

THE LEADER OF MEN

Siddharth Chowdhury

SIDDARTH CHOWDHURY (b.1974), born and brought up in Patna, now lives in New Delhi and works for a publishing house. He is a promising fiction writer and translator. As a writer, his important works include Patna Roughcut, a novel which is a heartfelt homage to his hometown, and Diksha at St. Martin's, which is a maverick collection of short stories based on the lives and loves of young people in Patna and New Delhi. As a translator, his major work is the Hindi translation of Elliot Weinberger's prose-poem The Stars for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York in 2005. 'The Leader of Men', taken from Diksha at St. Martin's, is a tragic story of a poor man's hardships in a city rife with social prejudices.

A. Work in small groups and discuss the following questions:

1. What is an apartment building?
2. What amenities should be there in an apartment building?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in an apartment building?
4. Are you aware of the lives of the guards in an apartment complex?

THE LEADER OF MEN

1. **H**e was one of the replacement guards that came to work in our apartment building at the end of November. There are four guards in residence at all times. Two of them work in the daytime and the other two at night. They stay in **poky** little servant quarters near the parking lot and are not allowed to keep their families in there. Most of these security guards are lazy miserable fellows who are, it seems, just content to **survive** somehow. Most of them are illiterate

and of the lower castes and amidst the **gleaming chrome** of the shining cars their poverty stands out in **glaring contrast**.

2. So, I was taken by surprise when I first saw Roop Singh last December when I was back in Patna for the winter vacations. He wasn't at all like the other guards. He was around 5'10", well built, had a long sharp **patrician** nose and glorious light brown moustache that covered the upper lip and curled at the ends in a **defiant flourish**. He did credit to his name. His uniform was always ironed and creased and the shoes were gleaming black. He was so different from his little **brethren** in mismatched uniforms and dusty brown keds that he was actually a revelation in the true sense of the word. He simply didn't fit in at all.
3. So, the first time I saw him he was at the reception counter in the lobby and was getting a **dressing-down** from Mr Kedia. Mr Kedia lives right across our flat in F-9 (and is in his late thirties). He has sundry business interests and is reputed to be fairly rich. He has the stupid arrogance that comes with it and he wears it on his face with the same sense of pride as the hideous chunky gold watch on his left wrist and the Motorola cell-phone on his right hip. He is short and **stocky** and going bald. His face has started to **bloat** from excess of Stroh's beer. He is the kind of on the make, ready to take, upwardly mobile **enterprising** men, whom we see hovering around the periphery of our lives with alarming **alacrity** but then I guess it is a positive thing.
4. Kedia is the **consummate** consumer. A true child of his times. He has to buy things **randomly** to live, to survive, to find a purpose for his life. When he consumes he lives. Buying is his brand of *nirvana*. If a new car is not launched in the next six months he may simply fold up and die.
5. Back to the story now. There was Roop Singh standing behind the counter and Kedia in front of him shouting and another man who looked just like Kedia, gold watch and all, **gesticulating** frantically and shouting in the same breadth. They were both very angry with Roop for some reason or the other. Normally, I wouldn't have stopped because every few days or so Kedia shout at one worker or other. He is the president of the owner's association and he takes it very seriously. But, it was Roop – his open confident face and erect

bearing, an **innate** pride in himself, the sense of defiance and wounded honour in his eyes that made me pause and look over the scene in a new night. A totally astonishing thing happened then. Roop said to Kedia, 'But, it is not my fault sir, I was just doing my duty,' in **impeccable** English, **albeit** with a little **lilt** of a **rustic accent**. Now this is wonderful I thought, I could suddenly sense drama in the lazy December air. Kedia is stupefied and he can't believe he has heard right, and nor can his friend (for it has to be his friend). I can deduce it from the shock on their faces. The rights of **snobbery** have suddenly been reversed. I am sure Roop too can see it in their eyes. I am interested



now, but I realise how **trivial** the problem really is. Kedia is now all red in the face and bluster breaks out of it like hot air from a punctured balloon.

