



SHORT STORY

If I Were a Teller of Tales

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'*Aiye, aiye, come. Sir! Madam! Chay. Garam chay!*' I sing in my signature tune as I dust the bench and stool with an undershirt. '*Badhiya chay hai Bahenji, (fine tea sister)*' Foreigners with eyes the colour of marbles prefer our nicely boiled Indian tea. They worry about germs.

As you can see it's only a question of a minute or two under a truck and they too could find themselves in the same predicament as me – that is - minus legs.

Still, why begrudge them their beliefs when they can afford to go to Sethji's restaurant next door and yet they come to sit at my tea stall here, on the hard stools. Sethji's has air-conditioning and uniformed bearers, whereas I have natural air and a rammed earth floor under the awning my son has rigged up over the bamboo poles. I have the seating arranged so customers can keep an eye on the buses and read their destination boards. Customers travel long distances and arrive choked with dust. Some like cold drink, Bisleri, or lassi, but seasoned travelers know there's nothing like hot tea for quenching thirst.

I learn a great deal from my customers. One foreign customer told me how in his country if a man had no legs he would get a pension simply because he had no legs.

'*Baithiye. Sit. Come, memsahib*', I say as a couple walk towards Sethji's. The memsahib, although she looks

like you and me, quite Indian in fact, is, I'm sure, one of those foreign dwelling Indians. I can tell because the expression on her face is all wrong, not like that on faces of our ladies who live in Delhi. I see the memsahib conferring with the blue eyed sahib with her.

Meanwhile I serve other customers, a whole family on an outing from their Rajasthani village across the border. The women dressed in peacock blue, marigold orange and parrot green giggle and clink the chunky metal bands of jewellery on their ankles and wrists. It is this sound which makes me homesick for my own *gharwali*, my wife. The women shuffle and squeeze onto the bench, for there are five of them.

'*Le lo, take sister, take,*' I say, after I have served their menfolk. It's clear these women have never been served tea by a man. The younger ones pull their sari ends over their faces and peep at the world. There is something about this gesture which pleases me and flusters me, as though they acknowledge my presence as a man. I busy myself with the fire for the next batch of tea, for I see the memsahib and sahib approaching. The village women would have liked to have lingered on to watch the oddity of such a mixed couple, but their menfolk hurry them to their bus.

'Bad cough,' I say to the memsahib with a show of dusting the bench. 'Shall I put ginger in tea? Ginger is

very good for cough.' The memsahib has some trouble bringing her gaze to meet mine. I'm getting used to emotions flickering on faces. I see everything from disgust and pity to wonder and even anger. The memsahib hesitates before sitting down and I know it's because of my stumps. The sahib studies the memsahib's face and says, 'Come now honey, (wah! how these people use endearments in public), you're on holiday now. He's not on your caseload. Just relax.' She replies, 'I know, but I can't help it'.

I wonder what he means by her caseload. People think I'm illiterate. Actually I am. I cannot write, but I follow many tongues. English. Some French also, *Comment allez vous? Nous y allons tout de suite.* German, *Guten morgen. Danke.* Japanese too, a little. Bangla and Marathi. When I worked as a rickshaw-wallah I learnt from one customer and practiced on another. But mostly, I speak my thoughts in Hindi, as you can hear.

I stoke the fire and flames rise around the pot. I lift the pot. As you can see, my upper body is still good, in fact more muscular now that I use my arms to propel myself. I pour the caramelised tea into white china tea cups. Thinking to alert them so that they may watch what they say in English and not insult me inadvertently I say in English, 'Tea not much costly for ginger. No? Okay. Perhaps, memsahib has some other

medicine for the cough. We poor people, we use ginger. Too much dust here.' Makes cough,' I say.

She looks around as though for the first time. Again, that kaleidoscope of expressions twirls across her face as she takes in the chaos of buses pulling up and leaving, passengers disembarking or jumping on the steps of moving vehicles, auto-rickshaws scuttling in and out of traffic, cycle-rickshaws and even a bandy-legged camel erratically pulling its cart. Tourists and travelers each with their respective burdens of video recorders and backpacks or baskets of ripening guavas or wood apples to sell at the stalls bustle around.

'Wash our cups properly, okay, and boil the tea nicely,' the memsahib says to me. I am surprised at her tone. Sometimes I'm treated like I have no brains. Wasn't I the one after all, telling her that I served good boiling tea! Then turning to her man, she adds, 'You know, Tony, when we lived here when I was a little girl the tea stalls used to sell tea in disposable cups. Then you could be really sure the cups were clean.'

'Disposable cups? Surely not,' says the sahib.

