

SHORT STORY

The Packet of Rice

KAROOR NEELAKANTA PILLAI (Translated by Gita Krishnankutty)

'Sir, the rice this child had kept here is not to be found,' said the teacher of the second standard to the head teacher. The head teacher stopped writing, raised his head and looked up. He saw fresh tears rolling down the channels they had already made on the child's cheeks. He sat for a minute, gazing at the tender, famished face.

'Where had you kept the rice?' asked the manager of the school. The child said, amid his tears, 'In that room.'

The class teacher explained, 'He kept it where he always leaves it. Another child in his group had kept his in the same place and that packet was there.'

'Did you search everywhere? Isn't it anywhere?'

The child: 'I looked all over. It wasn't anywhere.'

The teacher: 'Didn't you look for it as soon as class was over?'

'I did.'

The teacher: 'This is really shameful! It's very distressing if children come to school just to steal food!'

The head teacher comforted the child. 'Let all the children come. I'll question them. I'll find out who it is. And make sure no one does such a thing again. Don't cry, child. If you're hungry, take your books and go home.'

The teacher: 'Will you go alone?'

The child: 'I don't want to go now.'

'Then go and sit down in class,' said the head teacher. The child obeyed.

The class teacher discussed the incident for quite a while longer and requested the head teacher to take it up seriously. The head teacher agreed to everything.

The bell announcing the end of the afternoon recess rang. The mentors who, to get over their tiredness, had stretched out and gone to sleep on the benches that had emptied when the children went out got up, rubbed their eyes and sat down in their places. The children who had been running around playing in the schoolyard, ignoring their hunger and the hot sun, came back to the classrooms, perspiring profusely. The benches filled with the fortunate ones who had come back after partaking of their *kanji* or rice and the unfortunate ones who had come to school knowing full well that nothing had been cooked at home that day. The satisfied children who had eaten their packets of rice and the little ones who had drawn and drunk water from the neighbouring well to take the edge off their severe hunger sat down in their places. Among them was the child who had lost his packet of rice.

The story of the stolen rice spread through all the four classrooms in the school, filling them. Each child sent his guessing powers racing towards a number of other children.

'Sir, Balakrishnan says it was I who took the rice and ate it,' complained a child. He turned to the child who had accused him and said in the same breath, 'Thief, it's you who stole the rice and ate it! Thief!'

Gopalan said to Joseph, 'It must be Pappu who ate it up.'

Mathai said, 'I won't keep my rice here any more.'

This matter remained the topic of discussion among the children

for a long time.

The teachers looked closely at the faces of the little ones seated before them to find out the thief. The head teacher, who was in charge of the affairs of the school, began to walk around, stick in hand, pursuing the investigation. He tried all the levels of persuasion--kind words first, then serious questioning and finally force--but to no avail. He then counseled the children, 'Theft is a sin. You might be able to hide it from human eyes. But you can't hide anything from God. Stealing is an evil habit. If you do it without meaning to, you must confess and ask for forgiveness. Then I will forgive you. And God will forgive you as well. If you do something wrong and are able to hide it one time, you will want to do the same thing again. And you will thus become thieves. Haven't you seen policemen catch thieves and take them away? You there, haven't you seen that? Is there anyone who hasn't seen that happen?'

The children: 'Yes, Sir.' 'No, Sir.'

'Ah! That's what I said. Tell the truth.'

No one confessed to having done anything wrong. The child who had lost his rice turned around to see whether anyone had confessed.

But no one had.

The head teacher then asked each of the children, 'Did you take it? Or you, or you? The next child. You?'

'No.'

'No.'

'No.'

'I went home for lunch.'

'I brought my food.'

'N...no.'

All the children denied having done such a thing. The teacher asked around a hundred and eighty children individually. Then he gave up. He felt ashamed. His colleagues respected him. The children worshipped 'Fourth Class Sir', the teacher of the fourth standard; they feared him. The villagers were proud of him. The manager thought highly of him. The school inspector was satisfied with him.

