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The Ivan Denisovich of Delhi—an Indian Story of Survival?

SUMMARY: The paper looks at a short-story by modern Indian writer Uday Prakash: unfolding at the onset of 1985, it describes a few hours from the life of a poor proof-reader who struggles for survival in Delhi's Ber Sarai district. Apart from the obvious deliberate connection the author builds between his character and the famous hero of Solzhenitsin's story, in Uday Prakash's prose, one can discover other, more subtle literary bridges linking Hindi and Russian literature. Thus, some features of Uday Prakash's characters point out at the similarities between the typical heroes of his prose and the so-called *malenkij čelovek* or "little man"—one of the key-concepts originating from classical Russian literature.

KEYWORDS: Hindi prose, Hindi short story, Russian prose, Uday Prakash, Solzhenitsyn, *malenkij čelovek.*

"Hindustānī Ivān Denīsovich kī zindagī kā ek din" ("One Day in the Life of the Indian Ivan Denisovich") is a short story by Uday Prakash, written in 1987 and included into *Tirich*, a successful collection of stories first published in 1989. The title is clear and suggestive: the author, inspired by one of the most celebrated novellas of the 20th century, is going to depict a day from the life of an Indian person who, one supposes, would be going through struggles and hardships somehow comparable to those Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Shukhov had to face one day—"just one of the 3,653 days of his sentence" (Solzhenitsyn 1991: 182). Everyone who knows about the dreadful Gulag experiences, described in numerous memoirs and biographies of the survivors, evident from

the documents, depicted by poets and writers who themselves went through the prison-camps, might be left wondering about the rightfulness of the suggested parallelism. Curiosity about what is hidden behind the title could be a common starting point for many readers to enter the world of this particular short story, written in Hindi.

The real name of the Indian Ivan Denisovich is Ram Sahay Srivastav. His home-town is Meerut, but, like many others, he went to Delhi as a child because the city promised a better life. In the winter of 1984–85, he, a 33-year-old bald-headed man with an amorphous body, lives in a tiny rented place in Ber Sarai in South Delhi, works as a proof-reader in a newspaper office and provides for the other five members of his family. His wife also works, the oldest son goes to school, all of them get regular meals, have basic clothes; by and large, they belong to the "above poverty line" category of Indian citizens (Prakāś 2001: 74[1]). This information, provided on the first pages of the story, makes one believe that the life-conditions of this family, as hard as they might be, are, nevertheless, acceptable: after all, Ram Sahay and his family members remain free subjects of an independent "developing country" and, from a certain perspective, could even be called privileged citizens of its capital. At first glance, the forced comparison with the Russian novella seems, indeed, rather far-fetched. And yet, we are soon to witness that the title character of the Indian story is, like his Russian prototype, also deprived of personal freedom, humiliated by poverty, and is mentally and physically tormented.

But has this unambiguous equation between a destitute Delhiite and a prisoner of Gulag been made with the sole purpose of accusing Indian authorities and, perhaps, the whole society of criminal

[1] All quotations from the Hindi story and, further in the article, from the Russian sources, are given in my translation, unless stated otherwise. Noteworthy, "Hindustānī Ivān Denīsovich kī zindagī kā ek din" has already been translated from Hindi into some Western languages, see: Prakash 1997, 2004, and 2014b. Other important translations of Uday Prakash into English or German are: Stark 2006; Prakash 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2015.

exploitation and neglect of the urban poor? Can this short story suggest a different, more subtle reading of Ram Sahay's "Russian" identity if we put it into a broader context of Uday Prakash's writing?

Uday Prakash (b. 1952) is one of the most important names among present-day Hindi prose-writes; he also has collections of poetry, screenplays, articles, essays, films to his credit. His name has become especially well-known in India and abroad in the last 10–15 years, largely thanks to his much acclaimed novella "Mohan Dās", published in 2005 in the Premchand-jubilee issue of the *Haṃs* literary magazine. This piece not only brought the author the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2010[2] but also, thanks to numerous translations into about ten Indian and a few major Western languages, became one of the most read and discussed prose-texts of contemporary Hindi literature.[3] As the author often confesses, his writings have been attracting sharp criticism and negative comments, typically mentioning graphic descriptions and the depressing "noir" atmosphere of many stories. At the same time, Uday Prakash receives both critical acclaim and genuine gratitude of the readers, who eagerly testify to the truthfulness of what he describes.