6. 'You talk *English* to me! How dare you talk?
7. 'I just said that I was doing my duty, and I am not a rascal. I do understand English.' Roop said to Kedia in Hindi.
8. 'I will kick you out'.
9. Roop kept quiet at this and contained in **his** anger but just barely.
10. I intervened around this time with neutral 'What's the matter Mr Kedia?'
11. He turned and looked at me. Normally, he doesn't ever acknowledge my presence but that day I could see he was glad that I was there. He thought of me as an **ally** against the class enemy but soon I would prove to be the contrary.
12. 'Ah Ritwik, good you are here,' he started to speak in English but I guess better sense prevailed and he switched over to Hindi, which was worse than

- his English but anyway 'My friend Mr Sharma (here the man smiled and I smiled back), came to see me fifteen minutes back and this idiot of a guard wouldn't let him come up to my place.'
13. 'I come here every week and this has never happened to me before. He wanted me to talk to Mr Kedia over the intercom and when I refused; he physically stopped me from going upstairs.'
14. I felt embarrassed in being involved with something as stupid as this but still I said, 'He was only doing his duty and moreover he is new and doesn't know you.'
15. 'He insulted my guest,' Kedia shouted but there wasn't much conviction in his voice anymore.
16. 'These rules have been made by us Mr Kedia, and Mr Singh was only doing what he has been told to do and it is for your own safety.'
17. Sharma and Kedia glared at me and then Kedia said, 'Ritwik I am going to complain to your father. You don't even know how to talk to your elders'. I smiled at him and kept quiet. He went away hurriedly into the elevator with his friend in tow. I took the stairs.

B.1. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. How many guards were working in the apartment building?
2. Where did they stay?
3. Did they live with their families? Why?
4. What makes their poverty stand out in glaring contrast?
5. Who is 'he' in the first paragraph? Was he like other guards?
6. Who was Kedia? Where did he live?
7. Describe Kedia's appearance. How did Kedia's friend look?
8. Why was Kedia shouting at Roop Singh?
9. Did Roop Singh do any wrong?
10. When Roop Singh replied in English what was Kedia's reaction? Why did he react so?
11. Who did the writer support to? Why?
12. What was Kedia so sure about?

18. Later on I learnt from Munna, my servant, that his name was Roop and that he was a Rajput. Munna also told me that the other guards didn't like him

much and thought him to be **haughty** and **stuck up**. He thought this was because Roop was of a 'forward' caste, all the others being 'backwards'. He generally kept to himself, and after his duties were over, read books in the guard room. All this seemed, to Munna, as **subversive** behaviour but even he **grudgingly** agreed that he was the best ever security guard that had worked at our building. He was smart, efficient and did his job quietly and **competently** and for this he got the princely sum of six hundred rupees a month, and **subsisted** on boiled rice and potatoes like the other guards. All this for mere six hundred rupees a month, my shirts cost much more than that, it was ridiculous – the sum – but it was true.

19. Kedia did complain to my father but my father didn't say anything to me like, I knew he wouldn't. But, after that incident Kedia with his wounded pride came down hard on Roop Singh. He criticised Roop for everything and anything. He called him inefficient and **insolent** and once claimed that he had caught him sleeping at night while on duty. He was **bent on** getting him **kicked out** of the place but the other residents opposed the move and so Roop stayed.
20. Kedia just couldn't take the fact that a poor miserable little guard had answered back to him and that too in English. He was sure it was just to show him up in front of his friend and worse, me. He was really **sore** about the 'English' part.
21. In his blind **vanity** he probably never even realised that he could have been wrong. He had always been rich and rich are always right; according to him there could be no two ways about it. Roop on his part didn't do anything that was counter reactionary except that he stopped saluting Kedia. Whenever someone else would be with Kedia, he would salute the other person but ignore Kedia, and this **galled** him no end.
22. It was during those days that I came to know more about Roop from talking with him every evening for ten-fifteen minutes after I returned home. He felt obliged to me and later thanked me for my intervention that 'fateful' day. The other guards by that time had started to come around. Roop would read to them from the newspaper and tell them what was happening around the world; not that they were much interested. They had unofficially elected

him to be their leader and I thought that it was fitting, for he came from a race that were once leaders of men, warriors. His ancestors must have waged wars against the British and the Mughals and fought glorious battles amidst the golden sand dunes of Mewar. I think, I am needlessly romanticising him, probably his ancestors were as poor as he was and were simple farmers **toiling** hard for their daily meal but who knows?