The head teacher, who had been unsuccessful in his mission, sat down in his broken chair, his face dull and pale. He had no enthusiasm for anything. He made a mistake in a sum he did on the blackboard. When he taught geography, he refused to accept the right answers the children gave him. It was only when a colleague came and told him that it was past time it was already ten minutes late--that he remembered to ring the bell announcing that school had ended for the day.

Everyone left. The man who swept the place waited to lock the building. The head teacher was writing and he kept writing until it was past dusk!

He finished writing and came out.

That night, as the manager was enjoying listening to the radio after dinner, he received this letter:

Respected Manager,

A theft took place in our school today. Someone took a packet of



rice that a child had kept aside for his lunch and ate it up. It was shameful. Such a thing has never been heard to happen before. After all, it is thirty years since I came here. Today is the first time such a thing has taken place. If it was to steal, there are so many things in school that are more valuable than a packet of rice.

Someone who was hungry must have taken it. But there were so many more packets that had more rice in them than this one. If it was not a very small child who took it, his hunger would not have been satisfied. But would a little child do such a thing? Even if it was an older child, how unbearable his hunger must have been for him to eat up someone else's food! Children who had eaten something in the morning would never risk doing a thing like this. If a child had eaten nothing in the morning, his mother would have provided some food at least for his lunch. He would not have had to steal. If he had to starve morning and noon, mothers would not send the children to school--what if they collapsed on the way! A child might steal a slate

or a pencil or a book. He might steal a mango or an orange. But to steal rice--and that too, without even knowing to whom the packet belonged--no, it is impossible to imagine that a child would do that. It is a terrible insult to look a child in the face and ask whether he stole rice. Among our teachers, there are some who eat nothing at noon. How could we imagine that they would do this? It was not the children. Or the teachers. And no strangers came here. Then who was it? I?

Yes, it was I.

It was I, who am in charge of running this school, who did this.

I, who am responsible for the intellectual welfare of around a hundred and eighty future citizens, for showing them the right and the good way to live.

I, who control and direct five teachers who work with me.

I, who punish all the misdemeanours in this school, who must be a model to everyone.

It is I who have to shape the next generation and make them good people who stole the food meant for a child's lunch and ate it--a mean thing that only a dog would do.

You may feel not only contempt for me but anger as well. I might have brought disrepute to your school. You might be thinking that you will have to dismiss me from my post. None of these things seem very important to me. The face of that six-year-old child, pinched with hunger, his tears flowing because his rice was stolen, gives me pain.

Just try and imagine why I did this, the act of a dog. I would have done it earlier. It was not that I did not have reason to. I just did not, that's all. If my companions do not do what I did, it is not because they do not need to; it is because they are afraid of an evil reputation. I have gone beyond that. I happen to have been born; should I not somehow live? I have worked for thirty years and do you know how many people have to be cared for with the twelve rupees you give me? Why should you know, isn't it? No one need know.

But even if you do not want to know, all of you will one day.

Twelve rupees that have to last for thirty days for a family of eight--and in these times when everything is so expensive!

I have to be a model to the children. I have to govern a school I have to work all the time on tasks that never end. I have to live a decent and respectable life. I too have a mother and a father--who are old and incapable of working. I too have a wife and children--who are dependent on me. I too have desires and emotions--like you.

I took a child's rice and ate it up. Was I stealing? Perhaps I was. I tell you now frankly--after I had some *kanji* yesterday morning, I ate no food at all for twenty-eight hours. Exhausted with work, I thought I would collapse and fall down and I took the three or four mouthfuls of rice belonging to a child--never mind who it was--who must have had some food of some kind three hours earlier. Maybe it was wrong. Maybe it was a sin. When I go to the next world, maybe I will be forced to answer for it. Maybe I will have to answer for it in this world as well. I will do so.

But tell me this too: What else could I have done?

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TRAVEL WRITING

Riding a Tata Sumo: on being squeezed out of Bangladesh

MANOSH CHOWDHURY
(This trip took place just before the last Indian parliamentary elections.)

