

## CURFEW (Translation of the Story Curfew)

Shakoor rang the call-bell as usual, and then continued to tinkle the bell of his *rickshaw*. This had become a matter of routine. The sound of his bell was exclusive, like the soft jingle of *ghungroos*. He then began scratching his ear abstractedly with a thin piece of twig. Today he would definitely borrow ten rupees from *Bahuji*. For the last eight to ten days there has been no work. A curfew has been clamped in the city, on the other side of the railway track, so how can a person go there. It's the end of the month. Whatever little provisions had been in the house are now exhausted.

The door opened. It was not Babli... but Saheb.

“Oh Shakoor, Babli won't be going out today. She has a slight temperature.”

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He was puzzled.

“And yes! the schools are closed so you needn't take her out. You can come when they reopen.” And he went in arranging the newspaper in his hand.

Shakoor could clearly hear Babli crying and stamping her feet indoors. “Let me go... Mummy, let me go. Please allow me to take a ride in Shakoor's *rickshaw*...” she was yelling. As it is she was very obstinate.

“I'll give you a tight slap. Shut up... The conditions are bad on account of the riots. What if he should kill you... Will you not keep quiet.”

Saheb had gone in and closed the door. Shakoor had thought of calling *Bahuji* to ask her for the money, but on hearing all this, he was dumbfounded. Had things come to such a stage? Didn't *Bahuji* know him or did she think him to be so wicked?

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Shakoor was not new there; he had been carrying children to school for last six years. Initially, his father used to take the children of Saheb's friend who had recommended him for Babli. Those days her brother, Kaka, used to go but now he went by cycle. Shakoor had been the same age when he started fending for himself.

Shakoor reminiscences that he must actually have been of Kaka's age when his father held his hand and took him to Ahuja Sahab's factory, saying that the boy would atleast learn some trade instead of loafing around the whole day. He had plied his *rickshaw* for Ahuja Sahab for some years so he obliged. Now, everyday he had to reach the factory at ten, be it winter, summer or the monsoon. His mother used to wake him up at eight and pack him off with an aluminium tiffin carrier containing four *rotis* with either onion or just salt and chilly Chutney. Initially he was adamant about not working in the factory. Each bone in his body ached operating the machine the whole day. He returned home only when the siren sounded eight at night. He had been better off loitering around. His father was

away with his *rickshaw*; *Ammi* too would be milling and crushing at different places or at Vakil Saheb's where she went twice a day to make *rotis* and to household chores. He had to mind Little Basheer and Baby Munni, but these two never came in the way of his playing marbles or collection nuts and bolts. There used to be a competition among children to rummage in the garbage for the best possible articles.

He didn't like going to the factory for another reason. The new *Maulvi* Saheb of the Neem wali Masjid used to collect the children of the locality and teach them. Having commenced with *Alif-Be*, they were now on *Qaida* 3. He dreamt of reading thick books fluently, like Vakil Saheb's children. Once he had gone there with *Ammi*. Their little daughter went inside leaving her book on the chair, and he slowly passed his hand over the coloured pictures in it which were smooth as butter. The book that he read was totally different.

"Saira *Baji* which book do you read? My *Maulvi* Saheb does not teach that."

"You are crazy! He must be teaching the Quran or Urdu. That is an English book."

He came to know for the first time that education too was of different types. One being Saira *Baji's* kind from English books with glossy pictures. The other being Shakoor's, the kind imparted by *Maulvi* Saheb... only Quranic... just Urdu. The next day when asked to clean his wooden slate, the *takhti*, he hesitated and could't help saying. "*Maulvi* Saheb, you only teach Urdu. Why don't you teach English?"

"*Abe*, you had better get your *takhti* ready. The father is a *rickshaw* puller and his son wants to study English! Why does a person study? So that he can become a good human being, a good Musalman. Do you intend to become a Saheb?"

He was puzzled. Was Vakil Saheb not a good Musalman? Once a year he organized a *Milad* and generously distributed *Shirmaal*. My *Maulvi* Saheb also attends those meets. On the occasions of *Idd* and *Bakhri-Idd*, he doles out tithe. He too had received a *Kurta-Pajama*. This seems strange...

Anyway, he studied what was taught. Then one day he came to the factory.

In the beginning he referred to Ahuja Saheb as 'Huja Saheb'. The reason being that a master by the name of Shuja Ansari lived near his house and he thought that Huja must be a name like Shuja. One day the *Mistri*, Ram Prasad rebuked him, "*Abe*, what is this 'Huja Huja' that you go on with? Can't you say Ahuja Saheb!" That's when he came to know the correct name.