'Yeah, disposable cups. Not polystyrene, but little earthenware pots. Not kiln-fired. Ochre red pots that fitted in the palm of your hands. Tea from these pots had a wonderful...umm! A distinct earthy aroma. And when one finished drinking one simply smashed them into the ground. Back to the earth.'

I busy myself with scalding her cup. I too remember those cups and that aroma. But, I think, nostalgia cannot be an



addiction for us who continue to live here. We must on move with the modern world, modern India, bombs etc.

'You seen Taj? Agra Fort?' I ask the couple. I like talking to customers, asking them what they've seen, making suggestions, reliving my days when the city was mine to see and to show. You see, I was not just a rickshaw peddler. I considered myself a guide. When customers started bargaining I would say, 'Money! Why, money is something I can make everyday. But reputation! That is something else. Your guide book is telling you, "In India you must bargain". Sure, sure. But no bargaining with me. I'm not



overcharging you. I'm making a little profit, that I don't deny. After all, why else would I pedal this rickshaw up and down streets? To fill my stomach. And that of my dependents of course. So! Let me explain something sir, madam. You are my guests. I will look after you. My name is Kabir.' And with this I would shake hands. You see, I imagined myself as some kind of ambassador for all India.

In this new occupation I've still a lot to learn. The actual business of tea making is simple enough. My son fetches fuel and fills the drums of water and puts them within my reach. He bargains for good tea leaf in the market and procures sugar and milk. I even keep some *chay masala* handy, cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, etc. for connoisseurs who will pay. I even have an explanatory patter for Westerners who insist on ordering "chay-tea" not understanding that *chay* means tea in our language.

I must cultivate my good name once again, so travelers from Delhi and Mumbai and Sydney and California will say, 'I want to drink my tea at Kabir, Skateboard Chay-wallah's stall'.

The memsahib continues, 'When

I was a little girl, even coffee was different. It was measured by the yard.' She demonstrates how those waiters from the south of India (oh yes, I've seen them too) cooled hot coffee. They poured coffee from one stainless steel tumbler to another, deftly stretching out their arms as though playing a yo-yo, so the liquid stretched as a continuous strip like a piece of coffee coloured cloth between the two containers.

The sahib comments, 'Ah, your childhood. My

poor darling. The country has changed too much for you, hasn't it? He runs his fingers through her hair, as though they were in the privacy of their bedchamber. 'My homeless darling,' he adds and there is an edge to his voice, which I don't care for. He throws me a glance. 'Homeless as this fellow here, aren't you?'

'Here you are madam,' I say wiping around the white cup and serve the cup to them on a tray.

Gradually I'm introducing some style to my stall. I've been musing, I may as well capitalise on my previous name. "Nawabsahib-rickshaw-walleh" they called me in jest. It happened this way: one day a foreign tourist hired me for the day. Towards the end of the day as we traveled and chatted, this man said, 'Stop'. I pulled up by the side of the road. I thought the sahib wanted to shoot a picture of the mustard ripening in the fields I knew better than to say "What are you taking a picture of, sahib?" For I know foreigners waste film even when there are no people in the photo.

But no, this sahib said, 'I'd like to pedal your rickshaw.'

'Sahib!' I replied. 'There are the unions, I shall lose my license. Can't allow it'. Eventually, he persuaded me and I handed the rickshaw to the sahib. Now I was in a quandary. What if this sahib turned out to be a thug and ran off with the rickshaw? But this sahib had yet another idea. He patted the seat, the very one customers sit on. 'Come on,' he said. 'Sit here.' I was truly appalled. 'Nahin, nahin,' I said but the sahib refused to have me run beside him and I was not



about to let him take off with my transport. 'It's bad enough that you have the whim to pedal the thing, but sit in it sahib, no,' I said.

Then, the sahib offered to pay me. He offered to pay me the same amount to pull me for a few minutes as he was paying me to pull him for the whole day! I don't know what came over me but suddenly I saw a very funny side to this. I climbed on board. We went only for a few furlongs, mind, but the damage was done. God knows who saw us in that semi-darkness of dusk and the smoky cooking fires, but soon word got around. 'Wah, Nawabsahib-rickshaw-walleh!' fellow rickshaw-wallahs began teasing me.

Not all rich people are like this man. Some, even foreigners, can be as mean as a dog's turd. Take the time I spat after that red-haired man who bought three bananas but was acting like some wholesale buyer. 'Give me change,' he said, raising his voice as he towered over one of our hill women, a woman who makes her daily living selling fresh fruit by the side of the road. Quite unashamedly he stuck out his left hand and repeated, 'Give me change'. I slowed my rickshaw and pulled up alongside the woman. 'Give

me change,' the man was beginning to shout now. 'Wo change mangta hai, better give it to him,' I said to the hill woman. She took her time, I will grant her that. Slowly she undid the knot at the end of her sari. Carefully, she extricated a coin. She handed this ridiculous amount to the man. The gob of spit I fired caught the back of his heel.

