

From Tube Light to Makadi

Yashoda

It was the 22nd day of the month, eight at night. I was sitting on the *takht*, my legs folded under me. I was jerking my hand from time to time. It had been hurting since morning. *Chacha*, my father, was sitting on a mattress on the floor, smoking a *bidi*. *Chacha* looks old. In any case, it is his age to look that old now. It seemed he was lost in some thought, puffing on his *bidi*. Mummy was just as lost in eating. We were having turnips that day, which she absolutely relishes. I don't quite enjoy turnips that much. The house was filled with the smoke of the *bidi* and the smell of turnips. The curtains were keeping them in. It's getting quite cold, so we keep our curtains drawn. The sound of children from the street below was also much softer than usual.

Suddenly the tube light began to flicker. I switched it off and put the bulb on. *Chacha* said, "*Arre* girl, why don't you switch the tube light on?" There was an urgency in his voice, as if the switched-off tube light would result in an earthquake. Oh! Earthquake reminds me of the time when my younger brother Rahul had insisted on getting a tube light in the house. His stubbornness had almost caused the tremors of an earthquake here! *Chacha* had responded with an, "Of course, first a tube light, then a refrigerator! Son, we are not in a position to be able to afford all of this! Stretch your legs according to the size of your quilt!"

"But *Chacha*, a tube light is not that much expenditure".

"Son, how much ever the expense, little or much, it is beyond our means".

But maybe a tube light in the house was the way things were to be, because as soon as Rahul began to get his Rs. 200 a month, he got a tube light installed.

And today, with the tube light having been barely switched off, *Chacha* has become so restless. I thought a while before I said to *Chacha*, "*Chacha*, you never wanted a tube light in the first place. You only liked the light from a bulb!" *Chacha* looked at me and said, smiling, "*Yes Beta*, you're right. But I've become used to the tube light now. Without it, things begin to look hazy. And when it is lit, it seems as if the moon has risen. It's because its light is white and cool". *Chacha* stood up as he was saying this. He switched the tubelight on and started fidgeting with the starter. The tube light started to flicker again. Mummy laughed and said, "Look at him! In his younger years, he never even fixed a nail. And now, in his old age, he wants to play around with electrical appliances!" Mummy's words seemed to me bitter as neem leaves. I pressed my paining hand, got off onto the mattress and said to her, "You taunt *Chacha* at the slightest instance. Why can't you be quiet some times?" Mummy turned to me in anger and said, "Yes of course, aren't you Papa's darling! When have you ever sided with your mother?"

Without replying to her, I moved *Chacha* aside and twisted the starter. As I was doing this, I could hear Makadi's voice from behind me. And seeing him, *Chacha* burst out in anger, "*Abbe*, I asked you to get us a packet of milk and you simply disappeared!"

"*Arre Chacha*, I didn't disappear. I had gone to Emergency".

Hearing that, I immediately put the switch off and turned towards Makadi and said, "Why did you go to Emergency?"

"*Arre Nannee*, you know Kallu, the ration guy, no? His grand-daughter was hit by a two-wheeler. She lost so much blood, it's unaccountable. I thought if I take her inside the house, she'll lose too much blood, so I took her to Emergency myself. And the shopkeepers gave the news inside. *Chacha*, I took her there, but got stuck there". I looked at him, and asked, "How is that?" He moved his hand through his hair and said, "They asked me her name. I didn't know. So I told them, Gulbashaan, and said her mother's name was Tahira. Then they asked me the father's name". Knitting his brows, he said, "*Chacha*, at this my head started to spin uncontrollably. Just then I remembered *Bhai's*

name, and said, Mohammad Yamin. After some time, all of the girl's family members reached there and I told them, 'Friends, whatever name came to my mind, I got those written down. Now you can read the form'. And finding the first opportunity, I slipped out of there".

