

“Bibiji! Bibiji! Bibiji!, here’s your baggage.”

The knock on the door was so loud that my query, “Who is it? I’m coming!” was completely lost. The knocks grew louder, along with shouts for me to open the door. Though irritated by the deafening noise, I nevertheless opened the door. He mumbled, all in one breath, “Biji, it’s me, *rickshaw wala*. You forgot your baggage in my rickshaw last night, while returning from the station.” Perplexed, I looked at his face and at my belongings clutched in his hands. Without another word, he handed over the baggage, turned around and quickly walked away. I could not even thank him. But then, who thanks a *rickshaw wala*, anyway?

I immediately remembered the discussion we had last night about how *rickshaw walas* were a bunch of thieves. My brother Satish, who had just woken up, asked, “*Didi*, who has come so early in the morning?”

“Eh! It’s early morning for you, is it? Look at how high the bright sun is in the sky”, I replied, ignoring his question about the visitor. He refused to give up. Stretching his limbs, he repeated, “*Didi!* I asked you about the visitor, didn’t I? He wasn’t my friend Sudhir, was he?”

“It was the *rickshaw wala*”, I replied calmly. When I had forgotten my baggage yesterday, I had told Satish, ‘these *rickshaw walas* are big thieves, they never return things.’ Satish remained hopeful that the *rickshaw wala* might turn out to be a good man. An argument ensued between us over this

SHORT STORY

Rickshaw wala

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Translated from Hindi by Radhika Bhasin

difference for some time, and turned heated. Satish had cited a few of his own experiences, both good and bad. My own experiences with them were limited. Nevertheless, I was biased against *rickshaw walas* because of what others said about them.

The *rickshaw wala* had just proven his integrity; not only that, he had probably also missed out on a few fares by taking the time to deliver my baggage first thing in the morning.

“So tell me *Didi Rani*, was the *rickshaw wala* a thief or a good man? Have you won or lost?” asked Satish, coming up close to me. I tried to

change the topic. “Well, at least his visit woke you up.” I pulled his earlobe playfully, trying to hide my defeat. Our ego never takes defeat in its stride; it tries to hide the defeat behind anger, or behind a change of subject. I chose to change the subject and not reply directly.

However, I kept thinking of the *rickshaw wala* for the rest of the day. In the evening, we were in the market. As we were walking along, we came across an unoccupied rickshaw, and my brother shouted – “Hey rickshaw, are you available?”

“Not ‘rickshaw’ sir, please say ‘*rickshaw wala*’, “he said as he applied the brakes. “Where do you want to go?” It was the same *rickshaw wala* from this morning before us. He recognized me but Satish did not recognize him.

“We want to go to Sariyyaganj market”, commanded Satish and we got into the rickshaw.

After reaching Sariyyaganj, Satish paid him a rupee and extended his hand for the balance. Pulling his hand down, I said, “Let’s forget it.” But the *rickshawwala* took out the change from the folds of his



loincloth, and said, "No sir, here is the change" and returned 30 paise. Satish took the money before I could say anything.

I had joined a college and went there by rickshaw every day. The same *rickshaw wala* would often be the one to take me to college but seldom said a word. Several times I almost told him how I appreciated his returning my luggage and other belongings. But somehow I never actually got around to telling him.

Sometimes we would talk along the way. I learnt that he could not tolerate eve teasing. Sometimes he was tough on eve-teasers; at other times he tried to persuade them. He would launch into a long lecture. I had by now found out his name was Akhtar.

After I got married I resided in another more dangerous locality of the same town. Akhtar was the only *rickshaw wala* who was willing to drop me at my doorstep, for the mere mention of my locality was enough to scare most *rickshaw walas*.

He would greet us when he spotted us in another rickshaw. My husband would often tease me by calling him my uncle. My family would report to me every time they saw him, whether pulling the *rickshaw*, drinking water from the municipal tap using his hands as a cup, smoking a *bidi* or eating his meal of *roti* and *sabzi* or *sattu* while sitting astride a bench near the station or the bus stop.

Once I couldn't stir out of my house for a couple of months due to illness. Since I no longer went to college, my trips out had anyway become less frequent. One day I met him when he came to our locality to drop off a passenger. After enquiring about my well being he was about to leave when I said, "Listen..." but when he turned back, I said "It's okay, it's okay." and then watched him as he left.

It was pouring on a day when I had to go to the hospital with my

mother to deliver my child. The road was full of potholes and the roads were all waterlogged. Luckily, I found Akhtar and he carried us with extreme care, riding very slowly, though my mother was complaining, "Hey *rickshaw wala*, why don't you drive faster?"

I asked my mother to keep quiet. It was indeed Akhtar's affection for me which not only made him drive the rickshaw so cautiously but also made him wait at the hospital till he heard the news of my son's birth from my mother. Overjoyed with the birth of her grandson, my mother even gave him a tip of two rupees, which he refused laughingly before going away. He visited me regularly during my stay at the hospital, even gave me five rupees as a present for my son which I could not refuse.