Ahuja Saheb was not a bad man; he showed some consideration too because of *Abba*, and never said much should he miss a day or two at work. However, he was always after them, observing things from a half-open window. If he got tired and tried to relax, Ahuja Saheb immediately reprimanded him, "Shakoor... What are you doing, just standing there and gaping! You have to complete two hundred nuts...."

"To hell with you and your nuts!" Shakoor mumbled to himself and set to work at the handle again.

He returned home filthy black, absolutely fatigued, swallowed whatever

had been cooked, and collapsed onto his cot.

After three to four years he came to Haji Kallu Khan who said that he would pay him four rupees a day instead of the three that he was getting. His father had advised him not to leave Ahuja Saheb who was known to them, but Haji Saheb had insisted and came personally to take him. Two to three years after graduation, when Haji Saheb's son had not secured a job, he set up a nickle-polish establishment for him. The work had just commenced. Initially there had been only two of them, he and Rehmani. Though he had been promised four rupees, but that was never paid on time; often payments accumulated for two to three months.

Once he decided that he would definitely take his money, and all his money. That day Rehmani asked him to get the basin etc ready while he set the machine. Seeing him sitting with his hands across his knees, he asked, "Shakoor, what's the matter? Why are you not preparing the basin?"

"Today I will work only after my dues have been cleared. I desperately need money."

"Then ask Haji Saheb or Bhaiya Saheb. What's the use of sitting idle."

Bhaiya Saheb was standing at the door lighting a cigarette. He laughed and said, "Hey you, Shakoor! Are you going on strike?"

"Bhaiya Saheb, today you must pay me first. I have to buy some clothes. Its so cold, and I don't have any woollens."

"All right, take it in the evening. Am I running away or is your money going somewhere? I have committed myself. Now get on with your work. Today a lot of things have come."

"When do I get to see you in the evening after work?"

Shakoor knew that in the evening Haji Saheb and Bhaiya Saheb, both went for *magrib* prayers and seldom returned. A servant of the house came and had the workshop locked, taking the key with him. Today he was adamant. In the morning his father had rebuked him, asking him to return home with the money.

Bhaiya Saheb felt humiliated. The boy has gone crazy and is going on arguing. He lost his temper, "Son of a b... you dare to throw tantrums! Tell me, are you going to work or not." He unbuckled his belt to thrash him.

On hearing the noise, Haji Saheb came out. He pushed his son aside, and caressing Shakoor said, "Son, you are our very own man. Your money is there, just think that you have left it with me for safe-keeping. Look, we should not quarrel among ourselves. People of the same community have great regard for one another. See we have just dispatched the goods. In a week or two we should get the payments, and you can take your money. There's no problem."

He was aware of the fact that just yesterday Bhaiya Saheb had collected a lot of money from the market, but he kept silent. After ten days he got the money, but only half of it. He did not return either to work or to collect the remaining amount. He had become skilled so was not worried; he could get work anywhere. There were many small factories in Aligarh that engaged labourers without proper documentation, so, at fifty paise less than what he was getting, anybody would

employ him.

It was just then that tragedy befell his tender age. One evening his father was hit by a bus and breathed his last. He had parked his *rickshaw* by the side of the road, and was relieving himself when the fast moving vehicle ran over him. It was a government-owned bus, and the compensation came to one thousand rupees. A month or so later his mother married another man, and went off with little Raffu.

Shakoor was astounded at the fact that he had become master of the house. Besides Basheera and Munni, he also inherited his father's *rickshaw*. Suddenly he became head of the family. This time he took Basheera to Ahuja Saheb and had him apprenticed there, just as his father had taken him.

At first Ahuja Saheb proved difficult, saying, "*Salon*, you guys can't stay put. Should someone come and appeal to you in the name of the community, you will again run off!"

"No Sir, The community and work are two separate things. We'll go where the working conditions are favourable and the money is paid on time. *Saab*, father is dead that's why I'm putting Basheera to work."

"Oh! Ch, ch, ch, ch! How did he die?"

"He was crushed by a bus, Saheb."

"Oh, that was tragic. Anyway, you can come from tomorros. But I'll pay one and a half rupees. He's small, and has no experience."

"One and a half is extremely low. Atleast make it two rupees per day, *Saab*."

"*Abe*, he'll be taking this forty rupees of mine even for nothing. At the moment I don't have any vacancy. Its up to you... take it or leave it"

And Basheer came to be employed there.