I thought, if his shirt got drenched with blood, then why aren't there any stains to be seen? But then my eyes moved towards his hands, feet and forehead, which still shone with droplets of sweat. Then my eyes got fixed on his face. At that time, he seemed to me a dear one. Don't know what those feelings were that arose in me for him at that time. Actually, Makadi is not particularly good-looking. It isn't so much his looks as his habits that are good. He is as short as Sachin Tendulkar, dark, short limbed, has round eyes, a small nose and his body is tied up in a very limiting frame. He crops his hair short, just like soldiers.

He had come here some ten to twelve years ago. I think I was in the second class then, and used to play *gitthas* right in front of his workshop, where the spread of a big stone made picking up the small *gittha* stones easy. Actually, that stone is there even today. Children don't play with *gitthas* there any more, just jump around a lot on it. Boxes for visiting cards are made in his workshop. Actually, the name of the owner of the workshop is Mohammad Yamin, but everyone calls him *Bhai*. He had bought the small room for the workshop from my grandfather for eight thousand rupees.

When Makadi first came here, he would wake up at night, crying and saying, "Oh *mange*, oh *mange*". I used to feel very bad for him. At that time he must have been as old as I am now. Or maybe a little older. In the initial days, he used to shit and pee in the workshop. *Bhai* used to beat him up for that. Also, his only work was to serve tea and water, and he used to sit in a corner, sad. Seeing this, everyone in the locality used to feel sympathy for him. Everyone wondered what name to call him by. And because he used to cry "*mange mange*", he was named Makadi (spider).

Actually his real name is Mohammad Kasim. He is from district Katihar in Bihar. His mother, Hasina Khatoon, and sister Shehnaz live in the village. He has his own land in the village, but because he wouldn't pay attention to farming, his *Mamu* brought him to Delhi. Once in Delhi, he stuck fast to the city, and remains stuck even today. Everyone asks him, "Don't you miss your home?" He replies, "Now this lane is my home. I won't leave and go any where now". When some one asks him about his father, he says, "He died when I was very young". When I need him to do something for me, I speak to him with lots of love. I say, "*Bhai* Mohammad Kasim, please will you come here?" Hearing this, he comes promptly, his teeth shining from behind his smiling lips, as if I have given him some precious gift.

Now he is the king of the workshop, because he is the second-in-command after *Bhai*. He takes care of all the work *Bhai* used to do. He is cared for in *Bhai's* house just as a family member. In *Bhai's* house, he is called by the name of Chhuwara. That's because he is small and dark like a *chhuwara* (a dried, sweet date).

A few years ago, because of some problem in the house, *Bhai* was not able to look after his workshop as much as he would have liked to. So Makadi not only managed the workshop, but also took care of the sale and purchase of materials. He could easily have cheated and fooled around with the accounts. But he did no such thing. He treated his employer's trouble as his own. Since then, *Bhai* has grown particularly fond of him.

Makadi is very good-natured. He always has a smile on his lips. Whenever I step out of home to go somewhere, he asks me with authority, "*Nanee*, where are you going?" The question makes my blood boil and I invariably say sharp, cutting things to him. But the very next moment, I speak with him again and ask, "You have lived in Delhi for so many years, but your language has not changed! If an outsider listens to you speak, he will never be able to make out what you are saying". Without saying any thing, he laughs away what I have said, and moves on.

Now, he is a favourite not only of *Bhai*, but of the entire lane.

As long as he is in the workshop, there is always a hustle bustle because someone or the other sits with him, chatting away. Whenever he goes somewhere to meet his friends, not only the workshop, but the whole lane becomes quiet.

Now it seems as if it's not *Bhai* who gives Makadi an identity, but Makadi who gives *Bhai* his.

A Cobbler

Lakhmi Chand Kohli

This is a story about a boy whose name is Jitender, who became a cobbler at the age of five. He is still a cobbler. He must be 15 years old now.

It was Thursday. I had taken a bath and was sitting outside, clipping my nails. Meanwhile:

My mother: Sonu, tell me if you see a cobbler.