Uday Prakash is known for his steadfast refusal to deliberately develop his public image and invest into self-promotion. In the words of German scholar and translator Lothar Lutze, "Uday Prakash has made his way without compromising, has not allowed any literary or

[2] The award was returned by him in September 2015 in protest against the murder of Kannada writer M.M. Kalburgi and Sahitya Akademi's silence on the matters of writers' freedom and safety in India.

[3] See, for example: Prakash 2012, 2014a. Alessandra Consolaro dedicated an insightful article to this novella—"Resistance in the postcolonial Hindi literary field: Mohan Dās by Uday Prakāś" (2011). The information about the translations into Indian languages are best available from Uday Prakash's own blog http://udayprakash05.blogspot.de/2012/06/review-walls-of-delhi.html. One should also mention the eponymous film made by Mazhar Kamran in 2008, which, however, deviates from both the story and the spirit of the original.

political entity to monopolize him; he has always been counted among (those) uncomfortable people who have a mind of their own. It is only natural that he goes ahead in life as an independent writer, journalist and film-maker" (Prakash 2007: 63, my translation). Indeed, Uday Prakash openly expresses his prejudice against any kind of establishment, particularly against the Indian literary circles, bitterly delineating a clear link between the Hindi language and literature—of which he, a native-speaker of Chhattisgarhi, claims to be a reluctant and even coincidental representative—and the castism/elitism of powerful littérateurs, critics and university departments.[4] The author himself, in his blog-entries, articles and interviews, confesses that opposing opinions about his creativity do not interest him in the slightest, but what always stays in the center of his attention is the ways and doings of the smallest people in Indian society, those who are engrossed in zillions—"10^{11} of troubles" ("Dattātrey ke duḥkh"), desperate, unnoticed by almost everyone around and so insignificant that they themselves often doubt the fact of their existence (like his famous character Mohan Das, whose identity was stolen). In an extensive interview to *Another Subcontinent*, Uday Prakash points out: "I am now completely apolitical. I look very skeptically towards any kind of combination of politics and power. But in my mind the author's job is to remain on the sidelines of mainstream society, with the people, and to write from this side and he has to be honest. And that I am still trying to do."[5]

[4] See, for example, the recent conversation with his American translator Jason Grunebaum: "Everyone big in the language system or literature establishment belongs to a single caste—academic institutions, literary setups, universities, schools, and a sinisterly designed entire mass media. Even the political ideology, which I had dreamed would make an egalitarian, just, modern, reasoned society possible, was usurped by similar caste structures."; "My life has been made wretched in my language and my country, and I have remained a freelance writer for over two-and-a-half decades, inviting reprimands and slanders." (Grunebaum, J. A Conversation with Uday Prakash, 26 March 2015, online: http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/26/a-conversation-with-uday-prakash, accessed on: 01.07.2015).

[5] Uday Prakash. Interview to "Another Subcontinent", September 2007, online: http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/up1.html, accessed on: 01.07.2015.

Thus, the struggles and dilemmas of the modern poor again came into the focus of literature: Uday Prakash's major characters are destitute and marginalized—they could be migrants from provincial or rural places, surviving in an aggressive and often alien urban environment ("Hindustānī Ivān Denīsovich kī zindagī kā ek din", "Rām Sajīvan kī prem-kathā", "Mangosil", "Dillī kī dīvāreṃ"), gifted, inspired, or in certain ways "different" individuals, let down by the social system or other people ("Mohan Dās", "Pāl Gomrā kā skūṭar", "Hirelāl kā bhūt"), idealists, refusing to give up their principles or duties ("Daḍḍū Tivārī: gaṇanādhikārī","Bhāī kā satyāgrah"). Ram Sahay Srivastav, a.k.a. the Indian Ivan Denisovich, fits into the gallery of such social types close to the writer's heart, and, given that this story belongs to his earlier writings, can be viewed as a model for the figures he created later.