We three were sitting side by side in the Tata Sumo going from Petrapole to Kolkata. I had the window seat. The man sitting in the middle beside me was a Bangladeshi Hindu ('Chanchal Saha') both of whose children went to school in Kolkata. It was also obvious, when we got to talking, that he spent a huge amount of time in that city. And the man on the other side of him was a Bangladeshi Muslim ('Jahangir Ahmed'), from Gopalganj, who owned a buying house in Dhaka. He was going to support his friend who had taken his father to Kolkata for medical treatment. Jahangir told us that his in-laws were Indian, and that he was planning to pay his first-ever visit to their home in Burdwan. Chanchal Saha would listen to both of us, and was cool enough to carry on conversations with both sides. Our driver--we were sitting just behind him--kept squinting at us through the rear view mirror, seemingly interested in our conversation. I couldn't be sure, but I guessed that he was a Bangla-speaking Indian, a contract driver based in Petrapole, and must have been a Hindu too.

Tata Sumo is a popular brand among Indian vehicles. No doubt it had been named so as to sound big and strong, like a Japanese wrestler. But when the passengers were told by our travel agent at Petrapole to ride in one, none of us had been happy. Usually, the Dhaka-to-Kolkata route has a number of travel agents doing business in a haphazard way. When they issue tickets imprinted 'Dhaka-Kolkata,' one can hardly imagine the tough time that awaited travelers at the border. A group of travelers from Bangladesh can reach Benapole, disembark and then not know how the next leg of the trip, from Petrapole to Kolkata, is going to go. A lot of the time contract vehicles--Tata Sumos--simply wait for a group, and as soon as 7/8 travellers clear immigration, the travel company dumps them inside one of those vehicles. Neither the travel companies, nor the state authorities, bother to supervise how travelers actually are transported. So there we



were, uncertain, standing with blank looks, when we were herded towards the Tata jeep.

'So *dada!* Do you have Sumos in Dhaka?' our driver asked, his eyes looking at me in the rearview mirror.

I looked at Chanchal beside me since I was not the right person to have a discussion with on cars. Then Jahangir looked at us as if seeking permission to start on this topic. But the subject had already provoked a response. From behind, someone said: 'Come on, what are you saying? Bangladeshi people do not even bother with Indian cars. They have plenty of Japanese ones.'

'Really? Then they have money.'

Though our driver sounded unhappy, his face seemed to announce his familiarity with this fact. Maybe Sumo-topic was an easy subject for him to start a discussion with his India-bound passengers. It seemed unbelievable to me that people from this region, especially the Bangla-speaking ones, had to be provoked into a discussion. But maybe our driver wanted his passengers to have a lively time.

Two girls, in their early teens, were settled in a single seat beside the driver. Till now they had shown no interest in the seniors' conversations, but the comment on vehicles in Bangladesh by their father made them sit up in their seats. He now began to express a real annoyance about the extravagance of Bangladeshis, which he had seen on his two-week visit to Bangladesh.

This family was Muslim, from Barasat, a near-by town of Kolkata. I knew very little about Muslims in West Bengal. What I did know came through a general understanding of Partition and pre-Partition population transfers - of both of the communities; especially those who were upwardly mobile with a keen interest in modern education and trade. Yet it surprised me to see an average trader Muslim family of West Bengal with very close kin in Dhaka [Bikrampur actually] who had made a real long trip of two weeks just for a wedding.

Earlier, in the waiting room at immigration this family was the only one that had looked happy. A tiresome journey along with a harassing immigration process had made everybody very tired. It was harder on the older passengers waiting for a vehicle that could get them a bit closer to the destination. Return passengers, from India to Bangladesh, were also there, giving us traveling tips for India. There were the money-changers, each one telling us how his service was much better

observation about Bangladeshi people: 'Then they have money, eh?' He seemed irritated by the fact of families having ancestral ties in present-day Bangladesh. Which had an effect on my two Bangladeshi seatmates. Jahangir Ahmed looked at Chanchal Saha, and Chanchal looked at him. Then both of them looked at me. But seeing that I refused this invitation to defend Bangladesh against this charge, Jahangir took up arms: 'They say Bangladesh is a beggars' country. They should go there and see for themselves what our people can show. What do you think, *dada?*' He said, turning to both Chanchal and then me. Both of us were, technically, '*dada*'. After a second's hesitation Chanchal decided to join Jahangir.

'Sure! Huh! All that other talk is hot air...'