I said: Ok. (And, cutting my nails, I went out and waited to see if a cobbler would come. I saw one approaching our lane. As soon as he came near me, I put my arm around his shoulder and started towards my house with him. He was looking at me as if I was a mad man. He was laughing.)

Then:

I said to him: Friend, there is a pair of slippers that has been lying broken for years. You have to fix it. Today is the day of your examination. If you manage, I will pay you whatever you ask for. (I think hear-

ing this he was completely convinced that this boy is mad. Because he was laughing quite a bit, looking at me.) So:

I said to him: *Abbe*, why are you laughing? Tell me if you will fix it or not. And how much will you charge?

Cobbler: Yes, I will fix it and I'll take two rupees.

I said: Ok. But you have to repair it properly. It shouldn't break as soon as you leave.

He was so happy-go-lucky that I thought I must speak with him. (He was thin and dark. He was singing one song over and over. That was: Ding-dong. And he looked really cool. As if he was really happy that day. So I really wanted to speak with him.)

I said: Friend, you are really happy today. Can I ask you something?

Cobbler: Yes of course, ask.

I said: What is your name?

Cobbler: My name is Jitender.

I said: Tell me one thing... how old are you?

Cobbler: I'm fifteen.

I said: Since when have you been doing this work?

Cobbler: *Bhai* I have been doing this work for ten years now.

I said: Ten years! Couldn't you find someone else to tell lies to? Just now you told me you were fifteen. That would mean you have been working as a cobbler from the age of five!

Cobbler: *Bhai*, I used to polish shoes earlier. Then I used to carry a lighter toolbox.

I said: Till what class have you studied?

Cobbler: Till the fifth. I used to work as a cobbler till twelve in the afternoon, and then go to study.

I said: Where do you live, and who all are there in your house?

Cobbler: *Bhai*, I live in Khanpur. And my family members live in the village. I live with my father's younger brother here.

I said: Do you do this work out of your own desire, or does your uncle force you to do it?

Cobbler: No *Bhai*, I do this work because I want to.

He had finished repairing the slippers while we were talking. But standing there, more work had reached him. He would make at least ten to twelve rupees.

Seeing this:

I said: *Oye* master, look how much work you have got by sitting here with me. I don't care, I want my share!

He looked at me and started laughing.

Cobbler: Of course.

I said: No friend, I was just joking! But good, you have more work, so we can chat some more.

Then I asked him who all lived in his house.

Cobbler: *Bhai*, my father, my mother and my elder brother.

I said: Does your family know you work as a cobbler?

Cobbler: Yes *Bhai*, they know.

I said: Didn't they stop you?

Cobbler: Yes *Bhai*, at first they did stop me. But now they don't do anything like that.

I said: You work all day long. Don't you feel like playing like other children your age?

Cobbler: Yes *Bhai*, and I do play. When I go back home in the evening, I play.

I said: Don't you get tired after working all day?

Cobbler: Yes, I do get tired. But when I feel like playing, I go and play.

I said: How much do you earn in a day?

Cobbler: *Bhai*, around 40 to 50 rupees in a day.

I said: And who do you give all your earnings to? To your uncle?

Cobbler: No I keep all that I earn. Sometimes I do give some to my uncle, but otherwise, I keep it all.

I said: Then what do you do with it? Do you save, or spend it?

Cobbler: *Bhai*, I spend it. Some I eat up, and some I give to my uncle.

I said: Tell me one thing. Is this toolbox yours, or is it rented?

Cobbler: No *Bhai*, earlier I used to manage by taking it on rent. But

now I have bought it for Rs. 200.

I said: Alright! May you always remain happy in life!

I said this to him because now he was leaving. He had finished his work. While leaving, he said, "Ok, *Bhai*" to me. Seeing him leave, I followed him with my eyes. And I was thinking about how hard he works at that young age. Who knows what his tomorrow will be, how he will live his future life, and if I would ever meet him again. And before I knew it, he disappeared from my view.