Uday Prakash carries his mission—to voice the troubles of the deprived classes—with dedication that finds obvious parallels not only in the prose of some Hindi writers (Premchand, Ugra, Rahi Masoon Reza readily come to one's mind) but also suggests certain foreign influences. One cannot but notice how well his destitute and alienated characters fit into the famous "little man" type (in Russian *malenkij čelovek*), born in the classical works of the 19th-century Russian prose-writers (Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Dostoyevsky and many others). Examining Uday Prakash's heroes through the prism of this foreign concept may be well-justified also from the perspective of this author's socio-political and cultural interests—his interviews and publications never lack proof of his deep attachment to particular Russian texts or films. The short story analyzed in the present article is, of course, more eloquent evidence of the same.

The "little man" concept, coined in the 1840s by Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848), first entered the literary discourse in a somewhat narrow sense,[6] but soon enough started being associated with a wider range

[6] It is believed that the term was first suggested by Belinsky in his article titled "Woe from Wit" (1940), in the context of some Gogol's characters. In the narrow sense, "little man" belongs to the so-called "third class" of

of characters, growing into one of the iconic categories of Russian prose and dramaturgy. Thus, in the 19th-century context, *malenkij čelovek* is typically an urban person of a low origin; he is full of aspirations, may show personal abilities and ambitions, but finds himself oppressed both socially and psychologically; he longs for compassion and helplessly fights against the circumstances—more often than not, such characters bitterly lose many of their battles.[7] The concept was further expanded and reevaluated by later generations of writers—thus, Chekhov, Gorky, Bulgakov and many 20th-century littérateurs often highlighted the triviality of "small people", petty character of their troubles or suggested satirical, grotesque, unrealistic interpretations.

This article will further argue, that "Hindustānī Ivān Denīsovich kī zindagī kā ek din" is one of the texts, among many by Uday Prakash, that, through the compassionate tone and meticulous accounts of tragic lives, connects to the 19th-century classics. At the same time, in it—as in the case of "Mohan Dās", a significant postmodern text, according to Alessandra Consolaro (Consolaro 2011: 14)—many cultural vectors intersect, making several interpretations possible.

Looking at the events of Shukhov's life within one day of his long imprisonment was, for Solzhenitsyn, in a way, the same as seeing

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the Russian society of the late 18th—early 19th century, of which insignificant clerks and the low-ranked servicemen would be typical representatives. The characters of Pushkin's "The Postmaster" (1831) and Gogol's "Overcoat" (1943) are one of the first and most well-known examples.

[7] See, for example, Nikolay Dobrolyubov's essay "Downtrotten People" (1861), dedicated to Dostoyevsky's *The Insulted and Injured* novel: "We find one common feature in the works of Dostoyevsky, traceable more or less in all of his writings—the pain for a person who accepts himself as an incapacitated being, perhaps, even as someone who has no right to be a real, full, sovereign being, a human being by himself" (Dobrolyubov 1963: 242); also, in Konstantin Mochulsky's words, "Gogol... opened up a new sphere for Russian literature: the world of 'small people', imperceptible sufferers, humble and meek victims of social injustice, the world of the destitute, miserable, poor in spirit, of 'the insulted and injured'" (Mochulsky 2000: 91).

the ocean in a drop of water. He himself expressed it in the most eloquent way, in his 1983 interview to Barry Holland, for the Russian service of the BBC:

> In essence, it is enough to describe one day in minute detail, a day of just another toiler, and it will mirror our entire life. One does not have to play up the horrors or depict a very special day, but just an ordinary one—the kind of a day that goes to make up years. (Solzhenitsyn 1997: 21)

It was, of course, not a random day, after all: its picture is the exact result of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's measured craftsmanship, his balancing and weighing of events, details, characters, and words, done to create a perfect representation of Shukhov's character and the routine of a prison-camp life. The Indian interpretation of this technique is, however, different. In spite of what the title suggests, Uday Prakash's story shows just a few hours of one day—the day that, as we are hoping to demonstrate, is exactly not going to be a day like many others.

