

The Report Card

It was a Sunday. I was waiting for "Sandesh Dry Fruits and Sweets" to open. "Sandesh" was a popular shop for Indian sweets in and around Model Colony. The Shrikhand they prepare is a high-quality product, and Alaka asked me to buy one and a half kilogram of Keshar Pista Shrikhand. We were expecting guests for lunch that afternoon.

I stood at the traffic light opposite "Sandesh" watching the rickshaws, the two-wheelers, and the cyclists, the cars and the PMT buses honking and jostling each other for space, "breaking" the red "signal" and driving away with impunity. A potbellied, paan chewing, "Ray Bon" sunglasses-wearing traffic *havaladar*, was standing next to a lamp post. He was animatedly arguing with a rickshaw owner, threatening him with a "police *pavti*." The *phoolwala* at the corner was arranging the flowers into neatly decorated bouquets while his assistant sprayed water over the floral bunches, neatly wrapped and stapled them in plastic transparent covers, and patiently waited for customers to arrive and take them away.

I intently waited at the shop, anticipating the owner Surajmal Jain to open the shutters. It was nine in the morning. Finally, when Surajmal opened them, I went across. Waiting alongside me at the traffic light, was a young lad in around his fifteens. He was also waiting for the shop to open. We crossed over and waited for Surajmal to finish his dusting, his mopping and his morning prayers to the replica of Dagdushet Ganapati. Surajmal was behind the cash counter waiting for the first customer, the "*Bhovani*" to begin his day.

This, fifteen something, young lad wore a light blue shirt, properly buttoned, over striped shorts. Where must he be staying, Gokhale Nagar? What must be his father's occupation? What could his family be? All irrelevant thoughts kept

scurrying through my empty mind as I waited patiently. Finally, I went into the shop and requested for one and a half kilograms of "Keshar Pista Shrikhand". Surajmal, with all politeness, requested me to wait for 5-10 minutes when his helpers would arrive and the shop would begin its sale. I had no issue about that.

There was a red phone, a dialling one, perched just close to the cash counter. Remember the old phones of yesteryears, which had coin slots? Remember? Yes, the same one. The young lad came forward with a coin in his right palm, picked the receiver with his left hand and dialled a number. I had nothing else to do while I waited, and the boy at the telephone attracted my attention. I was watching him.

Apparently, someone picked up the phone for the other side because the boy put the one rupee coin in the coin slot.

"Hello!" said the voice from the other side.

"Is this the Ranade house?" he asked.

"Yes"

"May I talk to Ranade *kaku*?"

"Speaking"

"*Kaku*, I am Vasant speaking"

"Vasant?" Vasant who?"

"*Kaku*, *me* Vasant Baghoji."

"Tell me Vasant, why have you called me?"

"I have called you for a job at your house; the job of a caretaker for your garden." "But *bal*, I have someone looking after my garden."

"*Kaku*, if you give me a chance, I shall look after your garden

very well. “ “I already have one for doing that.”

“*Kaku*, I shall water your plants, manure them and do whatever is necessary for the garden.”

“I already have one who is doing that.”

“*Kaku*, I shall also wash your car clean and also scrub the patio in the same payment you give me.”

“But *bal*, I don’t need anyone to wash my car and look after the patio because I have another set of helpers for that job.”

“*Kaku*, I will cut and trim and mow the lawn. I will make it into the prettiest lawn in Aundh. “

“No *bal*, I already have a boy called Prakash looking after that, and he does a very good job. I’m very happy with his work, sorry”, and she hung up. ”

Vasant was about to walk away. He had a sharp glint in his eyes. A hint of a smile appeared on his face. I was patiently watching the boy and overhearing this interesting conversation.

“Vasant, will you please wait?” Surajmal said to him. The lad stopped, halted in his steps and turned around and looked at the shop owner.

“I want to offer you something!” said Surajmal. He placed a piece of “*barfi*” in the boy’s hand and said to him, “I liked your attitude and your perseverance, young man! I am looking for a boy like you to work part-time in my shop. I shall pay you well. I shall also see that this does not clash with your school timings. Can you join my shop?”

The boy turned around and replied, “*Nahi, nahi, nako, nako*”. He looked straight into Surajmal’s eyes and said, “My name is not Vasant Bhagoji, my name is Prakash. I am the one who is

working at Ranade *Kaku* and needed to confirm if she is happy with me. The telephone I made was to Ranade *kaku* and my report is **good.**”

Having said that, the cheerful and a confident Prakash walked away happily, savouring the *Barfi* given to him.

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