A Gift

Shamsher Ali

Following the 1999 elections, the elected leader got taps installed in our colony. Our immediate neighbourhood also got a tap. Since then, we don't have to go far to get water. Water flows through this tap twice or thrice a day – three hours in the morning, from five to eight (it stops on the dot at eight) and three hours in the evening (same timing as the morning). Sometimes water goes on strike, and doesn't flow from the tap. So no one gets any water.

The tap provides water to fourteen or fifteen houses. Its speciality is that it pays special heed to our needs. That is, water flows through it at special hours during the festivals for which we need more water. On Eid, water comes very early in the morning, and stays till nine am. On Holi, it comes also in the afternoon for an hour or hour and a half, so that we may bathe. And on the day of Diwali, it comes at four pm.

Many of our difficulties have eased because of this tap. Earlier, we had to go far to get water, and stand in queue for at least two hours. The tap is a gift. We have accepted the gift as a community, and use it together. The tap holds significance in all the fourteen or fifteen

houses which fill water from it. It is a member of our families. We may not write or talk about it, but in our hearts, we have love for this tap.

The tap has brought a different kind of freedom for us. Especially for the children, who had to stand in queues for hours to fill water – at taps for drinking water, and at hand pumps for water to bathe and for other household needs.

The Couple

Dhirender Pratap Singh

Wow old age, you are too great for words!
But how is that?

This is how:

It was five o' clock in the morning. I was washing clothes in the washing machine, and had stepped out onto the balcony. Mummy was filling water upstairs.

In front of our house, lives a 'pair of turtledoves'. We know them as *Baba* and *Ammaji*. They wake up at four am. And the moment they wake up, they start bickering. *Baba* wakes up and makes the tea. And *Amma* starts to sweep and swab. (*Amma* is particular about cleanliness. *Baba* is 87 years old, and *Amma* is 80. Both are stern, though not to everyone.)

Yes, so as I was saying, it was five o' clock in the morning. *Baba* put water to boil and started preparing tea. I think *Amma* also got up. Once the tea was ready, *Baba* called out, "Queen, oh my queen! Tea is ready, you must awaken. 'Cos to water it will turn if you delay".

Amma called out, in reply, "But I am already awake".
Baba asked, "Will you have tea in a cup or in a tumbler?"
Amma called out in response, "In a cup".

Both must have sat down and had tea in peace.

After drinking tea, *Amma* got busy with her sweeping and mopping. And *Baba* went out for a walk in the park – excuse me, I mean, in the street, for there is no park. After a short walk, when *Baba* opened the door to enter the house, *Amma* pushed him out and said, "Wash your feet and then come inside". And she mumbled, "Goes out to tease girls!" *Baba* said, "Stop muttering early in the morning".

Amma let *Baba's* comment pass – because she is hard of hearing. *Baba* said, "Give me water, I will wash up". *Amma* said, "Come in and get it yourself". She probably forgot that she had asked him to stay out.

I think *Baba* entered forgetting to take his slippers off. The next thing I heard was *Baba* screaming, "Why are you hitting me?" *Amma* must have hit him with her broom. She was saying, "I told you not to enter!" The alarm of the washing machine went off, and I went back inside.

The Unfamiliar Road

Kiran Varma

This is from the time I was eight years old. I was in class three then.

One night, Papa brought me anklets. It was a beautiful pair, with many small bells. I had only just put them on when Papa said, "Don't wear them!" I asked, "Why? Are they for someone else?" Papa said, "No, they're for you. But don't wear them because you always lose all your anklets". I immediately said, "I'll never lose them now". But Papa

refused, "I have brought too many pairs for you before".

Hearing this, I started to cry and went to our shop. Papa followed me there, picked me up in his lap and put the anklets around my ankles. The next morning, I went to school wearing them. Everyone looked at them and admired them.