Earlier Shakoor used to pull small children around in his *rickshaw* for fun. Now he decided to turn it into a profession. He did a wise thing by engaging a few school-going children on a monthly basis. It was light work, and the regular income was like a salary. Together, he and Munni cooked the meals twice a day. But these kitchen chores were beyond him."

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It was winter. Dusk had turned into darkness. Munni saw a young girl alighting from Shakoor's *rickshaw*. She had a pretty but indifferent face. Wearing a dirty *salwar kameez*, she had covered her head with a crushed *orhni*. Munni was sitting outside struggling with damp firewood, the smoke of which filled her eyes with tears and things became blurred.

"Munni, this is Razia. Your *Bhabhi*." Having placed extraordinary stress on the word *Bhabhi*, his gaze wandered around nonchalantly as if nothing significant had occurred.

Hasn't Basheera returned yet'?"

"He has gone to the Lala's shop for flour."

Munni was confused, and didn't know how to react to this unexpected new

sister-in-law. However, she heaved a sigh of relief. She had a companion at last. She held her hand and made Razia sit beside her.

Next morning Shakoor got up when he heard the call for morning prayers. He went running to the mosque and greeted the priest, “*Assalaam alaikum*, Maulvi Saheb.”

Maulvi Saheb was seeing him after a long time. He acknowledged his salutation.

“Maulvi Saheb, will you please perform the marriage rites for me... I have brought the girl.”

Shakoor is still amused at his haste. It was like a story in films.

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Hitting the pedals slowly, he brought the *rickshaw* to the crossroads. It seemed as if he were dragging rather than driving it. He had come to have a cup of tea at a hotel there. He popped his head into the thatched cabin and asking Nanhe’s boy to give him the beverage, he came and sat on the bench outside. These days Nanhe’s hotel too was deserted. Most of his customers are *rickshaw* pullers and as there is no work movement and camaraderie too have become restricted. Though there is no curfew in this area and people can be seen moving around; the shops are also open; but the hustle bustle of the streets seems to have gone missing somewhere. There seems to be no activity and people too are keeping mum. Talk and laughter have metamorphosed into whispers.

He tried to rationalize things : there was no problem if Babli’s mother had not allowed her to ride around in his *rickshaw*; had he asked for the money, he would definitely have got it. Basheera too is sitting idle; he is afraid to go to the factory lest something untoward should happen because most of the people there are Hindus. Babli’s mother is apprehensive because the *rickshaw* puller is a Musalman. What’s the need to feel bad about it? Everyone is scared. Why is he taking this matter to heard. Babli is really a very sweet child. Once he too had aspired to study, progress like the children of Vakil Saheb... but that did not happen; he could not get beyond the third *Qaida* of Urdu. Now... now he dreamt of having a child like Babli; his Razia’s progeny; extremely cute. Razia was six month pregnant.

It was last month that he was taking Babli home after having dropped the other children. He was pulling the *rickshaw* slowly and talking to her. She was persistently asking. “Shokoor, where is your house?”

“Babli, do you want to come to my house? It is very small, not like yours!”

And he really brought her home.

“Rajjo, see who’s come!”

“Oh! Who have you brought! In case someone should see and object.”

Shakoor went close to Razia and whispered, “Rajjo, we too will have a daughter like her... a doll like her, won’t we!”

“Go on! You are crazy!” And she was lost in a world of dreams where there was her Shakoor and her own house... all very different from her childhood which

had been horrific and terrifying. A drunkard step-father and his thrashing! Abuse of the mother. That day too her father had beaten her and pushed her out of the house. Had Shakoor not saved her, perhaps...

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He carried Babli, and bought her an ice-cream from a vendor standing close by. He knew that she was very fond of ice-cream.

On returning home, Babli was very happy. "Mummy, today I went to Shakoor's house."

"Oh *Bahuji*. She is very naughty." He began laughing and explaining. "She began insisting that she wanted to go to my house. So I brought the *rickshaw* via Diggi Road, and showed her my room from a distance."

"And Mummy I also had a big Ice-cream." Babli's enthusiasm knew no bounds.

"Babli, you are very mischievous, and keep bothering everyone". *Bahuji* too began laughing, and said affectionately, "Shakoor, come on, take money for the ice-cream."

"Leave it..." And taking his *rickshaw*, he quickly went away.

He was trusted not only by *Bahuji* and Saheb, but others as well. It was he that deposited hundred of rupees as fees for the smaller children. Babli was so addicted to moving around in the *rickshaw* that even when there was no school, she insisted on going out in Shakoor's *rickshaw*. It had become a sort of routine for Shakoor to take her out daily for a round. *Bahuji* too never said anything, but today... she came to doubt even him. This curfew... f... and he mouthed an expletive. This was the thing that kept pricking him continually and he involuntarily shouted, "*Hey boy!* You have turned into a lazy lout! Are you not bringing tea?"