The Hindi story starts early in the morning and ends at noon. The readers, who agree to live through these several tough hours with Ram Sahay Shrivastav, should be ready to learn about pain and ugliness, dirt and darkness, disabilities of body and mind. The comparison of facts and particulars of Ivan Denisovich's and Ram Sahay's day is, perhaps, an unnecessary task, it is enough to mention a few very general motives that are common for both the texts—efforts to warm up on a chilly morning, the onset of an illness, scarcity of food, going for medical help, etc. The author explains that Ram Sahay has not heard about Solzhenitsyn and any of his stories, and yet, untill the very last passage, he is called "Ivan" and "Ivan Denisovich, or Ram Sahay". From time to time phrases like "call him as you wish" or "there is no difference between the two" are added.

He wakes up from heavy restless sleep on the first morning of the new year of 1985. We are reminded, as the story progresses, about the political background of that day: earlier in the autumn of 1984, India's prime minister was killed; consequently, the new elections took place in December, now the new leader is coming to power. The first day of the new year was a time of political rallies, as the official election

results were being announced. Ram Sahay's family was not thinking about any of these events, for them, as for many other poor people, that winter would be memorable because of its extraordinary cold weather.

The water-pipe in the room is dry, all the buckets are empty. No water means no tea to warm up, but, most importantly, without water "Ivan" will not be able to go outside, to a gutter where they all perform their morning toilet. The wife and the eldest son have already gone to school. Among the four kids only the eldest is healthy, but we do not learn much about him—"normality" does not seem to interest the author, who pays more attention to the handicapped or heavily ill younger kids. Shrivastav's own physical weakness is spondylosis—his neck stiffens, at times he feels as if he is turning into a stone. Tired of constant struggle with life, he escapes into a semi-conscious state, often to the degree of almost complete loss of consciousness. Such moments are also rewarding, as they allow him to rest from painful reality.

Since there is neither tea nor water, he thinks he should at least give some *roti*s to his kids, but finds no food in the "kitchen"-corner. Apparently, the kerosene stove got broken earlier that morning, his wife could not cook anything. The electricity also does not work. His second son, a dumb boy with a half-paralyzed body, looks at him imploringly; mercifully, the two-year-old handicapped girl and a few-months-old son, who suffers from chronic dysentery, are still sleeping. With a heavy heart, "Ivan" locks up his two little ones in the room and leaves with his middle son, in order to take him for training in a charitable center.

This day's bad luck strikes again: the buses are overcrowded, it takes almost an hour to board them; having reached the school, they see the locked doors—the "full-bodied fair-skinned" women who work there took the day off on the first of January. "Ivan" feels powerless and desperate, now he is eager to return home and hurry to his office. The father and the son sit down and wait for the bus. Another hour passes, but "Ivan" does not notice the time, as he slides into his common unconscious state, his mind engulfed by murky darkness.

A passer-by informs him that the bus-traffic is canceled on this street due to a political meeting after the elections. "Ivan" realizes that he is hopelessly late for his job and will most certainly be fired. The moaning of his hungry son is intolerable, but there is no way they could reach home now—there are just a few coins left. His anxiety is reaching its peak, he feels, he is giving up all hope.

At this crucial moment "Ivan Denisovich" takes an unexpected decision. There is *prāthamik svasthya kendra*, a governmental medical center, across the road. He gets up and resolutely heads towards its gates. He takes his last rupee and buys a handful of roasted and sweetened groundnuts for his son, leaves him to wait in the yard and goes inside. He fills up a form for an operation—it will be performed for free, he will also get some food and a solid monetary reward, for himself and for the person who brought him to the center (with the doctor's permission, "Ivan" fills up his son's name). The hospital is empty ("perhaps, this hospital treats only healthy people", comes to his mind (Prakāś 2001: 83)), the operating table looks filthy, it took "Ivan" five rupees to make a hospital *chaprāsī* to clean it up. In an hour—it's about noon now—"Ivan" leaves the hospital. He does not feel much pain, but he is nauseous, his head is spinning and his stomach is aching, also because something was mixed up in the milk he drank in the hospital. Still, he has got more than a hundred rupees in his pocket, and his absence at his place of work is not an issue anymore. Sensing the onset of a new nauseous wave of sticky darkness, he quickly puts his son in an auto-rickshaw and commands the driver to go. Before giving the address, he weakens and loses consciousness.