At lunchtime, all of us were sitting on a low wall eating our lunch, when an Aunty came and started looking at my anklets. She said, "Your anklets are very pretty". I said, "My father brought them for me last night". Lunchtime got over, and the gate of the school was shut. We went to the grounds to play. After some time, the same Aunty came to me and said, "The gate is closed, how will I get out?" I said, "Aunty, just tell our watchman to let you out, he will". But she said, "There is a hole in the wall. Help me out through it". I said, "Lets go".

I went with her. After we got out, she said, "Let me drop you to your house". I said, "The way to my house is from the gate, not from here". "Alright, then you come to my house. I'll drop you back at school after a while". I said, "Lets go". Aunty said, "Close your eyes. Don't open them till I tell you". I closed my eyes, and I don't know where Aunty took me. After some time, she asked me to open them and I saw that I was in a new place. I said, "There's no one here". After a short distance, Aunty bought me an ice cream and gave me fifty *paise*. I really liked that. I said to myself, "This aunty is so nice".

After some time, she took my anklets off. I said, "Aunty, don't take these off. If I lose them, my father will beat me". She said, "Wait here. I'll show these to my daughter, because I want to buy her a pair just like this".

I said, "Ok, but hurry. I have to get back to school as well, otherwise my teacher will strike my name off the records". She went away and I kept sitting there. All the passersby were looking at me. I was getting very scared. I didn't know where I was, and where Aunty had taken my

anklets and I didn't know where she was. Then I got up and started to look around for her. Now I started to cry. Crying, I ran from one direction to another. An uncle in a shop stopped me and asked, "*Beti*, why are you crying?" I said, "Uncle, I am lost. Please help me reach my home". He said, "Sit here". I sat down. His son came in the evening and asked me my name. Then he asked me my address, and then asked how I had come there. I told him the whole story.

Then he went away and returned at night. By that time, I was asleep in the shop. *Bhaiya* picked me up and took me to my house on his scooter. We reached home quickly, and he said, "Kiran, we've reached". I got off the scooter and ran towards my house. I saw that everyone was crying, but Mummy and my brother were trying to console my father. I went and stood in front of my father. As soon as Papa saw me, he hugged me. He asked *Bhaiya* to sit down. Then suddenly, Papa started touching *Bhaiya's* feet. *Bhaiya* shot up from his seat and said, "What are you doing unclej?!"

Papa said, "Where are you from?" *Bhaiya* said, "From Khanpur. Thank god your daughter knew the address, otherwise you would have lost her".

We went to sleep without further discussion. Papa got up at four in the morning, and I got up with him. Papa was making tea. He asked me to tell him everything, and I did. He hugged me once again. I said to him, "Papa I won't go to school". He said, "Why?" I said, "What if I meet that aunty again?"

Papa said, "You should never go anywhere with strangers, how much ever they insist".

Even today, everyone in the lane teases me about how I gave my anklets away for fifty *paise*.

Amjad's Problem

Azra Tabassum

Amjad [name changed] had six brothers and sisters. Amjad was the eldest. People would always make him feel that he was growing old, and that he should get married. He also wanted to get married, but he couldn't mention it to his family because he was responsible for them.

He was 28 years old. His parents were alive, but they were very old. So the responsibility of his brothers and sisters fell on him. Amjad had two elder sisters, who were married. Then there were three younger brothers and sisters as well. That is, they were seven siblings in all. Amjad was a manager in a motor company. He earned 5000 rupees every month. With this money, he ran the household and also took care of his younger siblings' education. But his parents would always ask him for money for their *paan* and *bidi*.

All of Amjad's friends were married. And one or two even had children. When Amjad would see his friends with their wives, he would think, "If I had been married, I would also go out with my wife. I would also have taken her out for parties. Maybe I will never get married. My life will be spent taking care of my brothers and sisters".

