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BARI THEKE PALIYE (1959)

A village boy, Kanchan, pines to live in a world of fantasies, the *El Dorado*. But the prosaic, adult reality impinges on his freedom to take unbounded flights into the regions of Orinoco river and the Red Indians.

The headmaster father has different ideas about bringing up a boy. A strict disciplinarian and a tyrant, he cares little for boyish fantasies. Instead, he believes in spanking as and when needed.

But Kanchan is not abandoned in the midst of this terror. His mother understands and she is demonstratively indulgent. But she too knows her limits with the domineering husband and his quick anger.

But Kanchan is incorrigibly drawn towards mischief-making and dangerous pranks. He dares to question the power and validity of the sacred thread, and upsets a pot of curd on the head of the village priest's son. More than that, he even defies his father by refusing to come home in time. The world is full of too many curiosities and he rows away in the village river in search of them.

He carries on with this defiance of his father and just saves his skin from his father's cane by running away to Calcutta, the city of lights and dreams, mysteries and adventures.

He arrives at his *El Dorado*, but is overpowered by its massive structures and frenzied movement. At the point of getting run over, he is saved by a bearded old man with a huge, sack-like bag dangling from his shoulders. Indeed, thinks a terrified Kanchan, here he

is! The one who kidnaps young children by shoving them inside the sack; back at home mother had warned him.

But no, it's Haridas. A jobless, poor teacher from East Bengal. In the absence of teaching, he tends for himself by selling savoury roasted grams. That exaggerated appearance in his disguise, not to kidnap children but to lure them towards him, just as he sings and dances to win them over for his grams. They set out together towards Haridas's shack in a slum. An immediate bond of friendship grows as Haridas is also runaway from home, who wanders around the streets and lanes of the frenetic city in search of his lost mother. But the mysteries outside are too alluring and promising for Kanchan to be confined inside. Hence off he goes, no sooner than Haridas has turned his back. In a quick succession, Kanchan encounters a number of curious but unpleasant episodes. He witnesses the gory spectacle of a wayside magician who cuts up his young assistant into two.

Hungry and tired, he eats in a restaurant only to receive a severe tweak in his ears for not paying. From there on he roams around like a mendicant, observing this grand, complex and rather inhuman city. And he meets Haridas suddenly only to be lost again in a crowd of processionists.

He sneaks into a wedding. Amidst the pomp and show Kanchan meets Mini. She rouses some vague longing in him. After a sumptuous dinner, Kanchan falls asleep in the crowded house and dreams of Mini, his village and his mother. Next day, he witnesses the finale to the vulgar extravagance of the wedding; a bunch of beggars nibbling at the food thrown into the dustbin. He is horrified.

Loitering here and there, he meets a dumb boy who earns his living by drawing pictures of gods and goddesses on the pavement. Kanchan is fascinated and he befriends the boy, Abhi, only to discover that he is not dumb. Further surprise awaits him when he learns that a bunch of gangsters kidnapped Abhi and now deprive him of his earnings from those drawings. The two boys try to escape from the clutches of the underworld kings and indulge in the day-dream of a bright future together, with Kanchan's mother's unbounding care to share with. Abhi realizes that he has no memories, not even that of his mother's. The moment of fantasy and friendship is snapped as a black car bores down on them and Abhi is snatched away. Kanchan makes a narrow escape.

Lost and famished, he meets an old woman. She takes pity on him and brings him home. Kanchan hears the sad tale of her runaway son. She lives somehow by doing odd jobs, but is ceaselessly looking for her son all over the city. She dotes on Kanchan and pleads with him to stay on. But the world at large has an irresistible attraction for him and Kanchan is again on the streets.

As chance would have it, he meets Mini. She invites him to her house. Mini's ailing mother provides him with solace and comfort and Kanchan remembers his own mother. Kanchan too evokes in Mini's mother fond memories of her childhood days in the village. Mini's father proves to be yet another surprise. He turns out to be neither a tyrant nor an ogre, but an affectionate man caring for his ailing wife and his little daughter. With a promise of a visit the next day, Kanchan sets out in the nocturnal streets of Calcutta.

He gets deeper into the darkness of the city. His shoes get stolen. He is harassed and humiliated by two street urchins who wallow gleefully in their degradation. A shattered and confused Kanchan confronts the old woman with the runaway son in a horrifying state. She is surrounded by a crowd for the alleged crime of trying to kidnap a child. She is pushed and thrashed, and is hauled up in a police van pathetically pleading innocence. Kanchan knows too well the truth about her and desperately tries to save her and calls out to her as 'mother'. But his voice is drowned in the clatter of the city.

A chance meeting with Haridas brings a moment's respite as Haridas tries to tell him the story of a happy prince asking the same question as Kanchan, 'Why is there so much grief in this city?'

They go to Mini's house. Kanchan accompanies Mini and her parents to the riverside. Mini's father is now aware of Kanchan's real identity. He and his wife decide to send a telegram to his father. Haridas joins them and implores Kanchan to go back home. But Kanchan is adamant. He refuses to go back until he amasses wealth for his mother, and then only he will be able to brave his autocratic father. He suddenly takes off and vanishes into crowd. Mini's mother collapses.

Forlorn and hungry, Kanchan is forced into a reverie of a home of plenty in his village. A casual labourer understands his plight, shares his frugal meal with him and warns him about this ruthless city, a place of fierce struggle for existence.

Kanchan goes back to Mini's house only to find it locked. An

ever waiting Haridas breaks the news: Mini's mother is dead and Mini has gone away to her village with her father, forsaking the city for ever. A tired and vanquished Kanchan reels under the blow and breaks into a heart-rending wail.

Haridas persuades him to go home. But Haridas will stay back to look after many more such runaway Kanchans.

Kanchan arrives at Kajaldighi. The servant meets him at the station to ferry him across the river. The fear of father's anger looms large. But as the boat tilts towards the bank, an elated and overjoyed mother receives him in her arms. A repentant but embarrassed father tries to break the ice, 'Did you see many things in Calcutta? Is that place better than home?' A pleasantly relieved and surprised Kanchan rushes into his father's arms and announces gleefully, 'No father, there is nothing better than home!'