23. He was an educated person. He had studied till the intermediate from the College of Commerce, Patna, the very same college I had gone to albeit for a short time and much later than him. I didn't tell him that because I thought it might embarrass him. His father, who was a farmer, had died around that time and Roop had to leave his studies and look for a job. He went back to farming when he couldn't find any job that he liked. They didn't have much land and some of it had to be sold for his sister's wedding. He himself had married when he was just 15 and now had a wife and a son back home in the village. The income from the farm wasn't much so he left farming to his younger brother, who wasn't much interested in education anyway and started looking for a job again. Eventually he got a job as a teacher in a school near Bihta but after six months without pay and with no hope of the situation ever changing he left the job and came to Patna, drifting from job to job, sometimes working as a sales help in a grocery store, sometimes as a construction worker. Finally around four months back he had got the job with the security agency. He would tell me all these things without even an ounce of self-pity, yet I could feel the helplessness beneath his practised **stoicism**. He hadn't seen his family in six months and sometimes it made him deeply **melancholic**.
24. For a man of his background he was amazingly aware and well read. He loved reading and often would talk to me about books that he had read and what he had felt about them. His perception was remarkably acute. I realised his was a sharper critical faculty than mine even though I am a student of literature. Perhaps because my experience of life has largely been **vicarious** while his, I am sure, has been more 'lived in' comprehensive on.

25. Though I am not as well read in Hindi literature as I want to be, I have some books and these I lent to him. Among the books were a collection of Muktibodh's poems, the complete short stories of Renu and Dinkar's *Rashmi-Rathi*. He returned the Muktibodh back the very next day.
26. In the evening when there would be no one in the lobby we would sit on the bench that was there and talk about the books and stories and life in general, little informal **chitchat** until I finished my cigarette and went back home upstairs.
27. Around that time he stopped saluting me and I was glad that he had stopped. Somehow, it had always made me vaguely uneasy. After all we were not in the army.
28. He had one sweater that he would wear all the time. A bright maroon one that his wife had sent and he wore it with much pride over his grey uniform.

B.2. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. From whom did the writer learn more about Roop Singh?
 2. How did Roop Singh discharge his duties?
 3. What did he do after his duties hour?
 4. How would you take it when a guard speaks English?
 5. What does the author mean by 'stupid arrogance'?
 6. Where had Roop Singh studied? Why did Ritwik not tell him that he had studied in the same college?
 7. At what age did Roop get married? Was it a proper age to marry? Why or why not?
 8. Why did Roop leave the job of a teacher?
 9. What did Ritwik think about Roop's perception as a reader?
29. In the last week of December he sent a letter to my father asking for an advance of 100 rupees, which should be cut from his next month's salary because he suddenly had to send money home and now was **in dire need of** it in order to survive. He had written that he hadn't eaten anything for two days and now was having difficulty in doing his shift. It was a short, formal, very official letter.
30. Father had gone out so I went down with the money and gave it to him and also sent some food with Munna for him and the other guards.

31. When Kedia came to know he laughed at my **naïveté** and called Roop a lazy free loader. He thought aloud that probably Roop and other guards drank at night because he had heard noises sometimes and that is where all the money went. I kept quiet.
32. Kedia is a **devout** man. He gives donations to temples, organises Jagrans regularly and himself performs Puja for an hour every morning, but strangely enough has no faith in any other human being. Sometimes I wonder what kind of God he believes in. It must be the God of small things!
33. On 31st night a big **bonfire** and party was organised on the **terrace** of our apartment building. Since I am not a very social type I hadn't gone up to join the party but instead I watched **Michelangelo Antonioni's** wonderful *Blow-up* on cable T.V. My parents came home by 11 p.m. and much before the old year had rung out and the New Year rung in the party had died a cold lingering death. Many families had failed to turn up, and it always happen at these things, more food than needed had been ordered and was now left untouched on the tables. Great heaps of Chicken and Meat and Biryani and Paneer and Kofta curry, Gulab Jamun with no one to consume it all. The ladies came down by 11.30 and the remaining gentlemen drunks were in no position to stand let alone eat.
34. Anyway, one of the gentlemen drunks suddenly felt in his breast the milk of human kindness and said to Munna, who was there watching the antics and mixing the drinks and having a few pegs of his own, I am sure, 'Munna beta go downstairs and bring the guards up to eat, someone has to eat these damn things.'
35. So Munna went downstairs and the guards came up and, all of them except Roop, gorged on the food and went downstairs satisfied. Two of them had upset stomachs the next morning. As Roop picked up the plate and started to serve himself Kedia rolled over to him and said loudly, 'So Mr Singh, I hope you are not hungry now. You probably haven't eaten such fabulous food ever in your life, so eat carefully, don't overdo it.' And then he laughed and patted Roop on the back **patronisingly**. Roop felt as if someone had lit a long abandoned fuse inside his body and that it was snaking up slowly to his brain.

