocent individual crushed by a society built on conflict. His tragedy is that he cannot survive in the village, nor can he survive in the city Eklas promises. He is the "private army" of no one – just cannon fodder for the violence around him. Through Hazu, Gangopadhyay asks questions: What happens to those who are too gentle for this world? The answer: they get hurt, again and again, and society calls it their own fault.

4. How does *Shah Jahan and His Private Army* depict communal tension and the cycle of violence in rural Bengal? [10 marks]

Answer: Sunil Gangopadhyay is a shining star in Bengali juvenile literature. In his writings, the imagination, dreams, self-respect, and conflict with reality of a child's mind are expressed with great fluency. "*Shah Jahan and His Private Army*" is one such child-centered story, where a subtle aspect of the human mind is revealed through an ordinary boy's desire for leadership and his attempt at self-assertion. Along with entertainment, the story carries hints of a deep understanding of life.

Sunil Gangopadhyay's story uses the microcosm of Gajipur market to show how communal tension and violence are ingrained in rural society, with Hazu as the silent witness.

The Market as a Site of Conflict: The story opens with a fight between sweet-potato sellers and pumpkin vendors over selling spots. This petty economic quarrel quickly turns violent with sticks and clubs. This is symbolic. The market is where Hindu shopkeepers and Muslim suppliers meet. Peace "hangs on a thread." Any small trigger can become a riot. Hazu getting hit shows how innocent bystanders become casualties.

Hindu-Muslim Relations in Gajipur: The text states: "Most of the shops belonged to Hindus, but most of the supplies came from the Muslims." This economic interdependence does not create unity; it creates friction. Sheik Anwar Ali, the Muslim local official, and Visnu Sikdar, his defeated Hindu rival, represent the political power struggle that mirrors communal divide. Their rivalry filters down to the common people.

Cycle of Violence and Rumor: After the market fight, people immediately blame Hazu instead of stopping violence. This victim-blaming is the first step in justifying communal violence. Near Suleimanpur, Eklas and Hazu see a procession of 150 people with "flags, shovels, and axes." Eklas instantly predicts, "There'll be a real battle here today." Violence is expected, normal, and even prepared for with weapons. The procession is described as a "gargantuan serpent" – a traditional symbol of evil and endlessness. It suggests communal violence is a recurring, snakelike cycle that coils through the village.

The Role of the Individual vs the Mob: Hazu, an individual with no communal identity or hatred, is repeatedly drawn into the mob. He stares at faces in crowds, gets hit in fights, and walks toward battles. Eklas says even a simpleton saves himself from a burning house. But the story suggests that in communal fires, even simpletons cannot save themselves because the mob pulls everyone in. The final scene – Hazu standing "transfixed" before the armed procession – shows how the individual is hypnotized and consumed by collective violence.

Irony of "Private Army" in Communal Context: Shah Jahan's Mughal army was disciplined and imperial. The "private army" of Gajipur is a mob with shovels and axes. By using the emperor's name, Gangopadhyay mocks how grand historical legacies decay into petty, endless village feuds. Every man becomes a soldier in this "private army" of his community, whether he wants to or not. Hazu's tragedy is that he is conscripted into it by birth and location.

Conclusion: The story shows that communal tension in rural Bengal is not about religion alone but about land, market spots, political power, and rumor. Violence is a "gargantuan serpent" that keeps returning.

Innocents like Hazu have no “private army” to protect them; they are the first victims. Gangopadhyay’s realism lies in showing that the biggest casualty of communalism is not faith, but humanity itself.

5. Describe Hazu’s experience at Hotel International in Calcutta. Explain with reference to the ant episode in the story.

Ans. Sunil Gangopadhyay is a shining star in Bengali juvenile literature. In his writings, the imagination, dreams, self-respect, and conflict with reality of a child’s mind are expressed with great fluency. “Shah Jahan and His Private Army” is one such child-centered story, where a subtle aspect of the human mind is revealed through an ordinary boy’s desire for leadership and his attempt at self-assertion. Along with entertainment, the story carries hints of a deep understanding of life.

Imtiyar thought the job suited Hazu because it only required him to stand in the men’s room and bow to guests. He bought Hazu pants and shirts and escorted him there. At the hotel, Hazu loved his job. He did not have to run around or do hard labor, and there was no grumbling boss. From one to eleven at night, he stood by the wall. When gentlemen entered, he bowed low. If they washed hands, he stepped forward with towel and soap. Most guests ignored him — no one noticed if he bowed or not. Hazu found refuge here. The smooth walls and mirrors fascinated him. In the afternoons between three and six, when no guests came, he stared at the gleaming wall. This was the most splendid sight for him.

Hazu and the two drunken poets in the washroom of Hotel International is a key scene in Shah Jahan and His Private Army that reveals both Hazu’s innocence and society’s cruelty. When a poet enters the men’s room, he is startled to find Hazu and becomes strangely persistent. He grabs Hazu harshly under the chin and hollers, “Where are you from?” Hazu, frightened like “a cow tethered to a post,” replies “Gajipur, sir,” and “Medinipur.” When asked his name, he first says “Hazu,” then admits his mother called him “Shahjan.” The poet is put off, calling it “a strange name for a strange fellow.” He then asks if Hazu is Hindu or Muslim. Hazu starts to shake and whispers, “We’re Muslims.” At this point the second poet bursts into laughter. He mocks Hazu directly: “Shah Jahan, hey, I mean Emperor Shah Jahan, Your Highness, who has taken you prisoner and locked you up in this pissoir? What happened to the fort at Agra?” The first poet calls the hotel practices “disgusting” and says he’d like to kick the manager, but his friend replies that with whiskey he might, but tomorrow he wouldn’t care — and he’d only get kicked himself. As they leave, the second poet slurs at Hazu: “Prisoner, Emperor, once you were sovereign ruler of all of Hindustan. Now you are a prisoner in this pissoir. Then perhaps this is your Taj Mahal.”

One day, he saw a line of red ants on the wall. It reminded him of a procession in Suleimanpur. He drew water lines to make a “channel” and “bridge.” The ants stopped and then turned when he drew more lines. Hazu whispered, “My good little children, this way,” thrilled that they obeyed him. He had never been so happy — for once, he felt like a real emperor. However, the hotel was not entirely safe. Two drunken poets questioned him, grabbed his chin, and mocked his name “Shahjan.” One called him “Prisoner, Emperor” locked in this “pissior” which was his “Taj Mahal.” Hazu did not understand their insults. He was only relieved they did not beat him.

At the hotel, Hazu’s afternoons are precious. Between three and six, when no guests come, he stands motionless staring at the gleaming white wall. One day he sees a line of red ants marching in single file. The sight mesmerizes him. It reminds him of a procession in Suleimanpur that crossed a bridge over a channel. To recreate this, Hazu wets his fingers and draws a line of water on the wall — his own channel and bridge. When the ants reach the water, they stop. Some move back as if to consult. Hazu is wonderstruck. He whispers to them, “My good little children, why go over there where the water is? See, there’s so much room over here.” He paints another water mark, and the ants turn around. For the first time in his life, someone obeys Hazu. He has never been so happy. Drawing line after line, he guides them, whispering “This way, this way.”