It's just as well the whole world is not like that. See that cobbler? There, under the shade of the big tamarind tree.

Wait till the exhaust from that bus disperses, then you will surely see him. He sits there every day and stitches and mends. You can't imagine how many travelers leave home with semi-broken thongs and shoes with holes in their soles that they notice only when they step in a puddle.

The cobbler and I, we both sit here across from each other, he on his old jute sacking, me on this skateboard. Sometimes the cobbler will say to me as he goes off on some errand, 'Hey, keep an eye on my stall will you,' (as if anybody would steal a cobbler's, an Untouchable's tools). Besides, anybody with eyes can see what little I could do against a truly determined robber, but then you see, when the cobbler packs up for the night he drops by with a couple of rupees for me.

'Hai Ram! What's that?' My blood still freezes whenever I hear such a screech of brakes, although there's not much I recall from the time the truck made chutney of my rickshaw and of my legs. The sahib and memsahib rush across along with everyone else in the vicinity to see what's happening. I still shudder when I hear that din of horns, beeps,

panic-stricken screaming and then that final crunch of metal on metal and pulp.

I call out, 'Array Babu, what's happening? Someone tell me.' I pray that no one is hurt. 'Only a dog,' this fellow calls out. 'No, wait. It's all right. That half-smart puppy, won't live to be full-smart at this rate.' He tells me this as though it were a cricket commentary, 'Puppy crosses road to join its mother, Maruti swerves to avoid puppy, scooter nearly runs into Maruti, scooter skids and nearly sends a pedestrian under bus'.

'Oh mister, what can you see? Is anyone hurt?' I ask.

It wasn't as if I'd taken no precautions. I'd even buckled an old sandal to the chassis of my rickshaw, a child's single sandal I'd found abandoned in the gutter so my rickshaw looked old, so no malevolent spirit would cast an evil eye upon it. I also used to make offerings, sometimes fruit, sometimes money, to wayside shrines and yet, what had to happen, happened.

Wasn't I mentioning the ways of the rich and poor, the good and greedy? After the commotion at the crossroads I turn around and notice how memsahib had foolishly left her bag on the bench. I see Budloo's son leaning on the stall making eyes at me and bringing his fist up and down as though he were nursing sore knuckles. It is then that I realise how any valour I imagined I had, had indeed gone with my departed legs.

The memsahib says, 'Oh shit, my purse!' She frantically pats her bag and peers into it, then looks towards me and says, 'Surely it can't be him.' It cuts me up when people imagine that my morals too must have disappeared with my legs.

Budloo's son continues standing over me. Now, the sahib looks at me and says, 'Come on love, don't be ridiculous. Why, he can barely crawl. Besides we were hardly gone a minute'.



'These fellows can be very clever,' memsahib continues, 'Sometimes they mutilate themselves to get sympathy'. I keep myself busy pouring, mixing, rinsing, letting them believe that I don't understand a word. Memsahib continues, 'God, how I hate this place. You come to have a holiday and they bloody well fleece you soon as look at you.' From the corner of my eye I see her looking at me, this time straight at my stumps.

'Let's not make a bloody scene,' says the sahib. 'Just think honey, 36 hours and you'll be in Sydney.'

'Yeah you're right. Let's get the hell out of here. God knows the bugger needs the cash, at least the passport and stuff's alright,' she says, as they rush off. Their pity and payment hits me like spittle.

Budloo's son must have seen the couple depart, for he smirks and slinks

over like a feral dog. He twiddles a couple of Rs 50 notes in my face. Judging by this his loot must have been considerable. He stands over me on the pillars of his two strong legs, hands on hips, as he twirls the notes in my face. He's not going to drop the note - he wants to engage with me - to make me acknowledge my shortcomings. I think of my wife and what I could buy for her. What would I not do to give her a moment of frivolity? Like the time I was chauffeured by my own customer.

A new batch of passengers arrives and I pour the tea. After a moment Budloo's son shrugs. As he tucks the note in his pocket and saunters away I think, and vainly perhaps, but I think all the same, that Budloo's son may have gained something more from this encounter than memsahib's money. One day, hopefully soon, Budloo's son will reflect on how Kabir, rickshaw-wallah turned skateboard-chay-wallah refused stolen money, and perchance Budloo's son may turn into an honest human being. I make a note of how I'll share this story with my wife, of how I nearly bought her a sari and jewellery. And I am saddened because I imagine the story the memsahib will also tell when she returns to her country - of a skateboard-chay-wallah at a certain tea-stall who stole her money. □

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