The outline of the events, however, does not immediately suggest the interpretation. The story revolves around the central idea of "Ivan"'s struggle, that, we understand, has been going on for years. Its representation is done through a rather detailed picture of his background and general circumstances—his salary, the rent he pays, the favorite food he never gets to eat, his and his wife's village childhood, of which only illusive reminiscences remain. At the same time, there are small and big "routine" troubles, that keep the character in constant stress,

demanding vigilance and active action—such events, as it has been demonstrated above, constitute the plot of the story. "Ivan Denisovich" is presented by the author as a figure somewhat responsible for the balance of benign and evil forces, at least inside his small intimate world. At this level, Ram Sahay and the real Ivan Denisovich have much in common. Shukhov goes through the days of his life negotiating and counting the consequences of every action and interaction, from morning till evening; in Jackson's analysis, he is "patient but not passive" (Jackson 1997: 47). The success of the day, then, lies in the fact that not only was the delicate equilibrium of Shukhov's existence not compromised but also, on the day that initially promised trouble, things finally worked out in his favor. Hence, he goes to sleep "pleased", counting the blessings of the day—"a long-awaited draw on a cigarette-butt, the discovery of a useful piece of steel, sucking on a fish-bone, or the enjoyment of a pair of boots" (*ibid.*: 46). More importantly, in the long run, Solzhenitsyn's hero, much occupied with the task of physical survival and also poised to safeguard his social position inside his gang's hierarchy ("wariness had become second nature after eight years inside"), manages to preserve his humanity and dignity, taking pride in the fact that "even after eight years on general duties he was no scrounger, and as time went by, he was more and more determined not to be" (Solzhenitsyn 191: 131). It is generally understood that Shukhov sticks to a middle way strategy, as he "strikes a balance between aggressiveness needed to survive and the compromises needed to live" (Jackson 1997: 48).

Searching for a narrow way and leveling troubles is Ram Sahay's strategy as well. For years, he was managing to make ends meet and maintain stability in bizarre poor circumstances. On a symbolic level, one finds, in a number of descriptions, clear indications of the struggle between the two agencies that is taking place not only everywhere around "Ivan" but inside his body and mind. Such categories as movement and stagnation, softness and hardness/harshness, quietness/dumbness and loudness, empathy and indifference appear throughout the story, often in juxtaposition, in relation to Ram Sahay's life.

The opening description of the character underlines his essential connection with motion and vitality: he wears an old coat of "tree-leaf shade of green with yellow stripes" (Prakāś 2001: 77), that seem to be alive and moving, and capable of betraying the character's mood, especially in the moments when he shuts himself out from the outside world. The fits of spondylosis are a major cause of "Ivan"'s fears, he panics at the first onset of the illness, trying not to succumb to what feels like a near-paralysis state. He energetically moves his neck, shoulders, the upper body, tolerating the pain, only not to be become like a piece of wood or glass. His body, very heavy and flabby, resembles that of a frog and, even when he sits motionless, chased by haphazard visions coming from the depth of his mind, one notices that he remains alive—full of feelings, emotions, thoughts.

Another terrifying thing for "Ivan" is the loudness, harshness, and cruelty of his wife. The hardships of life drained her body of all the softness and freshness it once had, she became "like a piece of dried wood"—Ivan even thought; he could at times hear a rattling sound coming from her (*ibid*.: 79). When their daughter cries, failing to get milk from her dry breasts, the wife screams and shouts; she swears badly at the kids, beats them, or makes banging noises, while washing the dishes—such things cause "Ivan" pain as if "his brain is pierced with sharp thorns"; he cannot tolerate rough voices, rudeness, any kind of violence (*ibid*.: 80).