After the *mundan* ceremony of my son, we returned from Devghar. It was a big struggle to get a rickshaw at the station. It was the month of *Baisakh* and most of the rickshaws were loaded with crates of lichees. The heat was unbearable. Caught in this situation, we naturally remembered Akhtar *miyan*. Just then we saw some youngsters having a scuffle with a *rickshaw wala*. They had started beating him. Some people had gathered around, but none tried to save him. I felt like intervening, but didn't. The moment the *rickshaw wala* turned so that I could recognize him, my sympathy for him turned into pain, for it was Akhtar.

He used to boast about reasoning with youngsters; what happened to him? Why did he not protest? Several emotions swept through my mind. I was pained to see him hurt, and was angry with him for not protesting. Having watched him being beaten up without doing anything, I felt guilty too.

Just then, my brother-in-law called out, "Hey *rickshaw*, hey *rickshaw*, are you available?" But he drove away. Had I defended him when he

was being beaten, I thought, perhaps he would have stopped. But at that moment I could not gather enough courage. My brother-in-law said, "Look, the rascal is not booked, but will still not take a passenger. They are all rogues. They will starve, but will not work. Only a local goon can set them right." I did not mention that he had just now met the goons! Akhtar had by then crossed the station gate.

My husband and brother-in-law had managed to grab two *rickshaws*. But one of the *rickshaw walas* refused to go. My brother-in-law reached out and grabbed him by his collar. The young *rickshaw wala*, seated stubbornly on the driver's seat, said, "Sir, I must go and eat now, it is already 3 o'clock, and I also have to return the rickshaw. For one passenger, I will be fined."

"Will you obey me or ...?" My brother-in-law pulled him off the *rickshaw*. He grumbled, but started picking up the luggage. He must indeed be very hungry. He was unable to pull the *rickshaw*. His vest was completely drenched in sweat. A foul smell emanated from his body. On reaching home I said, "Wait, I will get you something to eat." Perhaps he did not even hear me. Turning the *rickshaw* in a great hurry to go back, he said, "I have to return my rickshaw in time, *maaji* or I will be fined, the owner is very cruel." Saying this, he drove away. It was by then 4 pm.

My husband got transferred to another town. In Calcutta, the roads were full of taxis, trams and buses. It was a terribly crowded place. Sometimes we would spot a hand-drawn *rickshaw*, but no cycle *rickshaws*. Perhaps Calcutta was carrying the burden of its ancient traditions.

Later, we got ourselves a transfer back to our own small town. We had returned with our entire luggage. At the station, we came across the same

dearth of *rickshaws*. I felt irritated. I wondered if the roads of this town will ever improve. We eventually did find a *rickshaw* with great difficulty, but did not catch even a glimpse of Akhtar during our ride from the station.

Next day, early morning, I set out for Garibasthan. After travelling a short distance, we came across a road block caused by a rally. Since elections were over and results were not announced, what could the rally be for? As I sat in the *rickshaw*, I wished it was Akhtar's. He would have started giving me his report

by now. On the events of the polling day, which polling station witnessed riots, what passengers he had ferried and where, what the voters were saying, and in the end, which party would win. Just like a newspaper. Akhtar did talk a lot.

That day, very few *rickshaw walas* were plying on the road. Was it that *rickshaw walas* were on strike? Maybe some political party had called for a strike on one pretext or the other. Or, maybe the rickshaw union ...

On my return from the station yesterday, I had seen Akhtar. He had a red flag in his rickshaw. He could not spot me but I had seen him through the curtain of my rickshaw moving in the opposite direction. His rickshaw was decorated with big posters, bearing the symbols of cow and calf, sickle and wheat grain, engine and other pictures, in a myriad collage of colours. At one glance, I could see that Akhtar had become very weak. He was not able to even walk straight. His long beard had turned white. When I next meet him, I thought, I will talk to him at length. In



Calcutta, I used to talk to any person from my town, even if he was a *kulfi* seller or a cobbler. Akhtar had always wanted to talk to me, but I had never encouraged him.

Just then, somebody came up and picked up a scuffle with my *rickshaw wala*. He began abusing him, shouting, "You bastard, why are you out on the road with your rickshaw? I am not even taking my sick mother to the hospital in mine." Dragging him down from his seat, he said, "Run away now. A public rally is on its way." My *rickshaw wala* asked "What has happened? I have just

come from my village. I do not know anything."

"Why, haven't you heard? There was a fight at the voting booth yesterday and the people beat up a *rickshaw wala*. He died on the spot."

"Oh no!" I said and closed my eyes.

"He was already very sick. He had tuberculosis. He succumbed with the first blow itself. He was a very large hearted man."

I opened my eyes and saw the two *rickshaw walas* wiping away their tears. Just then, the first part of the silent march reached us.

In a hushed tone, my *rickshaw wala* asked, "Who was he?"

"Arre, it was our own union leader, Akhtar." My eyes closed. Involuntarily, my hands joined together. All the flowers, which I had carried for Lord Shiva, fell on the ground. The water mixed with the sacred *Gangajal* too fell down. I heard the voices of both the *rickshaw walas* speak in hushed tones, "Pick up these flowers and offer them to Akhtar." □

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