Jahangir seemed to be relieved to have this Bangladeshi Hindu support on Indian land. But the head of that Barasati family wouldn't give up so easily: 'What a useless lifestyle! Everybody there is wasting money.'

And so it went on for some time.

Later everybody calmed down. In the silence the noise of the engine grew louder and when anybody tried to talk, the words dissolved into the sound. I dozed off. Then woke up when I felt the Sumo come to a stop. I saw that we were behind a long queue of other vehicles, surrounded by a vast countryside. Riding in the Sumo we had been getting hungry, and everybody had asked the same question: 'When do we stop at a *dukaan?*' We had thought that surely there would be a stoppage for some food. Maybe a break at Barasat. But now stuck in this jam there was no chance of that. We were starving. Passengers from other vehicles had gotten down and were walking around. Govinda suggested a very tiny shop at the end of the slope beside the highway. People rushed down to buy there. Jahangir ran down with them but only managed a small packet of *muri*. Which he shared with us.

Back in our seats we were told what had happened. The president of India Abul Kalam had come to a Barasat school-

house for a meeting and a speech. And security-men had blocked off all the roads. This presidential visit to Barasat, a rather remote place in West Bengal with a lot of Muslims, provided us with matter for another round of discussion. Govinda found the president a '*bojia*t' without any fault in BJP's act: 'He is just spoiling all the credibility of the government. He is a clown, you know? A reputed scientist, eh? Then let him go back to his laboratory.' Chanchal Saha was furious about the BJP's strategic move of selecting a 'minority' for the presidential post: 'An unnecessary move. Surely India could find a more competent candidate.'

Jahangir was trying hard to follow his position but waited to hear what the head-of-the-Barasati-family would say: 'Don't you understand? Just to cash in on the Muslim votes. They make fun of the people but everybody knows. *Dada* was absolutely right.' This view shocked him. When the talk first had started he had supported Abul Kalam being made president: 'India has the guts to do it. A Zail Singh, then ...' Now he looked to Chanchal Saha for support. But the latter didn't respond. So he turned towards me:

'*Ki Bha?*' What do you think?' 'Huh? Me? Nothing really.'

We were still stuck in the traffic jam. Soon the light faded.

It was mid-February and the day was in a hurry to get to its end. Far from our destinations, we settled in for a long wait. Everybody was tired and hungry. A silence. Girls were sleeping. Nothing was moving. And then softly somebody proposed an alternative route, very narrow and risky. There was a small road on the right by which we could reach a muddy by-pass, where cars hardly ever ventured. I thought Govinda wouldn't be interested in such a risky venture with a brand-new Sumo, but he seemed delighted. Everybody then debated the matter. The Barasati head-of-the-family led the way: 'I don't have to go a long way, just to Barasat. And I am going home, so no urgency.' Chanchal added: 'My sister-in-law's home is in mid-town Kolkata. So no problem with a delay.' Jahangir: 'I am going to be in a hotel near Shyamoli [our travel agent office] in Kolkata. No big hurry.' But everybody was hungry. And when I asked Govinda, he said: 'You know, *dada*, my wife had a baby just last night. She is in the hospital and my mother is ill. I have to get back from Kolkata tonight.'

That did it. Everybody wanted Govinda to return to his wife and little baby. So he started the Sumo and swung into the risky, narrow, muddy road towards the Barasat bypass. A sense of relief, and tension, at the same time. Holding a water bottle in



his hand, Jahangir looked at me. 'Don't you have any urgency?' 'Not really,' I replied. 'I see.'

'As long as I get there by midnight.'

'So where are you going?' 'Oh, Kolkata, of course.'

'Relatives, or work colleagues?'

'Actually, my parents.'

'They live in India?'

'Yes, presently. They are from Bangladesh.'

'So you visit them frequently?'

'This is my first visit after they left.' Actually, as Hindus living in a village, they had been slowly been squeezed out of Bangladesh. Had sold the old *bheeta bari* and left on a bus for Kolkata.

'Oh!'

Darkness swallowed the inside of the vehicle. It was darker outside on the road, muddy, with trees on both sides. The only light was from the beam of headlights. We rode in silence into the black night.

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