Finally, the disability of the middle son, with whom "Ivan" shares a special emotional connection, could be interpreted as one of the key symbolic features of the story. He has a vivid mind, a highly developed intuition and seems very wise, "as if he knew everything about the world" (*ibid*.: 73–74).[8] With half of his body paralyzed, he is, nevertheless, full of energy and playfulness; being dumb, he often

[8] The motive of a highly gifted child from a destitute family would, later on, reoccur in Uday Prakash's: this story describes cases of a strange physical disorder among the world's poor, when children are born with enormous heads, that contain all the knowledge about the world.

expresses himself through a sad, yet soft and melodious ("like mantra chants") moaning. He learns fast in the training center and may even acquire some profession later on. This boy accompanies his father from the morning until noon, being the only witness to his agony, and, in the end, perhaps, even becomes a successor to "Ivan"'s vital power, as he receives from him in the auto-rickshaw an emblematic gift of bananas and eggs.

A closer examination of that particular day in Ram Sahay's life will reveal that the defense he had been holding against the cruel environment fails massively. One after another come small but critical blows from the hard material world. Regular things—artificial objects made of metal, wood or glass—start challenging him in the morning: the old heavy brass tap, which has been with him for 25 years, gives no water; the three buckets (one old metallic from Meerut and two of discolored plastic) are found empty; the 7-watt bulb doesn't work; the pin of the kerosene-stove is stuck inside, its broken end lying on the floor; the brass front-door lock is missing; another heavy brass lock is hanging on the closed gates of the training center; the buses do not come. We also learn about a shard of glass in Ivan's foot stuck under the skin near his big toe—the pain from it has been adding to his daily agonies. This sharp artificial object, like an agent of aggressive environment, penetrated his body and stayed inside him for a year, making "Ivan" wonder if someone would ever find it in the heap of ashes, after his body is cremated.

The final part of the story, that takes part in a hospital, is, however, not connected with any of the medical problems mentioned in the text earlier—the purpose of the operation he goes through is not named clearly but could be guessed from the general context and a few particular details. The very fact that he gets solid compensation for his hospital visit leads to the conclusion that the operation is performed in the framework of a government-sponsored scheme. This 15-minute-long procedure under local anesthesia that requires only light precautions for a couple of weeks cannot be anything else but a vasectomy, an infamous measure designed during the Indira

Gandhi era to introduce population control in India. The minor details reveal the gruesome truth of the story: it is done routinely, carelessly, without proper attention or hygiene, and, as happened many times in the reality, might end in serious complications or even turn out to be lethal. The outcome of the situation is shown by Uday Prakash as the final stage of his character's struggle that is taking place entirely in his inner self. It finishes off—both physically and mentally—what remained of "Ivan"'s vital power and courage. The tempo of the narration is accelerating, leading the hero to a terrible end.

> Ivan Denisovich wanted to chase away those yellow bat-like spots, heading towards him in the bluish darkness of his unconscious state. All he saw now was the image of that boy on the ground near the gates, who has eaten the last remaining groundnut. With a jolt, he filled up his lungs with air and hold his breath. A heavy battle was going on, he was giving his last efforts to it.
>
> Not allowing the air out, he jumped over a few steps and rushed through the hospital's doors, away. (…) He found his son on the same spot he had left him—he was sleeping curling on the ground, the groundnut shells scattered around him.
>
> He got hold of his upper arm, lifted him and then dragged towards the street, where some auto-rickshaws were parked.
>
> He got into one, pulled the boy in. Inside, he took the eggs and the bananas from the pocket of his coat and placed them on the boy's lap.
>
> Ivan Denisovich, or Ram Sahay (call him as you wish, there is still no difference between the two) said: "Go!" and immediately released the air. He had been holding his breath for so long, that, when all the air went out, a sound was heard—a strange, sad sound, full of pain and defeat, as if a car's exhaust-pipe cleared up with a pop. Such sound could not have come from a human (*ibid*.: 86–87).