He quietly put the plate down and walked away, aware of everybody's eyes boring into his back. The other guards chose to ignore Roop's reaction; they enjoyed themselves to the full.

36. What happened next can only be called unfortunate, may be tragic but 'tragic' has a kind of grandeur attached to it, which doesn't necessarily include the minor characters of this world. Roop was on night duty, on the 31st of December. After the party had died down and people gone to sleep Roop sat in the lobby and brooded about what had happened. This is all reconstruction, all conjecture on my part, because the evidence is all physical and doesn't really say anything about his mind, except that he was perhaps hopelessly melancholic and full of hurt and pain. He probably thought about his family. About his no good brother, but a loyal one nevertheless, his beautiful wife who still looked young in spite of it all and his beloved land, his own little field of wasted dreams, on a part of which a bright red flag with a hammer and sickle had appeared suddenly one day and a small chunk of land was lost to him forever. As if by magic. He remembered he had cried that night holding his wife tightly and she too crying silently and their son sleeping serenely by their side. It was his son's beautiful calm face that made him go out in the morning and leave the village. It was his son's face again, that night, around four o'clock in the morning that finally upset the delicate balance of his mind. With his bare hands he ripped the lobby apart. With his fists he broke the glass revolving doors, the wooden bench where we sat and talked, the red plastic chairs and the intercom system. His hands were bleeding badly, the fingers broken at many places, and when Haripal, the other guard that night, tried to stop him he punched him in the mouth. He was totally **oblivious** to pain, and only when Haripal came back with other two guards and they all beat him up that he became quiet. But by that time the lobby was totally **thrashed**. Haripal came to inform us and my father wake me up and we went downstairs. Some other residents followed in a little while. Roop was in the guardroom. They had tied him up with a rubber hose pipe. His face was swollen and his hands were badly smashed. The eyes were blank, expressionless, like the eyes of people we sometimes see in B.B.C. documentaries in some remote corner of the

world struck by natural disaster – an earthquake, a drought or a cyclone. I untied his hands and legs but he sat there on the floor motionless. Kedia didn't come down. Later I knew why he didn't. My father and a few other residents took Roop to a nursing home nearby. He had multiple fractures on his hands. He probably would never work with his hands again. Damaged beyond repair. We have sued the security agency. Someone has to pay for the damages, I guess.

B.3.1. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. Why did Roop send a letter to Ritwik's father? What kind of letter was this?
2. What did Kedia laugh at? Why?
3. Why did Ritwik not join the 31st December party?
4. What did Kedia say to Roop when he was serving himself? How did Roop react to this?
5. What made Roop lose his balance?
6. What did Roop think about, before he lost his balance?
7. What did he do when he lost his balance?

Glossary and Notes

poky (adj): small, uncomfortable

survive (v): to continue to exist, especially in a difficult and dangerous situation

patrician(n): belonging to or typical of the highest social class

gleaming (pp): shiny, clean, and looking very new

chrome (n): an alloy used for covering other metals to make them shiny

glaring contrast (np): something that is very obviously different

brethren (n): used for referring to people who belong to the same community or group

defiant (adj): insolent

flourish (n): grand gesture, show

dressing-down (idm): to speak angrily to somebody because they have done something wrong

hideous (adj): someone or something not attractive

chunky (adj): thick and square in shape

stocky (adj): a person who looks strong but is not tall

enterprising (adj): willing to try or think of new ideas or methods

- alacrity** (n): quickness and with enthusiasm
consummate (adj): complete, excellent
randomly (adv): arbitrarily
gesticulating (pp): making movement with your hands and arms while talking
bearing (n): demeanour, manner
innate (adj): quality that one is born with
impeccable (adj): faultless, perfect in every way
albeit (conj): used for introducing a comment that slightly changes or reduces the effect of what was said before
lilt (n): infection, rhythm
rustic (adj): typical of the simple style of the countryside
accent (n): tone of voice, pronunciation
snobbery (n): the attitude or behaviour of someone who believes they are better than other people
trivial (adj): not very interesting, serious or valuable
ally (n): supporter
conviction (n): confidence
elevator (n): lift
in tow (idm): to follow somebody
haughty (adj): proud
stuck up (adj): arrogant, snobbish
subversive (adj): rebellious
competently (adv): did effectively and satisfactorily
princely sum (dim): a large amount of money; this expression is used humorously to denote a small amount of money
subsisted (v): stayed alive when he had not much food or money
insolent (adj): rude, not showing respect
bent on (idm): determined
kicked out (idm): thrown out
sore (adj): angry
vanity (n): self-importance, egotism
galled (v): annoyed, provoked
toiling (pp): working hard
stoicism (n): accepting things without complaining
melancholic (adj): sad