Abdullah Pehalwan came and sat beside him.

"*Salaam*, Abdullah Bhai."

"*Walakum Salaam*... Shakoor! How are things?" he whispered.

"What can you expect? This curfew has made things difficult for everyone."

"*Abe*, there are People who are making a living these days as well. You need brains for everything. But you have been a blockhead right from the start."

Just then Nanhe's boy handed Shakoor his glass of tea and asking him to bring another one, Abdullah fell silent. Shakoor took a sip and put his glass down. "Have you heard that today again a Musalman has been stabbed in Sarai Labariya?"

"Is that so?" asked Shakoor sadly. Then he said softly, "But the *Paanwala* at the cross roads was saying that it was a Hindu who had been killed." Abdullah did not reply.

Shakoor gazed into the distance and muttered, "Can't understand what is it that people want. Innumerable Kolis have migrated towards the kiln from the city. I have heard that two or three of them have been killed in the firing. People are

asking us also to be alert. Don't know what these people will do in their fury."

"Indeed! You can take a *Katta* and eight to ten cartridges from me to keep in your house; it can come handy if time requires. Though a country-made pistol with ten cartridge has been sold for one hundred and fifty rupees, I can get it for you at half the price."

"Come on, what am I going to do with it? I can't handle these guns and cartridges. Who will kill me? A mere labourer! Its none of my business!"

"You are a traitor, Shakoor! So many of our Musalman brethren have been slain, and you dare to say that it is none of your business!"

"Abdul Bhai, don't make me open my mouth! Last year you shot Qadir, wasn't he your brother? The owners of Sursati Oil Factory paid you saying that Qadir was indulging in Union activities with the Communists, not allowing the strike to be called off. The Seth quickly had you bailed and you were soon acquitted of the case. Now tell me, who was your brother, the Seth or Qadir?"

Abdullah didn't take offence and kept laughing. Then, turning slowly towards Shakoor, whispered. "*Abe*, you can atleast kidnap a child if nothing else. You carry innumerable Hindu children. By God! Hand over one of them to me. I'll work out the plan and get you five hundred or a thousand.

Shakoor had finished his tea and was about to get up when he heard this. He froze. His mind spun, and black spots swam before his eyes. Outraged, without waiting to think that Abdullah was a gangster with a criminal history, he gave him a tight slap. Abdullah lost his balance and staggered. Then a second slap and a third... he had gone *crazy*. The tea vendor, his boy, and a few other shop-keepers came running. A simpleton like Shakoor was slapping Abdullah! They looked on stupidly, and came to their senses only when Abdullah suddenly pulled out a knife....

"*Saale*, then You had better go... take this... for trying to defend them... He attacked Shakoor innumerable times.... Stab! Stab! Stab! And the onlookers moved back silently.

Flaunting the blood-stained knife, Abdullah shouted, "Beware! Nobody dares to open his mouth." Then looking around, he took some steps backwards, and picking up one of the bicycles for hire at Chhotu's shop, he made good his escape.

A crowd had assembled. Shakoor, bathed in blood, was holding his stomach and writhing on the bench. Someone shouted. "Police! Police!"

The policemen were sitting on a parapet at a short distance away. It did not take them time to reach the spot.

"Who killed him? Who is he?"

"*Saheb*, he is Shakoor, a *rickshaw* puller, living at the rear of Diggi"

"It's the limit! The riot has spread to that area as well!"

"Who killed him? Was it a Hindu?"

Everyone was silent. Nobody said anything'

The tea vendor broke the silence saying, "Don't know *Saheb*. My boy and I

were indoors. It must have been a Hindu."

Shakoora was losing consciousness. People were holding him, and their words seemed to echo in his ears. But hearing this, his lips moved, and he began shaking his head, "No! No! It's not like that!... " It was not ""

He wanted to reveal much more, but was only able to mumble, "No! No!" People thought he was muttering those words because the agony was unbearable; instead of allowing him to lie on his back, they should carry him to hospital.

Two policemen put him into the *rickshaw* and held him on either side. They asked the tea vendor to accompany them because he seemed to know Shakoor. But Nanhe didn't want to go for fear of being asked to narrate the entire incident. Why make an enemy of Abdullah unnecessarily!

Meanwhile the rumour had spread that Shakoor, the *rickshaw* puller, had been stabbed by a Hindu. Perhaps he is still shaking his head to refute the charge...can't say.

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