Unconscious, "Ivan" finds himself at a political meeting, listening to the new prime-minister's speech, his ears catch series of prolonged, "like machine-gun shot", applause; then he sees his wife, who is swearing while cleaning after the child, "Ivan"'s newspaper proofs in her hand. And finally—the river of his childhood, its soothing quiet water. "It was the first day of the new year. A political meeting was going on at the Yacht-club. An Indian man was sitting in a rickshaw, whose name was not Ivan Denisovich, he was Ram Sahay.

He was unconscious." (*Ibid*.: 88) As we see, Ram Sahay represents Ivan Denisovich while he possesses the power to struggle and the energy to keep the balance; the moment he gives up, his identification with the Russian prototype loses its validity.

Feeling defeated by the conditions in which his family has to live, and above all, by the suffering of his children, he takes a desperate decision to voluntarily give away his right to procreate. The details about the operation and his poor state when he leaves the medical center suggest that now his whole life is under threat.

What, according to the author's vision, brings his character to the crisis? Is it merely the *sum total* of all the troubles? The finale suggests deep political reasons for his collapse. Undoubtedly, there is a critical exposure of the system, administered by Indira Gandhi (the poverty, ignored by the Indian state, is shown to be at least equally cruel as the conditions at the labor-camps; the state itself, encouraging the carelessly performed medical procedures, aimed at the so-called common good, is as good as a totalitarian machine). Also, one finds a pessimistic vision of a new, post-Indira political era that started from January 1985. The descent of Rajiv Gandhi upon India, explicitly linked to "Ivan"'s last onset of unconsciousness, appears as yet another menacing event that finished off whatever vitality and strength Indian society or at least some of its representatives possessed.

Finally, there is an obscure private link that emerges from certain facts presented in the story. The life of the 33-year old hero takes a sharp turn on the first day of 1985—the day which was significant for the country due to the political turmoil. But it also had to be special for the author himself—he turned 33-year-old on the first of January of the same year. Has Uday Prakash's personal life been encoded in some way in the story? Has "Ivan"'s crisis served as yet another metaphor—this time of the author's own emotional situation?

Uday Prakash, through both direct and subtle messages, makes a number of interpretations possible. The title may lead readers to a straightforward understanding of the main situation, when social conditions in mid-1980s India are put on the same scale as the life

of a Soviet prisoner. But as one pays attention to the extraordinary importance given to the Indian Ivan Denisovich's intimate world and the detailed accounts of his inner struggles, the connection with the Russian novella emerges from a new perspective. Both the characters—each in his own way a "little man" of his time—are seen, by the author, as counterparts in the ultimate task of keeping the balance between the contradicting forces in the surrounding aggressive worlds. Indeed, Ram Sahay manages, at least until a certain point, to cope with the hostility of that particular day, but at a very high cost. As one may observe, going through a vasectomy is a step of not only physical but of also spiritual importance—at this moment, his inner battles, in their intensity, seem to outgrow his physical and material troubles. To put it very simply, "Ivan" gives up. Hence, the last thing he is able to do is that do-or-die run through the hospital yard towards the auto-rickshaw, which will fail to bring him and his son home.

The emphatic account of "Ivan"'s painful day allows one to discern, in Uday Prakash's story, a revival of a classical "little man" figure: this tormented and misunderstood hero closely resembles many of the "insulted and injured" character types in classical 19th-century Russian prose. In fact, without risking to over-stretch the scope of similarity, one is, indeed, tempted to recognize in many of Uday Prakash's characters, destitute and alienated, some features of the "little men" depicted by, say, Dostoyevsky in his novellas and novels—they, in a way, take another birth in different spatio-temporal circumstances. Although this statement still needs to be proven and developed, it has a clear parallel emerging from Alessandra Consolaro's observation made in connection with "Mohan Dās". In her words, Uday Prakash's postmodern method manifests itself, among other features, in showing the succession of situations, characters and their destinies, stretched in years if not centuries: "individual characters may disappear, die, or be defeated, but the meaning of their struggle, as well as the collective or cosmic value of acts of rebellion inspired by a sense of justice and truth, remain and reappear from age to age" (Consolaro 2011: 14). With Uday Prakash, Hindi prose has plunged into the past to redefine

the value of a small private life, and emerged revitalized and energized, for a new beginning.

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