vicarious (adj): experienced through the actions of other people

chitchat (n): friendly conversation about things which are not very important

in dire need of (phr): needing something very badly

Michelangelo Antonioni: Italian neo-realistic film director of the 1950s and 1960s

patronizingly (adv): behaving or speaking in a way that shows that you are more intelligent or important than someone

conjecture (n): a guess based on information that is not complete

oblivious (adj): unaware

thrashed (v): battered

sued (v): prosecuted, taken legal action against

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. Describe the culture and attitude reflected in the party on 31st of December. Give your own comments on this.
2. Roop had married at the age of 15. Do you think it would have been better if he had not married so early?
3. Roop had to sell his land for his sister's wedding. Is dowry a good practice?
4. What does the story tell you about the apartment culture?
5. Sketch the character of Mr Kedia.
6. Write your experiences with a person who resembles Kedia in behaviour or character.
7. When hungry and humiliated Roop Singh left the party quietly, nobody, not even guards, came to stop him. They rather ignored him though Roop Singh was their leader. What in your opinion made them indifferent?
8. Is the title of the story justified? Who is the leader of men in the story?
9. What formed the base of the bond between Ritwik and Roop Singh? How did this bond grow stronger?
10. Narrate the story in your own words.

C. 2. Group Discussion

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

- a. 'Early marriage is a bane to the society?'
- b. Dowry system encourages gender discrimination

C. 3. Composition

Write a paragraph in about 100 words on the following:

- Job and life of a security guard
- Education and employment

D. WORD STUDY**D.1. Dictionary Use**

Ex.1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

diffculty	cigarette	rememberd	intrested	earthquak
astonising	ridiculus	documentires	arogance	

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words – the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common:

flourish	counter	need	guess
damage	drink	talk	experience

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following lines:

*Kedia shouts at one **worker** or the other.*

*He was smart, efficient, and did his job **quietly**.*

See that in the first line suffix '-er' is added to the verb 'work' to form a new word 'worker' which is a noun. In the second line suffix '-ly' is added to the adjective 'quiet' to form a new word 'quietly' which is an adverb. Use '-er' and '-ly' suitably in each of the blanks given below:

- Meetu is the own..... of that house.
- Ajeet takes things serious
- J.P. was the lead... Of the masses.
- The Principal listened to my story indifferent.....
- Amod normal.... Gets up at 6 o' clock in the morning.
- Suraiya does her work competent...

- (vii) She went to the court.....
 (viii) Roop Singh was deep... disturbed..
 (ix) M.F. Hussain is a great paint....

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex. 1. Find from the lesson words the meanings of which have been given on the left hand side. The last part of each word is given on the right hand side:

be totally unaware ofvious
belonging to the highest social classcian
some one or something not attractiveous
willing to try or think of new ideas or methodsprising
moving hands and arms while talkingfating
used to change topic or reduce the effect of what was said beforebeit

Ex. 2. Fill in the blanks with suitable adjectives below:

poky dusty smart efficient enterprising miserable

- The poor are always
- Most of the rural roads are
- companies prefer and employees.
- He is an..... young man.
- The slums have houses.

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. And use them in sentences of your own:

shout at	look at	fit in	think of
fold up	switch over	break out	look for

E. GRAMMAR

Read the following examples:

- Kedia scolded the guard. (active voice)
- The guard was scolded by Kedia. (passive voice)

Here, the first sentence is in Active Voice which has been changed into Passive Voice in the second sentence. Change the following sentences into passive voice:

- a. He welcomed my guests.
- b. We have made these rules.
- c. He criticised Roop for everything and anything.
- d. They had tied him up with a rubber hose-pipe.
- e. Someone has to pay for the damage.

F. ACTIVITY

Ex. 1. Some sentences begin with the following words:

So, for, though, around, anyway, later, but.

What is their special function in the passage?

Ex. 2. Read the following sentence carefully:

"I will kick you out"

What is the specific role of such sentences in the passage? Choose from the given option:

(a) warning

(b) praising

(c) arguing