Amjad would go from home to work, and come home from work. This was his routine. When his brothers and sisters would laugh and play with him at home, he would also turn into a kid with them. It would seem he had no sorrows. Two to three years passed like this. Meanwhile, Amjad's father passed away. His mother was in mourning [*iddat*, the period of mourning]. And in the middle of all this, a proposal for marriage came for his sister. Amjad fixed the marriage. Now Amjad was busy with his sister's wedding.

One day he was coming back from the market after making some purchases. He met his friend on the way. Seeing the purchases in Amjad's

hands, he asked, "So many things! Are you getting married?" Amjad smiled.

His friend said, "Won't you invite us? Where is *Bhabiji* from? What is her name?" Amjad's smile died. He said, "It's my sister's wedding".

"What? Not yours? *Yaar*, you've got left behind. Will you ever marry, or are you going to die a bachelor?" Amjad somehow managed to change the topic, and then went home, feeling disheartened. What could he do? There was no one other than him to take care of the house.

Ammi's iddat got over. It was the month of the wedding. Amjad had saved some money, and he borrowed some more for the preparations. His elder sisters had also come home. He was really busy that day. He wanted to make sure everything went well. Nothing should be left wanting. He was handsome, but he was a little weak. He was dark, had a thick moustache, big eyes, five feet tall and thin and slim. He was laying food on the table.

He overheard two women speaking. They were sitting behind him. One of them said, "Who is this?" The second woman said, "He is the bride's brother".

"He looks good enough. What is his age?"

"Must be around 28 or 30".

"His youth is passing him by, why doesn't he get married?"

"But that's in his mother's hands. He is a very simple boy".

Hearing this, Amjad started feeling old. The words, "His youth is passing him by" were echoing in his ears. His heart felt heavy, wilted. Even though he wanted not to, he couldn't help taking what he had heard to heart.

He thought, "Why are people like this? Why do they want to tell others what to do?" Thinking of all this, he bade his sister goodbye as she left for her new home.

[What everyone said]

[Neelofar]

Actually the most important characters to me in the text were the two women sitting at the eating table. What they said had a huge impact on Amjad.

[Mehrunnisa]

I think I have heard this story before. I don't know from whom. Right now Amjad is surrounded by his problems. Once they are taken care of, Amjad will marry. On the other hand, if the world continues to trouble him like this, maybe he will feel defeated. He still has two sisters who may not yet be of marriageable age. Doesn't Amjad's mother want him to marry? But she knows some women create distances between mother and son. Maybe she also thinks, "He is so old now, where will I find a girl for him?" Maybe Amjad decides against marrying, because he has started feeling old because of what the two women said.

[Masooma Ansari]

Amjad is a man who is bearing all the responsibilities of a son. Because of this, he doesn't have a life of his own. He also realises this when he sees his friends with their wives. He feels his life is passing him by. Seeing his friends makes him realise the emptiness in his life. But why doesn't he realise that people will always say something. If he were to marry, the same women will say, "What kind of a son is he? He doesn't listen to his mother, but only to his wife". Amjad is fully conscious of his responsibilities. But what people say unsettles his life, which is otherwise going on fine. Why does he think he is not getting married, why does he not think instead that his responsibilities will only increase after marriage. Secondly, he will get married if he is fated to. If not, then he won't, even if he tries really hard.

[Azra Tabassum]

1. When Amjad goes to work, is he able to keep his personal thoughts at bay?
2. What is Amjad's relationship with his family? Is it really of the

nature as has emerged from the text?

3. If there was a girl in Amjad's place, how much difference would this have made to her, and to everyone's thinking?

4. I had wanted, when I was writing this text, to draw out Amjad's feelings, his sense of self, his desires. But somehow that got lost during writing. So now the text seems a little tied up in itself. Neelofar said this text needn't be worked on further. I agree with her, because I would start writing about his future – either morose, or one in which he finds a mate. But what if we write about his past life?

5. How does Amjad's mother look at him, and how does everyone else?

6. If we write about similar situations and feelings that we witness, we might understand this better.

7. If Amjad were to ignore all of what he hears around him and continue with life, where would the text lead?